

# PRIMARY PREVENTION RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM

Summary Report



October 2023

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# Background

On 15 August 2023 Respect Victoria convened a half-day research symposium in Melbourne. This brought together key actors in the primary prevention research community: researchers focused on primary prevention, prevention sector actors engaged in research, and government partners in the family violence sector. The aim of the symposium was to reinvigorate shared conversations about critical, overarching issues in primary prevention of violence against women and family violence that require greater collective research and knowledge building efforts.

Respect Victoria has a legislative remit to build evidence about primary prevention and to help to translate findings from research, monitoring and evaluation to support government and inform policy and practice. This requires concerted attention to research and knowledge building, particularly through partnerships and collaboration.

It is critical that Respect Victoria have strong relationships with colleagues working on research that addresses all forms of violence against women and family violence so that we can mutually inform, learn from and engage with each others' work. One of our objectives in convening this symposium was to start exploring how we can build and sustain relationships oriented to knowledge building about all forms of family violence and violence against women prevention.

## Facilitation and participation

The symposium was facilitated by Maria Dimopoulos alongside Georgia Prattis as rapporteur (both from Myriad Kofkin Global). The Myriad Kofkin team also contributed to development of this summary report.

Thirty participants from 18 organisations were in attendance at the symposium. The event offered an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships and discuss synergies across participants' knowledge-building work in primary prevention. The discussions were characterised by respectful listening, introspection, and openness.

The symposium centred on three main questions:

1. What does (or can) research do to progress primary prevention of family violence/violence against women (FV/VAW)?
2. What are the strengths of the primary prevention of FV/VAW research landscape in Australia?
3. What gaps or big unanswered questions do you see as a priority for primary prevention research in Victoria and nationally?

Participants were invited to reflect on these questions in advance of the symposium and share their thoughts with the facilitators by email. Responses from several participants were summarised and presented at the symposium. Through a facilitated open discussion, participants then had the opportunity to reflect on these questions in the context of the current policy and practice landscape in Victoria and nationally.

## Key discussion points and opportunities for primary prevention research

The main themes raised, both in advance of the symposium and in the facilitated discussion, are summarised below. This report presents the ideas raised under each theme in no particular order. The order in which they are listed does not reflect consensus among participants or the weight of each topic in the discussion; nor should they be read as the express position of Respect Victoria as forum convenor.

# The relationship between primary prevention research, practice and policy

## Key discussion points

- The primary prevention research community has a role in:
  - evaluating and testing primary prevention interventions to develop evidence about effective prevention strategies
  - making sense of evaluative evidence to inform continuous improvement of primary prevention frameworks, and
  - informing interventions on family and domestic violence and support translation of findings into primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery practice and policy.
- Certain forms of academic research or thresholds of evidence are often prioritised over other forms of knowledge building in primary prevention, with participants noting this was particularly true for research conducted by community-based organisations or groups. This reinforces perceived hierarchies of evidence that may detract from findings that are still relevant to the ‘real world’ and important for developing prevention practice, policy, and frameworks. Conversely, this dynamic can also mean that academic research is not always used to inform and improve practice: it can be categorically dismissed as too far removed from practice or inaccessible to be useful and/or can be insufficiently attentive to the importance of drawing on applied practice knowledge and translating findings into practice settings.
- Since the [RCFV - Royal Commission into Family Violence \(Victoria\)](#) there has been a focus in the state on workforce development for responding to family violence. Research may have a role to play in supporting further investment in the primary prevention workforce, including through providing evidence to inform policy decisions.

## Opportunities

- Increase attentiveness to how findings from primary prevention research, evaluation, and monitoring are translated and applied should be emphasised more in study and project design and planning.
- The primary prevention research sector has a responsibility to make findings available quickly, so they can be applied to identify upstream drivers and where to focus social change efforts in practice efforts and policy advice.
- There is a need for better understanding of the effectiveness of primary prevention interventions, for example whether increases in reporting of family violence and access of violence services is related to these interventions.

## Strong foundation of frameworks, strategies, data, and research bodies

### Key discussion points

- The [National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030 | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care](#) provides a solid base that can inform and enhance the focus on prevention and building systems based change over a 10 year period.
- The [Australian Data Strategy Action Plan \(finance.gov.au\)](#) shows a commitment by government to data integrity and taking an evidence-based approach to inform sector interventions.
- High quality data are available on attitudes and prevalence of family and domestic violence through [National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey \(NCAS\) - ANROWS - Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety](#), the world’s longest running population level survey of community attitudes towards violence against women.
- Australia has a robust landscape of research bodies and organisations committed to knowledge building about primary prevention, including those represented by symposium participants.

- A representative from ANROWS provided an overview of the Australian National Research Agenda (ANRA), to be published later in 2023. This informed the symposium discussion, and participants were able to link the discussion with key national research frameworks related to violence against women.

### **Opportunities**

- There are opportunities for greater collaboration within the primary prevention research landscape to strengthen national definitions and data sets across the family violence and sexual assault sector, and there is a need to map and co-ordinate research across organisations and sectors to avoid duplication of efforts.

## **Decolonisation and structures of power**

### **Key discussion points**

- Participants explored links between gender inequality as the primary root of the gendered drivers of violence against women and the ways that articulation of these drivers are shaped by structural inequality including capitalism, colonisation, and patriarchy.
- Discussions also centred on colonial notions of masculinity, recognising that masculinity may look different from an alternative cultural lens, particularly in relation to First Nations Communities.
- Participants recognised that sectors such as academia, government and research can inadvertently reproduce and reinforce unequal power structures in interactions, systems, and processes.
- Dominant western power structures, such as government organisations, often have colonial and patriarchal origins that may be sustained in current practice.

### **Opportunities**

- There is an opportunity to consider what decolonising practice might look like on the ground and what the primary prevention sector's role in decolonisation should involve.
- Participants recognised the leadership and self-determination of First Nations communities in the process of decolonisation as integral to these efforts. The importance of partnering with communities with integrity and genuine power-sharing was noted, alongside the need to take care not to inadvertently reproduce colonial trauma or increase cultural load.
- Research can explore how institutional power structures play a role in the perpetration of violence and how this informs community attitudes and behaviours. It was suggested that decolonising practice can begin internally within our own organisations.

## **Representation, collaboration and engagement**

### **Key discussion points**

- The primary prevention research sector often lacks engagement with community and other sectors under a shared vision and agenda.
- There was recognition that many groups have historically been under-acknowledged in primary prevention research priorities, and that the sector needs greater representation, engagement, and collaboration with marginalised population groups.

### **Opportunities**

- A mechanism could be developed to support meaningful and genuine collaboration and consultation with peak bodies, community and other sectors including organisations in the secondary and tertiary prevention space.

## Overlapping drivers for different forms of violence

### Key discussion points

- There was acknowledgement that dominant narratives of family violence have historically focused mainly on cisnormative and heteronormative understandings of men's physical violence against women in the context of intimate partnerships. Further, that these have been insufficiently attentive to the role that disability, racism, colonialism, age, or visa-related precarity can play in shaping the drivers of violence. Despite work to expand prevention beyond this and look at the common drivers of violence in different relational contexts, there remains more to be done. Addressing the gendered drivers remains of critical importance, however there is room to evolve and nuance prevention approaches to build on existing frameworks, especially in regard to addressing intersections of different forms of structural oppression (e.g., [Pride in Prevention](#); [Changing the Picture](#); [Changing the Landscape](#)).
- More comprehensive efforts to assess the relevance of dominant primary prevention frameworks and interventions with diverse communities will lead to improvements in messaging and strategies for prevention.
- There has been insufficient focus on the intersections of gender, race, disability and sexuality in considering how family violence occurs and correspondingly, in understanding the intersecting drivers of different forms of family violence.

### Opportunities

- There is scope for primary prevention research to be re-oriented towards a more inclusive discussion of common drivers rather than single issues. This may help to facilitate a more collaborative approach to research. This can present opportunities to understand experiences of family violence among a range of population groups such as older people, children and young people, people with disabilities, trans and gender diverse people, and other LGBTIQ+ populations.
- Research could reorient towards unpacking patriarchy and dominant forms of power and oppression to articulate common and overlapping drivers for family violence, sexual violence, and gender-based violence.
- There is continued work from different prevention sector actors and researchers examining the extent to which the gendered drivers articulated in [Change the story - Our Watch](#) are applicable to all population groups, including people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQ+ and culturally diverse persons and communities. This requires ongoing knowledge building efforts, accompanied by avenues to share and discuss findings and implications for practice and policy.
- Primary prevention research would benefit from improved understanding of trauma-informed principles. Several participants noted that this is particularly important considering the harms that the family violence sector has contributed to in some communities through its focus on heteronormative and cisnormative ideologies.

## Perpetration of violence

### Key discussion points

- Understanding perpetration (who uses violence and why) would contribute to primary prevention research by helping to shift the discourse around responsibility from victim-survivors to perpetrators and more broadly, to the normative and structural dynamics that allow violence to occur.

- A better understanding of perpetration will also inform and strengthen practice. This was also seen to be congruent with understanding what interventions and programs are effective in addressing patriarchal attitudes, particularly among young men and boys.

### Opportunities

- More research is needed to understand and quantify the economic burden of the perpetration of violence. Relatedly, more research is required to understand the economic benefit of addressing risk and drivers of violence through primary prevention.
- Applying a primary prevention lens to perpetration studies could help to ensure that prevention efforts across the family violence continuum focus on driving structural change, as well targeting the actions of individuals and the power dynamics between victim-survivor and perpetrator.

## Community attitudes

### Key discussion points

- The increased visibility of family and domestic violence has seen an escalation of backlash and resistance, in particular towards [trans and gender diverse communities](#).
- While there is robust national data on community attitudes ([NCAS](#)), more needs to be done to understand why attitudes have not changed despite years of primary prevention interventions.

### Opportunities

- Primary prevention research can examine why some attitudes are stagnant or have not shifted despite investments.
- There is scope to explore social media and media commentary and how this influences community and individual attitudes towards family and domestic violence, and more broadly violence against women.
- Research is needed on the cause of backlash and its impact on affected communities, particularly trans and gender diverse communities
- Primary prevention research could benefit from a mapping of organised and funded resistance against gender equality, including that which is represented in the 'Manosphere' and which targets trans and gender diverse people, First Nations women and that is otherwise racialized.

## Summary and implications

The symposium shed light on opportunities to advance approaches for primary prevention research, key topics and questions of relevance across primary prevention research, and considerations for future engagement within the primary prevention research community. Each of these is summarised below, synthesising the information presented throughout the report.

### How research approaches can evolve

- Integrating frameworks such as decolonisation and intersectionality in primary prevention research
- Incorporating power analyses systematically into primary prevention research
- Integrating trauma-informed approaches into primary prevention research
- Examining joint drivers of different types of violence as part of inclusive and collaborative discussions of common drivers rather than single issues
- Utilising and promoting use of existing research principles that guide engagement with diverse population groups, including [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons and communities](#). There may be opportunity to explore ways of developing these further for applied primary prevention research, particularly for researchers working outside of academia who may not have direct connection to human research ethics committees.



- Finding ways to measure, document and celebrate broader views of primary prevention success
- Developing strategies to implement primary prevention research, monitoring and evaluation findings in a timely fashion and within programmatic timeframes
- Collaboration to strengthen national definitions and data sets across the family violence, violence against women, and sexual assault sectors
- Supporting and developing guidelines for meaningful and genuine collaboration and consultation with peak bodies, community and other sectors
- Translating research findings into practice and for policy-makers in ways that are more broadly accessible and sharing research findings more widely.

### **Topics of relevance for primary prevention research that merit further exploration**

- Exploring the notion of backlash and how this impacts not only women but other population groups, and mapping organised resistance to prevention
- Investigating why some community attitudes that related to the drivers or perpetration of violence have not improved as significantly as hoped. This should include focus on the effects of backlash and resistance on uptake of primary prevention messages.
- Considering the role of primary prevention frameworks in research focused on perpetration, and how better perpetration research can inform nuanced understandings and application of primary prevention practice and policy.
- Supporting community-based and community-led research and democratising how questions and objectives and priorities are set and chosen in inclusive ways.
- Developing better quantification and modelling of the economic benefit of violence prevention.

### **Key questions connected the diverse themes discussed in the symposium**

- How do we avoid replicating systems of violence in our consultation and engagement with community and other sectors (e.g., through extractive research and/or not facilitating translation of findings back to participants and affected communities)?
- How can primary prevention research become less segmented, work in an inter-sectorial and inter-disciplinary way, and connect better with practice? How might this be translated to policy and policy advice?
- How do we ensure that we are considering experiences of violence perpetrated against persons and communities most affected by intersecting sources of structural discrimination and tailoring prevention strategies to their needs?
- What does meaningful knowledge production look like? How can we expand conceptions of what is viewed as 'acceptable' forms of evidence?
- How can the primary prevention research community navigate the range of disciplines and belief systems and frameworks that underpin our work, with curiosity not judgement?
- What are the points of alignment and opportunities for greater engagement and knowledge-sharing between academic and community-based action-researchers?
- What are the benefits and tensions in challenging the categorisations within the continuum of prevention approaches?

### **Future engagement among primary prevention research actors**

- There is an appetite among participants to continue to build more trust and continue the novel conversations started in the symposium. This was informed by a desire for greater collaboration and collective innovation, and to better understand how to build complementarity between work led by different organisations or parts of the sector.



- Several participants noted that future events should consider engagement with stakeholders from smaller organisations or who bring different lived experience of structural oppressions into conversations about prevention priorities.
- Collective exploration can help define what architecture might be suited to create similar opportunities to bring those engaged in primary prevention focused research together to develop a common understanding of primary prevention research and promote further joint reflection.
- Respect Victoria will continue to connect with symposium participants and other stakeholders to explore different modalities to advance the conversations started in the symposium.