RESPECT VICTORIA

High-impact attitudes: An item analysis of Victorians' attitudes towards violence against women

ABSTRACT

Primary prevention of violence against women depends on shifting attitudes and social norms that sustain gender inequality and excuse or minimise violence. The National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) administered by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) provides robust population-level tracking of Australians' attitudes towards violence against women over time. NCAS data also provides an opportunity to explore pressing questions in prevention practice at the national or state level. This paper presents findings from research by Respect Victoria that used a commissioned representative sample of Victorians responding to the 2021 NCAS survey to formulate new research questions, interrogate the NCAS data using different methods, and inform the scope of future research. The use of secondary analysis for this research is aligned with the overarching principle of good practice data collection set out in ANROWS' Australian National Research Agenda 2023–2028 to 'collect once, use often'.

This paper applies complementary approaches to analysis to look at the NCAS data 'under the surface' of the multi-item NCAS scales, by deep diving into attitudes measured using a single question, such as agreement with the statement 'It's only really stalking if it's by a stranger'.

First, item–scale correlations identify which survey items most strongly differentiate respondents with higher versus lower overall scale scores across attitudes towards violence against women, attitudes towards gender inequality, and understanding of violence against women. Second, item distributions (agreement, response tails, non-response and gender differences) identify beliefs that are more prevalent, contested or gender-patterned in Victoria.

Findings support broad rejection of most violence-supportive and gender-inequitable statements, alongside a smaller set of beliefs that remain especially diagnostic and, in some cases, relatively common and gender-patterned. Items relating to sexual violence myths and scepticism about credibility of people who have experienced violence were among the strongest markers of higher violence-supportive attitudes. For gender inequality, beliefs about men's suitability for leadership and authority were the strongest item-level markers, while more commonly endorsed items reflected minimisation and dismissal of women's experiences. Recognition of non-physical abuse was high overall, but uneven for specific forms such as economic abuse, technology-facilitated monitoring and identity-based coercion.

Together, these results show how item-level secondary analysis can complement NCAS monitoring by producing prevention-relevant insights that are specific enough to inform messaging, program refinement and interpretation of population trends. The paper discusses options for integrating findings into communications testing and informing new hypotheses for prevention practice and design.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY AND ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in being the world's oldest living cultures. We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside First Nations communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of these communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

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Respect Victoria acknowledges the significant impact of family violence and violence against women on individuals, families and communities, and the strength, trauma and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence. We pay our respects to those whose lives were taken and to their family members and friends. We keep at the forefront in our minds all those who have experienced family violence or other forms of abuse, and for whom we undertake this work.

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ABOUT RESPECT VICTORIA

Respect Victoria is the state's dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women. Our vision is a Victorian community where all people are safe, equal and respected, and live free from family violence and violence against women. To achieve our vision, we lead and support evidence-informed primary prevention and act as a catalyst for transformational social change.

INTRODUCTION

Attitudes towards violence against women shape how people interpret behaviours, respond to disclosures, and support or resist policy and practice reforms (1, 2). When permissive or minimising attitudes are normalised, they can make it harder for people who have experienced violence to be believed, seek support and receive consistent institutional responses, while also weakening expectations of perpetrator accountability (1–6). Conversely, attitudes that recognise harm, affirm equality and support respectful relationships create conditions for prevention and early intervention to succeed (1, 2). Tracking attitudinal change over time is therefore central to understanding progress, identifying emerging risks, and strengthening primary prevention approaches (1, 2).

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) conducts the National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) every four years. The NCAS benchmarks community attitudes and understanding related to violence against women, gender inequality and recognition of different forms of violence and control (7, 8). NCAS reporting typically summarises results using a set of validated scales that capture broader constructs, aligned with 'Change the story' and the evidence base on the drivers of violence against women (1, 7, 8).

The NCAS was designed to monitor population-level attitudes over time, and the scale scores are well suited to that purpose. By aggregating multiple items into validated measures, the NCAS provides a stable way to track broad progress and compare trends across jurisdictions and cohorts.

While useful for high-level tracking over time, scale averages can obscure heterogeneity in item responses and differences between population groups. Respondents with different attitudinal profiles may produce a similar aggregate score, and relatively stable scale averages can coexist with substantial variation in the beliefs underlying those scores. Targeted prevention practice requires insights at the level of specific attitudes rather than abstract scale scores. Programs and communications typically engage with concrete narratives such as myths about sexual violence, mistrust of people who have experienced violence, and assumptions about gender and leadership (1, 2, 9). Item-level analysis therefore complements scale reporting by identifying which attitudinal statements are most strongly associated with overall scale scores, and which beliefs are widely endorsed versus contested in the community. This identifies candidate areas for message testing, program refinement and more detailed monitoring.

This approach is timely because community understanding of 'what counts as violence' increasingly extends beyond physical assault to include coercive control, social isolation, economic abuse and technology-facilitated surveillance (10–12). Understanding which non-physical behaviours are consistently recognised as violence in Victoria, and where recognition is uneven, matters. This is because recognition influences help-seeking, bystander response and institutional decision-making (5, 6, 10–12). Similarly, community attitudes towards gender equality are shaped not only by overt endorsement of inequality, but also by more subtle patterns of minimisation, denial and backlash, which can undermine prevention and policy implementation even when explicit sexism is rejected (9).

Respect Victoria funded ANROWS to conduct an additional 1,500 interviews in Victoria as part of the 2021 NCAS, increasing the Victorian sample to enable item-level analysis of 'high impact' attitudes within the state (8). 'High impact' is an analytic shorthand for items that are either strongly aligned with overall scale scores or especially prevalent, contested or gender-patterned. It does not mean that an individual item has been shown to cause broader attitudes or violence, or that changing that item alone would produce population-level change.

This paper uses two approaches: (a) item–scale correlations to identify items most strongly associated with overall scale scores, and (b) descriptive patterns (agreement distributions, variability and gender

differences) to identify which attitudes are widely shared, contested or gender-patterned in Victoria. Together, these complementary lenses support a practical prevention question: where are the beliefs that are both meaningful in the measurement framework and salient in the population, and are therefore candidates for prioritisation in messaging, education and further testing.

This exploratory secondary analysis addresses two research questions:

1. Which specific attitude items most strongly differentiate overall scale scores in Victoria?
2. How are responses to specific attitude items distributed in Victoria, and which items show the clearest gender differences?

This technical paper is intended primarily for researchers, evaluators and policy analysts seeking detailed information about NCAS item analysis in Victoria. Companion evidence and implications briefs translate its principal findings for policymakers, senior decision-makers and primary prevention practitioners.

METHODS

DATA SOURCE AND SAMPLE

This analysis draws on the 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS), a national survey measuring community attitudes and understanding related to violence against women and gender inequality (8). The NCAS uses a stratified random sampling approach to achieve a representative sample of Australians aged 16 years and older (n = 19,100) (8). Respect Victoria funded an additional 1,500 interviews in Victoria, increasing the Victorian sample to 6,143 respondents and enabling more detailed item-level analysis within the state (8). Demographic variables collected in the NCAS include gender, enabling disaggregation of item responses where sample sizes permit (8).

The NCAS was administered primarily via computer-assisted telephone interviewing to mobile phone numbers, consistent with prior NCAS waves (8). An online bridging survey (push-to-web) pilot is described separately in the NCAS technical report and is not the focus of this analysis (8).

MEASURES

Analyses were conducted at the item level for three NCAS scales (8):

- **Attitudes towards Violence against Women Scale (AVAWS):** 43 Likert-scale items across three subscales (Minimise Violence, Mistrust Women, Objectify Women). Higher scores reflect greater rejection of violence-supportive attitudes.
- **Attitudes towards Gender Inequality Scale (AGIS):** 17 Likert-scale items across five subscales (Reinforce gender roles, Undermine leadership, Limit autonomy, Normalise sexism, Deny inequality). Higher scores reflect more gender-egalitarian attitudes.
- **Understanding of Violence against Women Scale (UVAWS):** 19 items assessing recognition of violence and understanding of its gendered nature across three subscales (Recognise Violence Against Women, Recognise Domestic Violence, Understand Gendered Domestic Violence).

ANALYSIS

Two complementary analyses were conducted.

1. **Item–scale correlations:** For each scale (AVAWS, AGIS, UVAWS), item–scale correlations were calculated to identify items most strongly associated with overall scale scores. Higher absolute correlations indicate items that more strongly differentiate respondents with higher versus lower overall scores on the relevant scale.
2. **Item distributions and gender differences:** Descriptive statistics were used to examine agreement distributions and variability for individual items, including the proportion agreeing ('strongly agree' + 'somewhat agree'), standard deviation (SD) as an indicator of dispersion, and gender differences in agreement.

These analyses address two research questions: Research Question 1 (RQ1): 'Which specific attitude items most strongly differentiate overall scale scores in Victoria?'; and Research Question 2 (RQ2): 'How are Victorians divided on specific attitude items, and which items show the strongest gender differences?', including where endorsement is common, where responses are polarised, and where gender differences are concentrated.

RESULTS

RQ1: WHICH SPECIFIC ATTITUDE ITEMS MOST STRONGLY DIFFERENTIATE OVERALL SCALE SCORES IN VICTORIA?

This section identifies the items within each NCAS scale that are most strongly associated with overall scale scores. Item–scale correlations (r) indicate how strongly responses to a specific item align with the total scale score. Higher absolute correlations indicate items that are more discriminating within the scale.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SCALE (AVAWS)

Table 1 presents the 10 AVAWS items with the strongest item–scale correlations (r = 0.85–0.90). These items cluster around sexual violence myths, victim-blaming, minimisation, and mistrust of victim-survivors' credibility.

Table 1. Ten AVAWS items most strongly correlated with overall scale scores

AVAWS subscale	Item (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)	r-value	Mean	SD
Mistrust Women	Women who wait weeks or months to report sexual assault are probably lying.	0.90	4.69	0.77
Objectify Women	If a woman meets up with a man she met on a mobile dating app, she's partly responsible if he forces sex on her.	0.89	4.76	0.80
Mistrust Women	If a woman claims to have been sexually assaulted but has no other physical injuries, she probably shouldn't be taken too seriously.	0.89	4.81	0.62

AVAWS subscale	Item (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)	r-value	Mean	SD
Objectify Women	Women who flirt all the time are somewhat to blame if their partner gets jealous and hits them.	0.89	4.60	0.95
Mistrust Women	When lesbian or bisexual women claim to have been sexually assaulted by their partner, they probably shouldn't be taken too seriously.	0.88	4.85	0.50
Mistrust Women	Women who wait weeks or months to report sexual harassment are probably lying.	0.88	4.69	0.79
Excuse and Minimise	It's only really stalking if it's by a stranger.	0.87	4.83	0.65
Objectify Women	If a woman is raped while drunk or affected by drugs, she is at least partly responsible.	0.87	4.63	0.95
Mistrust Women	A lot of times, women who say they were raped had led the man on and then had regrets.	0.87	4.12	1.23
Excuse & Minimise	Women who stay in abusive relationships deserve less help from counselling and support services than women who leave their abusive partner.	0.85	4.76	0.79

Across these items, average responses indicate strong disagreement overall (i.e., means above 4.0), alongside meaningful dispersion for a small subset (e.g., 'led the man on …' SD = 1.23). The correlation results indicate that endorsement of sexual violence myths and credibility-related beliefs, where it persists, is concentrated among respondents with lower overall AVAWS scores (lower attitudinal rejection) in the Victorian sample.

One item referencing lesbian and bisexual women shows strong rejection (M = 4.85) while also being strongly associated with the overall scale score (r = 0.88). This suggests that scepticism about sexual violence affecting marginalised groups, where it occurs, aligns with broader patterns of more violence-supportive attitudes.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS GENDER INEQUALITY SCALE (AGIS)

Table 2 presents the five AGIS items with the strongest item–scale correlations (r = 0.86–0.88). These items centre on beliefs about leadership, competence and control in relationships.

Table 2. Five AGIS items most strongly correlated with overall scale scores

AGIS subscale	Item (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)	r-value	Mean	SD
Undermine Leadership	In the workplace, men generally make more capable bosses than women.	0.88	4.54	0.96
Undermine Leadership	Men, rather than women, should hold positions of responsibility in the community.	0.87	4.62	0.90
Undermine Leadership	On the whole, men make better political leaders than women.	0.87	4.57	0.93
Undermine Leadership	Women are less capable than men of thinking logically.	0.86	4.79	0.70
Limit Autonomy	Men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household.	0.86	4.60	0.91

As with the AVAWS, mean scores indicate strong disagreement overall. The item–scale pattern indicates that beliefs about men's greater suitability for authority and decision-making are among the most discriminating indicators of higher gender-inequality attitudes within the Victorian sample, particularly in workplace leadership and relationship decision-making.

UNDERSTANDING OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SCALE (UVAWS)

UVAWS items are scored in the opposite direction to the attitudinal scales; correlations are therefore negative in this output (higher recognition aligns with higher overall understanding). Table 3 presents the five UVAWS items most strongly correlated with overall scale scores (r = −0.79 to −0.81).

Table 3. Five UVAWS items most strongly correlated with overall scale scores

UVAWS subscale	UVAWS item	r-value	Mean	SD
Recognise Domestic Violence	Forces partner to stop practising their religion	−0.81	1.53	0.93
Recognise Domestic Violence	Controls partner by denying them access to shared money	−0.80	1.49	0.89
Recognise Domestic Violence	Controls partner's social life by preventing contact with family/friends	−0.79	1.37	0.79
Recognise Violence Against Women	Repeatedly tracks location, calls or activities through devices without consent	−0.80	1.46	0.88

UVAWS subscale	UVAWS item	r-value	Mean	SD
Understand Gendered Violence	Tries to control partner by forcing them to hide that they are transgender	−0.81	1.49	0.90

These items relate primarily to non-physical control and surveillance behaviours, including economic restriction, social isolation, religious control and technology-facilitated monitoring. Low mean values (M = 1.37–1.53) indicate most respondents recognised these behaviours as violence (i.e., 'yes, always'/'yes, usually'), while the correlations indicate these items still differentiate respondents with higher versus lower overall understanding. These behaviours align with contemporary definitions of non-physical domestic and family violence, including coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse (10–12).

RQ1 RESULTS SYNTHESIS

Across scales, the strongest item–scale associations cluster around three domains:

- sexual violence myths and scepticism about credibility of people who have experienced violence (AVAWS)
- beliefs about men's greater suitability for leadership and authority (AGIS)
- recognition of non-physical control and surveillance behaviours (UVAWS).

These patterns identify which specific attitudinal statements most strongly differentiate higher versus lower overall scale scores in Victoria. However, items that are most discriminating within a scale are not necessarily the most widely endorsed. The next section examines how these beliefs are distributed across the Victorian population, and where gender differences and contested response patterns are concentrated.

RQ2: HOW ARE VICTORIANS DIVIDED ON SPECIFIC ATTITUDE ITEMS, AND WHICH ITEMS SHOW THE STRONGEST GENDER DIFFERENCES?

This section examines item-level distributions to identify where attitudes are: (a) more commonly endorsed, (b) more contested (e.g., visible in 'tails' such as 'strongly agree'/'strongly disagree' and in non-response), and (c) more gender-patterned. For AVAWS and AGIS, 'agree' is reported as weighted 'strongly agree' + 'somewhat agree' (SA + A). For UVAWS, endorsement is reported as recognition ('yes, always' + 'yes, usually').

Where tables report 'women/other', this combines women and respondents of other genders due to small base sizes of non-cis or non-binary gender identities. Interpret differences within non-binary genders with appropriate caution (8).

ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (AVAWS)

Table 4 presents the AVAWS items with the highest agreement rates in Victoria, alongside gender differences and response 'tails' (strong agreement and strong disagreement). For the most endorsed items, endorsement is concentrated in credibility and false accusation narratives. These items also show the largest gender gaps, with men more likely to agree. By contrast, several victim-blaming items show low endorsement and relatively little gender difference, indicating cross-gender convergence on those statements.

Table 4. AVAWS items with highest agreement: Endorsement, tails and gender gaps (weighted %, SA + A)

AVAWS item	Agree Overall % (SA + A)	Men %	Women/ other %	Gap pp (men – women)	Strongly agree %	Strongly disagree %	Not stated %
Women going through custody battles often make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence.	35.2	39.2	31.4	7.8	8.8	23.4	11.2
It is common for sexual assault accusations to be used as a way of getting back at men.	30.3	34.9	26.0	8.9	6.2	37.9	7.3
When a man is very sexually aroused, he may not even realise that the woman doesn't want to have sex.	24.3	24.8	23.9	0.9	10.5	60.3	6.2
Women who wait weeks or months to report sexual harassment are probably lying.	6.3	8.4	4.4	4.0	2.0	75.9	2.4
If a woman meets up with a man she met on a mobile dating app, she's partly responsible if he forces sex on her.	7.0	7.1	6.9	0.2	3.0	85.6	1.1
If a woman claims to have been sexually assaulted but has no physical injuries, she probably shouldn't be taken too seriously.	3.8	4.6	3.1	1.4	1.3	84.7	1.9

Note: Percentages are weighted. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; pp = percentage points. Gap = men − women/non-binary respondents. Women and non-binary respondents were combined due to small sample sizes.

Table 5 illustrates how two 'responsibility' narratives in sexual violence differ in prevalence, gender patterning and non-response, even though both sit within the broader cluster of sexual violence myths identified in RQ1.

Table 5. Gendered agreement with two items on responsibility for sexual violence (weighted %, SA + A)

AVAWS item	Agree Overall (%)	Men (%)	Women /other (%)	Gender gap (pp)
If a woman is raped while drunk or affected by drugs, she is at least partly responsible. (SV3k)	10.4	9.9	10.8	−0.9
A lot of times, women who say they were raped had led the man on and then had regrets. (SV3l)	21.1	23.5	18.7	4.8

Note: Percentages are weighted. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; pp = percentage points. Gap = men − women/non-binary respondents. Women and non-binary respondents were combined due to small sample sizes.

These items show different profiles. The intoxication-responsibility item has lower endorsement and little gender difference. The 'led him on'/regret item has higher endorsement and a moderate gender gap, with men more likely to agree. A relatively high 'not stated' rate for SV3l indicates higher non-response and should be noted when interpreting results.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS GENDER INEQUALITY (AGIS)

Table 6 presents the AGIS items with the highest agreement rates in Victoria. These items show majority disagreement overall, alongside a sizeable minority endorsement, with men consistently higher than women/other genders.

Table 6. AGIS items with highest endorsement, tails and gender gaps (weighted %, SA + A)

AGIS item	Agree Overall % (SA + A)	Men %	Women/ other %	Gap pp (men − women/ other)	Strongly agree %	Strongly disagree %	Not stated %
Many women don't fully appreciate all that men do for them.	29.6	33.6	25.8	7.8	6.9	38.6	3.9
Many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Australia.	33.4	39.1	27.9	11.2	9.6	34.5	4.9
Many women mistakenly interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist.	38.1	42.7	33.8	8.9	7.7	24.0	6.4

Note: Percentages are weighted. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; pp = percentage points. Gap = men − women/non-binary respondents. Women and non-binary respondents were combined due to small sample sizes.

These items reflect a pattern of minimisation and dismissal of women's experiences of inequality. While most respondents disagree, endorsement remains material (30%–38%), and gender gaps suggest these beliefs are more prevalent among men. This aligns with broader evidence that resistance to gender equality can take the form of minimisation, denial and backlash, even where explicit sexism is less socially acceptable (9).

Notably, the most prevalent AGIS items in RQ2 relate to minimisation/dismissal of sexism, whereas the most discriminating AGIS items in RQ1 relate to beliefs about men's greater suitability for leadership and authority.

UNDERSTANDING OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SCALE (UVAWS)

This section examines how Victorians' recognition of specific behaviours as violence is distributed across the population. For the UVAWS, endorsement is not 'agreement' but recognition. Results are reported as the weighted proportion responding 'yes, always' or 'yes, usually' (combined as 'recognised'), alongside 'yes, sometimes', 'no' and 'not stated'. Note that some DVInt items were asked of a subsample (~1,532), while most other items were asked of the full Victorian sample (~6,083). Percentages are weighted and comparable as proportions, but base sizes differ.

Table 7. UVAWS items showing the highest division and gender difference (weighted %)

UVAWS item (short label)	Recognised Overall %	Men %	Women /other %	Gap pp	Yes, always Overall %	Yes, sometimes Overall %	No Overall %	Not stated Overall %
Forces partner to hide they are transgender (DVInt5)	78.9	74.0	83.5	9.5	67.2	8.2	7.3	5.7
Forces partner to stop practising their religion (DVInt4)	79.8	76.4	82.8	6.4	67.0	9.9	8.2	2.1
Controls partner by denying access to shared money (DV2m)	80.9	75.0	86.5	11.5	67.5	9.9	7.6	1.6
Unwanted picture of genitals sent to a woman (SVK1)	81.3	79.9	82.6	2.7	70.2	8.8	7.7	2.2
Tracks location/calls/activities via devices without consent (DV10)	82.8	77.2	88.1	10.9	70.7	8.6	7.6	1.0
Prevents contact with family/friends (DV2k)	87.0	81.6	92.1	10.5	74.7	6.9	5.5	0.7

Note: Percentages are weighted. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; pp = percentage points. Gap = men − women/non-binary respondents. Women and non-binary respondents were combined due to small sample sizes. Recognised = 'yes, always' + 'yes, usually'.

Overall, recognition was high for all items presented here. However, there is still a measurable minority who either did not recognise particular behaviours as violence (responded ‘no’) or only recognised them inconsistently (‘yes, sometimes’). Items with higher ‘no’ responses in this set included denial of access to shared money, device-based monitoring without consent, forcing a partner to hide their transgender identity, and forcing a partner to stop practising their religion. The presence of both ‘no’ and ‘yes, sometimes’ responses suggests that there is uneven recognition for certain forms of economic abuse, technology-facilitated monitoring and identity-based control across Victorian communities (10–12).

Gender gaps were generally modest, but clearer differences appear for a subset of items. Women/other genders were more likely than men to recognise device-based monitoring without consent and denial of access to shared money as violence.

One item in the UVAWS set had a notably higher ‘not stated’ rate: forcing a partner to hide that they are transgender (‘not stated’ = 5.7%). This suggests a higher level of non-response for this topic and should be noted when interpreting gender differences and overall recognition for that item.

RQ2 SYNTHESIS

Across the AVAWS and the AGIS, the clearest divisions are concentrated in (a) sexual violence credibility and accusation narratives, and (b) minimisation and dismissal of gender inequality. In the UVAWS, recognition is high overall, but there is still uneven recognition for specific forms of non-physical abuse, including economic abuse, technology-facilitated monitoring and identity-based control (10–12). Across all three domains, gender differences are concentrated in a subset of items rather than evenly distributed, supporting the value of item-level analysis for identifying where population averages can mask meaningful divisions.

DISCUSSION

This paper demonstrates what becomes visible when the NCAS is used not only as a population monitoring instrument, but also as a supplementary diagnostic lens. NCAS scale scores are essential for tracking broad, long-term change. However, prevention activity rarely targets ‘scale scores’ directly. It targets the concrete beliefs and narratives that shape how people interpret harm, whether people who have experienced violence are believed, whether gender inequality is minimised, and whether non-physical abuse is recognised. Item-level secondary analysis helps translate scale-level monitoring into this more applied layer, while remaining grounded in the rigorous and validated NCAS measurement framework (1, 8, 9).

WHAT ‘HIGH IMPACT’ MEANS IN THIS ANALYSIS

This analysis uses two complementary lenses that answer different prevention questions:

- **High-leverage marker items (RQ1):** items with stronger item–scale correlations that best distinguish respondents with higher versus lower overall scale scores. These items help identify ‘marker’ beliefs that are most closely aligned with the underlying construct each scale is designed to measure (i.e., attitudes towards violence against women, gender inequality and understanding of violence).
- **High-reach contested beliefs (RQ2):** items with higher endorsement, more pronounced response tails, higher non-response or clearer gender differences. These items point to beliefs that are more common, contested or sensitive in the population, and therefore likely candidates for messaging and message-testing.

A central finding of this paper is that these sets do not perfectly overlap. The items that most strongly differentiate respondents are not always the items most commonly endorsed. Treating prevalence and item–scale alignment as interchangeable can lead to prevention work that either (a) focuses only on what is most common, missing key markers of lower attitudinal rejection; or (b) focuses only on what is most diagnostic, missing beliefs that remain 'live' for a substantial minority. Used together, the two lenses provide a clearer basis for prioritising where to focus prevention communications, education and monitoring (1, 8, 9).

ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: CREDIBILITY NARRATIVES AS A PRIORITY PRESSURE POINT

For attitudes towards violence against women, the most discriminating items cluster around sexual violence myths and scepticism about the credibility of people who have experienced violence. These items show strong overall disagreement but nonetheless differentiate respondents strongly within the scale. This indicates that endorsement, where it persists, is concentrated among those with lower attitudinal rejection of violence and aligns with a broader pattern of violence-supportive attitudes (3, 4, 8).

The analysis also shows that some credibility and false-accusation narratives are not only diagnostic but also comparatively common. Around one-third of respondents endorsed beliefs that women exaggerate domestic violence claims in custody disputes (35%) and that sexual assault accusations are commonly used to 'get back at men' (30%), with men more likely to agree. This cluster warrants particular attention because it combines relatively high prevalence, gender-patterning and conceptual relevance to responses to disclosure (3, 4).

From a prevention perspective, this pattern suggests that shifting normative 'credibility climates' may be as important as shifting explicit approval of violence. Credibility narratives influence whether disclosures are treated as legitimate, whether people who have experienced violence are believed, whether bystanders intervene, and whether institutional responses are supported and trusted (1, 5, 6). Broad anti-violence messaging may not directly address these specific narratives, supporting more targeted message development and testing. The findings support a more specific approach of messaging that directly addresses these narratives, including risks of unintended reinforcement and the need for clear counter-framing (9).

Item-level results also show that sexual violence-related 'responsibility' beliefs are not uniform. Some responsibility narratives show low endorsement and little gender difference, while others show higher endorsement, clearer gender gaps and higher non-response. This matters because it indicates that division is concentrated in particular storylines (e.g., 'led him on'/regret narratives) rather than across all victim-blaming attitudes. This supports precision in messaging, as prevention communications may benefit from testing responses to the specific narrative patterns that remain contested, rather than treating 'rape myths' as a single undifferentiated set (3, 4).

Finally, the presence of a highly discriminating item referencing violence against lesbian and bisexual women, strongly rejected overall but still diagnostic, reinforces that where scepticism about sexual violence extends to marginalised groups, it aligns with a wider violence-supportive attitudinal pattern. This supports the ongoing importance of inclusive prevention framing and attention to intersectional vulnerability, without implying that such work is absent in Victoria (13, 14).

GENDER INEQUALITY: TWO RELATED BUT DISTINCT PREVENTION TASKS

For attitudes towards gender inequality, the divergence between RQ1 and RQ2 analyses is particularly informative. The most discriminating items are beliefs about men's greater suitability for authority (i.e., in the workplace, community, politics, household). These items appear to function as markers of more entrenched attitudes endorsing gender inequality and align closely with drivers-focused prevention frameworks that emphasise gendered power and rigid gender roles as foundational to violence against women (1).

By contrast, the most commonly endorsed items relate to minimisation and dismissal of sexism and inequality (e.g., beliefs that women exaggerate inequality, misinterpret innocent remarks as sexist, or do not appreciate what men do). Endorsement remains material (around 30%–38%), with men consistently more likely to agree. This pattern is consistent with the broader evidence that resistance to gender equality can take the form of minimisation, denial and backlash dynamics, even where overt sexism is less socially acceptable (9).

Together, these findings suggest two distinct but connected prevention tasks to tackle attitudes towards gender inequality:

1. **Reduce the reach and perceived 'normality'** of minimisation and dismissal narratives that remain relatively common and can undermine prevention implementation.
2. **Track and shift authority beliefs** that are less widely endorsed but strongly diagnostic of entrenched inequality and therefore important for prevention segmentation, monitoring and longer-term norm change.

In practical terms, this generates different hypotheses for intervention design, including appropriate settings to target each theme. Minimisation/dismissal narratives may be appropriate testing targets for broader public communications and community norm-setting. Authority beliefs may be better examined through more intensive, settings-based approaches (including workplaces, leadership contexts and relationship education) that can work directly with entitlement, decision-making and expectations of gendered authority (1, 9).

UNDERSTANDING OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: HIGH RECOGNITION, LESS CONSISTENT AT THE MARGINS

For understanding violence against women, recognition of non-physical abuse is high overall, consistent with contemporary understandings of domestic and family violence as patterns of coercive control rather than isolated physical incidents (10–12). Item-level results nonetheless show uneven recognition for specific forms of non-physical control and surveillance, particularly economic restriction, technology-facilitated monitoring, religious control and identity-based coercion, where a meaningful minority responded 'no' or 'yes, sometimes', and gender differences are clearer on a subset of items (5, 6, 10–12).

For prevention, the implication is not that Victorians 'do not recognise coercive control'. Rather, particular forms of non-physical control appear easier to minimise, normalise or reinterpret. This indicates a continued role for settings-based reinforcement and professional education (e.g., clarifying what economic abuse looks like in practice, how technology-facilitated monitoring operates, and how identity-based coercion functions as control) (10–12).

The elevated 'not stated' response for the trans-identity-based coercion item warrants explicit mention as a finding in itself. Non-response may reflect discomfort, uncertainty or reluctance to engage with sensitive topics in a phone survey. Treating non-response as informative can support careful framing and inclusive

prevention design, while avoiding over-interpretation about the direction or intensity of underlying attitudes (8, 13).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MONITORING, MESSAGING AND FUTURE USE OF NCAS

A practical implication of this work is that item-level analysis can help translate NCAS results into clearer priorities for messaging and program refinement. The strongest ‘pressure points’ in this analysis sit at the level of specific narratives rather than broad constructs, particularly credibility and false-accusation narratives within violence-related attitudes and minimisation/dismissal narratives within gender inequality. These findings support structured message testing that focuses on clarity, resonance and unintended effects, consistent with evidence-informed primary prevention (1, 3, 4, 9).

Item-level analysis can also strengthen interpretation of population trends. If the most prevalent items and the most diagnostic items shift at different rates (or within different subgroups), scale averages can appear stable even when meaningful movement is occurring ‘under the surface’. Building a small, stable set of item-level indicators into routine reporting alongside scale scores could therefore complement NCAS monitoring and support more precise prevention learning and evaluation over time (8, 9).

LIMITATIONS

This exploratory cross-sectional analysis describes responses to the 2021 NCAS and does not identify causal mechanisms, intervention effects, behavioural outcomes or change over time. The findings are a point-in-time snapshot and should not be treated as estimates of current Victorian attitudes. Data collection occurred during the COVID-19 period, which may have affected participation, social context and responses. Survey coverage, participation and item non-response, telephone administration, social desirability and topic sensitivity may also have influenced the results. Some items were administered to smaller subsamples, and gender comparisons are constrained by the categories and sample sizes available; combining women and respondents of other genders does not permit conclusions about the experiences or attitudes of individual gender-diverse groups. Item–scale correlations indicate alignment with the relevant scale, rather than causal leverage or formal evidence of intervention importance. The findings are therefore best used to guide prioritisation, message testing, monitoring and further analysis (8).

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