



**Violence is preventable**  
UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women & UNV  
Asia-Pacific regional joint programme  
for gender-based violence prevention

## Preventing violence against women and girls

*From community activism to government policy*

*SUMMARY REPORT*

***Working Paper***

Partners for Prevention is a UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNV Asia-Pacific regional joint programme for gender-based violence prevention.

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This publication is a summary of the research findings and recommendations outlined in the full report. The full report can be accessed at [http://partners4prevention.org/sites/default/files/documents/right\\_to\\_respect.pdf](http://partners4prevention.org/sites/default/files/documents/right_to_respect.pdf).

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## Introduction

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The Asia-Pacific region has some of the highest reported levels of gender-based violence in the world. Between one and two thirds of women aged 15 to 49 in Bangladesh, Thailand, Samoa and Viet Nam have faced some form of violence in their lives (Garcia-Moreno, 2005). While decades of work has led to some significant advances in awareness, laws and policies on gender-based violence, there has been little-to-no measured decrease in violence across the region.

Many existing policies and laws on violence against women in the region importantly focus on prosecuting perpetrators of violence, and protecting women who experience violence. However, efforts to prevent gender-based violence – to stop gender-based violence before it starts – must go hand-in-hand with this critical work to respond and provide services after violence occurs.

The following summary report tells the story of how A Right to Respect – Victoria’s plan to prevent violence against women (2010 – 2020) – came into existence as one of the region’s only public policies dedicated exclusively towards the prevention of gender-based violence. Even though Australia is a high-income country it faced many challenges that countries in the Asia-Pacific face now – that violence against women is seen as a family issue, that women are blamed for men’s violence and that little is known about prevention or why it is important. The Right to Respect policy was the first ever example of a whole-of-government policy on gender-based violence focusing on stopping violence before it starts, along with providing better response services.

The following summary report provides a brief outline of the stages of the policy process, what strategies drove prevention policy forward, and what challenges remain to implement an effective and sustainable prevention policy. The summary report aims to be a catalyst for greater awareness and interest in prevention policy, and makes suggestions on how to adapt the process for policymakers and government bodies across the region.

For a comprehensive narrative of the A Right to Respect policy process, read the full report [insert link here]. We truly hope that this case study and model will help make prevention more understandable and ‘actionable’ for policymakers, activists and practitioners and contribute to putting prevention firmly on the policy agenda in the Asia-Pacific.

Partners for Prevention, Bangkok

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For more about Partners for Prevention, visit: [www.partners4prevention.org](http://www.partners4prevention.org).

## Methodology

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The research on A Right to Respect was commissioned by Partners for Prevention, a UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UN Volunteer Regional Joint Programme for Asia and the Pacific (P4P). It is part of a multi-country study - The Change Project - to promote a deeper understanding of the root causes of gender-based violence across Asia and the Pacific, in order to inform evidence-based prevention.

Interviews were conducted by report author Dr. Sue Dyson with 12 key informants who were involved in a variety of ways in the work that contributed to the development of A Right to Respect – Victoria’s plan to prevent violence against women (2010 – 2020). Information was gathered to describe from different perspectives the processes and events that led to the launch of the (but not fully implemented) 10-year plan.<sup>1</sup> The data was compiled into a narrative report of how the plan developed, and key lessons learned for replication across the region. The full report can be accessed here: [http://partners4prevention.org/sites/default/files/documents/right\\_to\\_respect.pdf](http://partners4prevention.org/sites/default/files/documents/right_to_respect.pdf).

The objectives for this research were to:

- Better understand the processes, developments and discourses that contributed to the recognition of violence prevention as a government responsibility.
- Investigate the factors that led to the development of the state plan to prevent violence against women, including research, advocacy and the political environment.
- Explore how the experiences of this first-ever whole-of-government prevention policy could be applied in other contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> The summary report will refer to *A Right to Respect – Victoria’s plan to prevent violence against women (2010 – 2020)* in shorthand as merely ‘the plan’, or ‘A Right to Respect’.

## The Story of a Right to Respect

*The foundational blocks of A Right to Respect developed over a relatively short time in Victoria, Australia. During a span of 20 years, a nascent movement of women’s voluntary action against violence grew into a sophisticated response and policy environment within which A Right to Respect was developed. Yet, the developments that took place were the result of massive effort on behalf of many people in civil society and government. The following narrative briefly describes this process.*

The role of women in lobbying for and shaping gender-sensitive policies in Australia has a fairly recent history, and often these policies were hard won (for example, women’s right to vote in 1901, the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975 and ratification of CEDAW in 1983). Until the middle of the twentieth century there was little concerted action to ensure women’s safety. In the mid-1980s, the national women’s health movement gained traction and state governments – including the state government in Victoria - began to fund crisis services, shelters and counselling for women escaping violence. By the early 2000s in Victoria, the sectors that responded to the needs of victims of gender-based violence were overwhelmed with the needs of their constituents and the struggle to get adequate funding. Even though work to respond to violence after it has occurred had been on-going for many decades, understanding prevention and how it works was relatively new.

In 2009, the state government of Victoria introduced a whole-of-government approach to prevent violence against women – A Right to Respect: Victoria’s Plan to Prevent Violence against Women 2010–2020. What might have seemed to signal a new direction was actually the culmination of the work of many people for more than a decade. Three key milestones occurred over this ten year period:

### **(1) A shift in perception of gender-based violence from a private social problem to a serious and costly health concern**

Lack of community understanding about violence against women and party politics are problematic when approaching an ambitious project like prevention. Attitudes and values are shaped by culture, experience, education and by discourses that are accepted as “truths” and become community norms.

To prepare for a prevention policy, the discourses about violence against women had to shift away from it as a private matter to a view that it is an unacceptable social problem. In 1996, the population-based, epidemiological UN global burden of disease study was carried out internationally which was well received by the Department of Health in Victoria. Concurrent research carried out by VicHealth<sup>2</sup> made clear that the mental health promotion approach towards the elimination of violence against women was an area for future work (McCarthy 2003). In the context of increasingly influential burden of disease research, VicHealth commissioned a study *The Health Costs of Violence: Measuring the Burden of Disease Caused by Intimate Partner Violence* (2004), which clearly demonstrated that intimate partner violence was prevalent, serious and preventable in Victoria. Another important result of the Health Costs of Violence study was that the evidence

<sup>2</sup> VicHealth is a statutory authority that was established by the Victorian Parliament as part of the Tobacco Act 1987. Funded by taxes on tobacco, VicHealth works in partnership with organizations, communities and individuals to promote good health and prevent ill health. VicHealth is one of a small number of foundations established internationally, and the only one in Australia, with the explicit purpose of promoting health and well-being. VicHealth provides evidence and theory upon which both community organizations and government work to implement prevention strategies and will be discussed in different sections, depending on its importance to the context.

enabled the financial cost of violence against women to the community to be calculated. Access Economics (2004) put this figure at A\$8.1 billion for the year 2002/2003.

## **(2) Multiple government and civil society sectors coming together to share responsibility for repairing the response system and preparing the way for the development of a policy of prevention**

With the evidence about the scope and impact of violence against women in Victoria in place, the next order of business was to address the response system to ensure women and children's safety. A number of developments occurred both within and across sectors, underscored by an increased commitment to whole-of-government approaches with strong partnerships with the community sector to ensure public safety, and particularly women's safety. Amongst a backdrop of increased government and Victoria Police action and commitment to addressing violence against women two key processes were underway:

- Launch of two state wide steering committees addressing family violence and sexual assault respectively.

“There were people [from government departments] who were compelled to be at the statewide steering committee because of the whole-of-government approach. This provided opportunities to develop relationships and for us in the community sector to understand the workings of government. We realized that we had not had a good understanding about how government departments worked. In the past, we had often seen a decision we disagreed with as being personal, but as our understanding increased, we gained a better [awareness] and it helped us with our political advocacy.”

These committees were co-convened by the Victoria Police and the state Office of Women's Policy and included community and response sector representatives. For community representatives, participation in the committees built relationships, illuminated government processes and encouraged a more strategic approach in everyday practices. The committees contributed to building strong government-civil society ties and coordinated a more effective response system to women's experiences of violence.

- Development of an 'authorizing environment' that included formal and informal bodies that provided legitimacy and support for the issue of violence against women and violence prevention.

In Victoria, VicHealth was an early leader in the field. Having determined the scope of the problem through the 2004 Health Costs of Violence study (discussed earlier) and commissioned a community attitudes survey, VicHealth continued to drive the discourse of violence prevention in Victoria, with the publication of seminal action-oriented frameworks on how to address violence. The conceptual models promoted by VicHealth would provide the foundation of future projects and approaches to prevent violence in local and state government, as well as among civil society partners.

Other authorizing agencies took on important roles. The leadership shown by the Commonwealth Government, the Victorian government and other players, such as the police and the justice system, were all factors in the shifting of the issue from secrecy and silence to something acknowledged as prevalent, serious, costly and preventable.

### (3) Whole-of-government policy development process to build a multi-sectoral, collaborative policy with wide-spread support and buy-in from key stakeholders

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With the integrated reforms to the family violence and sexual assault systems operating effectively, the third key milestone was the turn toward a prevention plan. Two factors emerged in the interviews with informants as critical to this shift being accepted within government at that time: the existence of an evidence base for violence prevention, led by VicHealth, and the expertise of key members of the team, pulled from government and the community sector with extensive experience on violence prevention on the ground.

The architects of the Right to Respect plan were aware from the outset that the kind of change they were advocating would take time, and a 10-year time frame was advocated. Support from all aspects of government (both political and bureaucratic) was important. They started work inside government to develop the vision, guiding principles and whole-of-government approach for the plan to gain wide-ranging support. This was a staged process within a tight time frame:

#### Stage one (three months): Understanding the context of the plan

*Five background briefing documents were commissioned to explain the scope and potential for each of the five settings<sup>3</sup> and to improve capacity across government work areas, create new partnerships and build an evidence base to inform future policy and programming for preventing violence against women. The major output of this stage was five background documents.*

#### Stage two (two months): Engaging a broad range of actors

*Policy advisory groups were set up for each setting. These were convened and coordinated by the Office for Women's Policy and chaired by a key government representative with responsibility for the different settings; members were stakeholders from across government. The major output of this stage was five draft plans (for each setting), which were then considered and endorsed by an interdepartmental committee. According to an informant who was involved in the process:*

“A lot of people in government had some connection to the plan. People understood, were interested and had a sense of ownership – it generated excitement and energy. We knew this was something new and cutting edge. No one had done this before, and so there was a climate of hope and enthusiasm that isn't present in your normal day-to-day work.”

#### Stage three (two months): Building broad-based consultation and collaboration

Five consultative working groups were set up with non-government people, including practitioners and academics with expertise and knowledge of prevention in each setting to be addressed by the Right to Respect plan. For example, in the education working group, school principals were represented. The working groups

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<sup>3</sup> The five settings are:

- education (primary, secondary and tertiary levels)
- local government and community services (including health and human services, the arts, faith communities and cultural institutions)
- sports (sporting clubs and organizations for men, women, children and young people at the local, regional and state levels)
- workplaces (private and public sector as well as such institutions as the military and police)
- media and popular culture (including cyberspace and new media technologies).

considered and provided feedback on the draft plans for the five settings, which were finalized according to the work of these groups. The major output of this stage was five final settings plans that received ministerial approval. The 10-year time frame was approved, based on broad consultation and the evidence that cultural change is a long-term project.

“The process engaged people at all levels. Without the critical mass of people supporting the work [of developing the plan] it would have been too easy for people in power to sideline it. But with all these people lobbying for prevention, they just couldn’t do that. We had to be pragmatic and not discount anyone who was interested inside government or in the community. And for a year [while we developed the plan], it was an idea that people just assumed would happen.”

#### Stage four (six months, concurrent with the other stages): Drafting the state plan

*In the policy papers released late in 2009, the vision was that Victoria communities, cultures and organizations would be non-violent and gender equitable, and relationships would be respectful and non-discriminatory. The Right to Respect plan intended to address the underlying causes of violence against women and reflected the value that all women have the right to live free from violence. It was developed in consultation with representatives of local government, education, sport, media, the arts, popular culture, workplaces and community settings and was intended to be a systematic, sustained, cross-sector policy that aimed to build skills, attitudes and cultural values that reject violence against women.*

The goals of the envisioned state plan were:

- a significant reduction in violence against women
- non-violent and non-discriminatory social norms
- gender-equitable, safe and inclusive communities and organizations
- equal and respectful relationships between women and men.

During the development of the plan described above, other processes took place that contributed toward strengthening the environment within which A Right to Respect was developed. This included efforts to strengthen capacity of community sector and government to advocate more effectively for evidence-based violence prevention; building allies among media to harness the potential of media for changing social norms and attitudes around violence; improving horizontal and vertical information sharing within government to foster support and participation of different departments; and developing a budget to fund the 10-year Right to Respect plan.

One of the strongest insights from the Victoria project is that change management is a process. There is no step-by-step formula for establishing prevention policy. Rather, it is about preparing for change through leadership, establishing evidence, managing people and resources, developing partnerships and networks and reinforcing change. It requires skills, knowledge and understanding. Most of all, it requires patience to focus on a long-term goal with small steps and preparedness to celebrate each small gain.

The leaders of the change process in Victoria were located together in a small government unit; they supported each other, engaged the whole range of stakeholders and worked with them to come on a decade-long journey together. Policy development only occurred after the response system was operating effectively at the end of the process. They shared a common commitment to the process taking time but were ultimately hampered by political timelines (in Victoria, elections take place every four years).



## Concluding remarks

A Right to Respect was never fully implemented due to shifts in the Victorian political landscape after elections, and loss of key government advocates and systems. Yet, the plan both stands as a model and has lessons for others interested in undertaking a similar venture. Recommendations on how to advocate for, develop and implement a whole-of-government violence prevention policy, building on the lessons from Victoria, have been consolidated below. For a more complete discussion of the research findings, see the full report at <http://partners4prevention.org/linkedddocuments/preventing-violence-against-women-and-girls> .

1. Build a sound evidence base: Ensure that rigorous evidence on the scope and nature of violence is compiled and disseminated. Without sound evidence about the nature, scope, impact and outcomes of gender-based violence, engaging other parties is likely to be a difficult project. Evidence can also help to shift beliefs that violence is a private, family affair by highlighting the health impact and burden of disease and the financial costs of violence against women to the community.

In Victoria, the process of building and disseminating the evidence base was led by VicHealth, both in the initial evidence gathered using the burden of disease study methodology and in all subsequent prevention programmes that were evaluated to build on that evidence.

2. Build an authorizing environment: Any organization or state wanting to embark on prevention must have the backing of an agency and leaders who are committed to the vision of ending violence against women. Whether it be a government or NGO agency, leadership from an organization with the credibility and resources to commission local research to demonstrate the scope and impact of the problem is essential.

In Victoria, a small group of people with stable leadership and a deep understanding of the issues, the context and the field shepherded the changes.

3. Ensure that service and prevention are part of a holistic system: Effective prevention policy and programmes depend on a well-functioning service system. Prevention can only occur if the system that responds to victims of violence is operating effectively to ensure the safety of individuals. Prevention requires specific skills different to crisis response, and while the two are inextricably linked, it is important that the workforce for each has a clear understanding of its roles and responsibilities and work together cooperatively.

In Victoria, the statewide steering committees to reduce family violence and sexual assault were helpful to reform and ensure the effective functioning of the response system and build relationships and understanding between government, civil society and the communities.

4. Prevention is a long-term project. Real change takes time. Ensure that strategies are in place for sustainability. This includes engaging a wide range of parties in partnerships for prevention, including those from government, the community and private sectors. Building a movement for change must be capable of lasting beyond the span of potential electoral changes.

The leaders of the change process in Victoria worked in a small government unit where they supported each other and engaged the whole range of stakeholders, inspiring them to be a part of the decade-long journey. Although A Right to Respect was not fully implemented, the project led by that small government unit remains a model and provides lessons for others interested in undertaking a similar venture.

5. Strategic stakeholder education. Provide information sharing, formal presentations, briefings and teachable moments to ensure that all parties, from government ministers to community workers, are well informed. In some cases, formal education may be necessary, particularly in the case of pre- and in-service training for service providers and others who are likely to come into contact with victims of violence. However, informal, adult education approaches are also suggested. Use “teachable moments”.

In Victoria, the Australian Football League, which had traditionally avoided or even covered up incidents of violence against women, became a flagship for prevention. By publically promoting the organization’s stance rejecting violence against women and working from within to change attitudes and behaviours, the AFL continues to be held up as a strong advocate for prevention.

6. Coherent conceptual approaches for prevention policy and programmes: The socio-ecological model, based on a public health model of primary, secondary and tertiary primary prevention, addresses factors related to violence across individual, community and society levels and targets change at each of these levels for a comprehensive prevention and response approach to violence.

In Victoria, VicHealth used the socio-ecological model as a coherent conceptual tool for its widely disseminated prevention framework. This resulted in the consistent use of the model across sectors to describe and understand violence against women.

7. Inclusion of relevant and culturally sensitive practices: Although gender-based violence is not acceptable in any circumstance, different groups have different needs and require different approaches. A singular approach for all does not work; understanding different community needs and ensuring the principles of inclusion, relevance and cultural sensitivity should be enshrined in policy and programme design.

In Victoria, the needs of different groups of women were integrated at the regional and subregional levels, creating critical links across sectors.

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