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Senate, Finance and Public Administration Committees
PO Box 6100
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Dear Committee Secretary,

RE: INQUIRY INTO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Finance and Public Administration with respect to the inquiry into domestic violence and gender inequality.

ACL's vision is to see Christian principles influencing the way we are governed, do business, and relate to each other as a community. ACL seeks a more compassionate, just and moral society. ACL advocates into the Federal Parliament and all State and Territory Parliaments, and is neither party-partisan nor denominationally aligned.

With over 50,000 supporters nationwide, ACL is conscious that it is statistically likely that many of its supporters may have experienced family breakdown and domestic violence, or may currently be experiencing domestic violence.

Domestic violence is a complex issue that affects the whole of society, inflicting extensive damage on individuals, families and the broader community. It is, therefore, imperative that public policy makers support the social good of the family and seek solutions to address domestic violence.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Experimental Family and Domestic Violence Statistics shows that in 2014 there were 95 homicide victims of family and domestic violence recorded by police. The data also reveals there were 53,976 domestic violence related offences, and 3,074 domestic violence related sexual assaults recorded by police.¹

Unfortunately, the inquiry's terms of reference, which frame the issue of domestic violence through the narrow lens of gendered violence, are overly simplistic.

The terms of reference appear adopt the assumption that gender inequality and the messages conveyed by gender stereotypes are a major factor leading to domestic violence and should underlie

¹ 'Experimental Family and domestic Violence Statistics, 2014'. *Australian Bureau of Statistics*, accessed 27/2/16, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4510.0~2014~Main%20Features~Experimental%20Family%20and%20Domestic%20Violence%20Statistics~10000>.

a public policy approach towards reducing violence. This is sometimes referred to as 'gender mainstreaming'.² It is the approach taken by the World Health Organization (WHO),³ and in Australia, VicHealth.⁴ The terms of reference even go so far as to mention the marketing of children's toys, which suggests that the committee expects to find that trucks and barbie dolls make little boys grow up to be abusers and little girls grow up to be victims.

Social theories that rely on notions of 'gendered violence' have been offered by theorists to explain the underlying causes of violence against women, such as the feminist model of causation that came out of the feminist movement of the 1970s. An extension of feminist theory into the ecological model was also proposed by Heise (1998).⁵

Yet, a narrow approach that fails to also examine broader factors in domestic violence is not free from criticism, even by those who aim to reduce 'gendered violence', with some claiming it fails to acknowledge other sources and intersections of disadvantage such as class and race, which may compound gender disadvantage.⁶ Heise (1998), who adopted male dominance as the foundation for a theory of violence, dismissed single factor explanations of violence, writing:

*'the feminist emphasis on male dominance and gender hierarchy (to the exclusion of other social and individual factors) fails to explain why some men beat and rape women when others do not...'*⁷

The narrow terms of reference in this inquiry, which focus on gender inequality and gender stereotypes as a cause of domestic violence are, therefore, likely to receive criticism, even from some operating on social theory frameworks.

The terms of reference do not provide a definition of gender, but the implication of linking domestic violence to gender stereotypes suggest that the committee is likely to adopt a definition of gender from social theory that defines gender as 'the social configuration of men and women's identities, interactions and relationships rather than the biological differences of sex that are male and female'.⁸ If this is the case, it is a problematic definition since it separates the socio-cultural role of a person's sex (male or female gender) from their biological sex. Put more simply, when gender is defined as an awareness of oneself as male or female with no basis in genetics or sexual development it becomes subjective and should not be used as a basis for public policy.

'Gender inequality' can be an imprecise concept.⁹ Since the term 'gender inequality' is used in the terms of reference with considerably broad application, what success would look like in terms of equality is unclear. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for example,

² Wall, L. (2014). Gender equality and violence against women: What's the connection? (ACSSA Research Summary). Melbourne: Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, *Australian Institute of Family Studies*.

³ World Health Organization/London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: taking action and generating evidence. Geneva, *World Health Organization*, 2010.

⁴ VicHealth. (2007). *Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria*. Melbourne: VicHealth.

⁵ Wall, L. (2014).

⁶ Sokoloff and Dupont challenge the gender model of domestic violence, pointing out other factors that contribute to violence between family members and partners. They argue that the structural roots of domestic violence extend far beyond those of gender. Other factors include race, class, the social structure, destructive addictions and individual behaviour. Sokoloff and Dupont write that the gender inequality perspective used to assess cases and causes of domestic violence, in fact marginalises high-risk groups. Natalie Sokoloff and Ida Dupont, 'Domestic Violence at the Intersections of Race, Class and Gender Challenges and Contributions to Understanding Violence Against Marginalized Women in Diverse Communities,' *Violence Against Women*, 11, 1 January 2005, p. 39-41.

⁷ Heise, L. (1998). Violence against women, an integrated, ecological framework. *Violence Against Women*, 4(4), 2622-2690.

⁸ Wall, L. (2014).

⁹ Wall, L. (2014).

frames gender equality through the lens of economic issues, while other organisations consider gender equality to be the absence of discrimination on the basis of gender in opportunities and allocation of resources.¹⁰

Limiting an analysis to a narrow social theory approach also raises difficulties with defining and measuring gender equality, and fails to provide an adequate explanation of violence between homosexual and lesbian couples. Individuals in same-sex relationships appear to have a greater risk of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) than other groups.¹¹ Analyses of domestic violence based on gender and gender equality do not explain this trend, nor do they provide a consistent theory by which to understand how and why domestic violence occurs in same-sex relationships.¹²

Whilst ACL submits that viewing the issue of domestic violence purely through a gendered lens is the wrong approach, those adopting a gendered approach should at least acknowledge the role of women in contributing to violence within the family.¹³ All people, including women, have the capacity to commit violent acts. The term 'domestic' violence is a recognition of this fact, which was developed as a gender neutral term as violence by women and within homosexual and lesbian relationships became increasingly apparent in the last few decades.¹⁴

Domestic violence also affects men. Some statistics suggest that up to one in three victims of sexual assault and at least one in three victims of family violence are male. The ABS' Personal Safety Survey in 2012¹⁵ found:

- one in three victims of current partner violence during the last 12 months (33.3%) and since the age of 15 (33.5%) were male.
- more than one in three victims of emotional abuse by a partner during the last 12 months (37.1%) and since the age of 15 (36.3%) were male.
- around one in three victims of physical violence by a boyfriend/girlfriend or date since the age of 15 (32.1%) were male.
- almost one in three victims of sexual assault during the last 12 months (29.6%) were male.
- more than one in three victims of physical and/or sexual abuse before the age of 15 (39.0%) were male.
- the ABS survey also found that men were less than half as likely as women to have told anybody about partner violence, to have sought advice or support, or to have contacted the police.

While the statistics also show that violence towards men is significantly lower than violence against women, they do reveal that domestic violence is an issue faced by men as well as women, therefore, to look at the issue of domestic violence in a way that paints men as the perpetrators and women as

¹⁰ NSW Health, *Gender Equality in Health*, accessed 27/2/16
http://www0.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2000/pdf/gender_equity.pdf p. 2

¹¹ Jenna Calton, Lauren Bennett, Catteneo and Kris T Gebhard, 'Barriers to Help Seeking for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence,' *Trauma, Violence and Abuse 1-16*, 2015. DOI: 10.1177/1524838015585318, p. 2

¹² Ibid. p 4.

¹³ Cathy Moore, 'Story of domestic violence against men is hidden, complicated and disputed', November 24 2015, *Brisbane Times*, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/story-of-domestic-violence-against-men-is-hidden-complicated-and-disputed-20151122-gl55v7.html>

¹⁴ Adam Tomison, 'Exploring Family Violence: Links Between Child Maltreatment and Domestic Violence,' (Issue No. 13), June 2000, *Australian Institute of Family Studies*, accessed 5/3/16 <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/exploring-family-violence-links-between-child-maltreatment>

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, Personal Safety Survey, Australia, 2012, cat no 4906.0, ABS, Canberra.
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906.0>

the victims or looks at the issue in a way that is only concerned with violence experienced by women and children should be avoided.

Other contributing factors to violence within the home, between family members, partners and former partners should be given due consideration.

‘Gender based violence’ lessons

Several Australian jurisdictions have adopted ‘Respectful Relationships’ classes in schools. These classes take a social theory approach towards what they describe as ‘gender based violence’. The classes focus on the themes of gender, power, violence and respect.¹⁶ The emphasis on gender inequality and gender-based violence is clearly articulated throughout the material, which is transparent about using the education system as a vehicle to propagate these values.

The Victorian ‘respectful relationships education’ program goes so far as to claim that these programs ‘must draw on feminist theoretical understandings. They must address the fundamental link between gendered power relations or inequalities and violence against women.’¹⁷

The age appropriateness of the material in some of the iterations of ‘Respectful Relationships’ programs has also been called into question recently by journalist Natasha Bitá,¹⁸ and in an editorial in *The Australian*, in relation to the Victorian School program ‘Building Respectful Relationships’ (BRR), the editorial stated:

*Despite a stated aim to work against premature sexualisation, BRR encourages explicit discussion of sexuality, including writing personal advertisements and anal sex. Lessons also cover transgenderism and deconstructing gender. Students are coached to use the gender-neutral term partner instead of boyfriend and girlfriend to be “inclusive of gay and lesbian partnerships”.*¹⁹

The sexualising approach of these ‘gender based violence’ classes is deeply concerning. It adopts a narrow social theory approach towards violence that views the issue through a gendered lens and ignores the fact that domestic violence is an issue faced by men as well as women. The contested political and ideological basis of the social theory behind this approach, and the sexualising nature of the material will also face criticism from many who espouse a Christian understanding of sexuality.

Also concerning is the fact that this approach is being applied to pre-school children. Journalist Susie O’Brien in the *Herald Sun*²⁰ raised alarm in relation to a program aimed at early childhood educators called ‘Start Early: Respectful Relationships for Life’, which is being funded by the NSW government and provided by Early Childhood Australia (ECA).

¹⁶ For example, the Victorian program: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/Pages/respectrel.aspx>.

¹⁷ Michael Flood, Lara Fergus and Melanie Heenan, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, ‘Respectful Relationships: Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools,’ *Department of Education and Early Childhood Development*, Melbourne, 2009, p. 32

¹⁸ Natasha Bitá, ‘Year 8 kids to study sex ads under ‘domestic violence’ curriculum’, *The Australian*, 14 April 2016, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/education/year-8-kids-to-study-sex-ads-under-domestic-violence-curriculum/news-story/db8ab65fbc849b725589124e49536c3>

¹⁹ Editorial, ‘Children sexualised in school diversity programs’, *The Australian*, 15 April 2016, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/editorials/children-sexualised-in-school-diversity-programs/news-story/1ccc661aecbb2099a4ff06739a3c0532>

²⁰ Susie O’Brien, ‘Toddlers to be Taught about Cross-dressing in Controversial Sex-ed Program,’ *Herald Sun*, March 6, 2016, accessed 6/3/16 <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/toddlers-to-be-taught-about-crossdressing-in-controversial-sex-ed-program/news-story/7b935bb2e1573c1b2e748755d0f18986?login=1>.

The 'Start Early' program, while purportedly aimed at developing 'healthy self-esteem and respectful relationships,'²¹ in order to reduce violent behaviour and domestic violence in later years, also places a heavy emphasis on the role of gender. For example, the program module states:

*Attitudes to gender start early, shape relationships throughout life and contribute to domestic violence and community responses to domestic violence.*²²

Clare McHugh, spokeswoman of ECA and Project Manager of ECA's Learning hub, has been reported stating that, 'rigid views on gender' are associated with domestic violence therefore, targeting children at an early age to reduce gender stereotypes is a legitimate form of violence prevention.²³

Early Childhood Australia responded to the media report with a statement that 'the program [Start Early] is not about sex education or gender identity at all' but rather is a 'long-term violence prevention program to help early childhood educator's foster respect between children in the early years.'²⁴ Yet, the repetitive theme of gender identity is a core issue discussed in the course and underpins its approach to addressing domestic violence. The Start Early course, made up of three modules, contains a whole module dedicated to gender, respect and identity which states:

Sex relates to the biological characteristics of being male or female that we are born with.

*Gender is the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour identified with being male or female. Not everyone fits into male or female gender; there is a continuum of variation, just as there are many different kinds of families.*²⁵

Early Childhood Australia also offers further resources for 'Start Early' to 'complement the modules and encourage further learning', which includes a book entitled 'Children's sexual development and behaviour — Pants aren't rude' by Pam Linke. The sexualising nature of this book is highly concerning. The book encourages parents and teachers to think about infants and very young children as 'sexual beings'²⁶ who should be allowed to sexually stimulate themselves from infancy²⁷ and contains advice such as: the belief that 'It is harmful to talk with young children about the sexual parts of their bodies' is a myth'. Yet, talking to very young children about sexual topics can sexualise children and cause harm if they are not developmentally ready.

²¹ Clare McHugh, 'Respectful Relationships Start Early,' *The Spoke: Early Childhood Australia's Blog*, November 25, 2015, accessed 7/3/16 <http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/respectful-relationships-start-early/>

²² Start Early Course, *Early Childhood Australia*, <http://startearly.e3learning.com.au/index.jsp> Module 2.

²³ Susie O'Brien, 'Toddlers to be Taught about Cross-dressing in Controversial Sex-ed Program,' *Herald Sun*, March 6, 2016, accessed 6/3/16 <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/toddlers-to-be-taught-about-crossdressing-in-controversial-sex-ed-program/news-story/7b935bb2e1573c1b2e748755d0f18986?login=1>.

²⁴ Early Childhood Australia, 'No Truth in Story About Sex-Education for Toddlers,' *Media Release*, 6 March, 2016. <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/20160306-No-truth-in-story-about-sex-education-for-toddlers.pdf>

²⁵ Start Early Course, *Early Childhood Australia*, <http://startearly.e3learning.com.au/index.jsp> module 2.

²⁶ 'Children are born as sexual beings without sexual inhibitions; they enjoy their bodies and are curious about how they work. It is the responsibility and opportunity of their first teachers, both parents and educators, to protect children's natural positive feelings about themselves as sexual beings, to help them to learn to value sexuality, to express feelings about it naturally, and to ask what they need to know as they do in every other aspect of their lives.' Pam Linke, 'Children's sexual development and behaviour — Pants aren't rude' 2nd ed. *Early Childhood Australia*, p 5.

²⁷ Masturbation is mentioned 21 times in the book of 36 pages.

Deliberately targeting children in early childhood education with messages about gender and sexuality is inappropriate. It is the role of parents, not early childhood teachers, to be teaching children about these developmentally sensitive topics.

Alternative Strategies to Combating the Causes of Domestic Violence

Strategies and approaches toward dealing with the underlying causes of domestic violence, which do not rely solely on a restrictive gender equality framework, should be considered.

Children learn by example, and the best example for a young child for how to behave in a domestic setting are parents, who not only practice good behaviours, but who are also present in the child's life.

In addition, policies that encourage children's contact with good role models, not only in families, but in schools, and local communities could be one strategy towards training boys and girls how to be respectful towards each other and how to manage their emotions appropriately.

Emphasis on developing positive character qualities, respect for others, kindness and most importantly self-control are also important in educating future generations and impacting the culture of violence that supports domestic violence. Respect for all people, kindness, and empathy are vital to a flourishing society and it is these qualities that need to be emphasised not only in schools, but throughout the community.

Conclusion

Domestic violence is a complex issue that needs a sound policy approach. ACL is concerned that the terms of reference in this inquiry aim to provide a discussion of domestic violence that will result in recommendations that take a gendered lens approach.

An approach towards domestic violence that only looks at Gender inequality and gender stereotypes as causal factors is too narrow. Broader factors that contribute to domestic violence should have been considered in the terms of reference.

More could be done to encourage and foster virtue in young men and women to be respectful, compassionate and empathetic members of society without purely focusing on gender and gender inequalities and stereotypes, and sexualising children.



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