Equal and Safe Strategy 2019
Improving gender equality and preventing violence against women

City of Whittlesea

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

The City of Whittlesea recognises the rich Aboriginal heritage of this country and acknowledges the Wurundjeri Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of this place.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised this report may contain images of deceased people.

Definitions and Concepts

Gender inequality is the key driver of violence against women. Violence against women has been shown to be significantly and consistently lower in countries where women's economic, social and political rights are better protected, and where power and resources are more equally distributed between women and men. Individuals (women and men) who do not believe women and men are equal, and/or see them as having specific roles or characteristics are more likely to condone, tolerate or excuse violence against women.

Violence against women Any act of gender based violence that causes or could cause physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of harm or coercion, in public or in private life.

Family violence Occurs when a perpetrator exercises power and control over another person in their family. It involves coercive and abusive behaviours by the perpetrator that are designed to intimidate, humiliate, undermine and isolate, resulting in fear and insecurity. It can include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and spiritual violence and financial/economic abuse and control. While both men and women, adults and children can be perpetrators or victims, intimate partner violence by men against women is the most common form of family violence.

Gender The socially constructed differences – roles, behaviours, expectations and attributes – between women and men, as distinct from 'sex' which refers to their biological differences.

Gender equity Entails the provision of fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities on the basis of gender. It is not about the equal delivery of services, or distribution of resources – it is about recognising diversity and disadvantage, and directing resources and services towards those most

in need, to ensure equal outcomes for all. Gender equity acknowledges that women and men have different access to resources, power, responsibilities and life experiences and that different strategies are often necessary to address disadvantages and achieve equal outcomes for women and men, girls and boys.

Gender equality Is the outcome reached through gender equity – it means equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women, men and trans and gender-diverse people. Equality does not mean that women, men and trans and gender diverse people will become the same but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on their gender and that their contributions and efforts are valued equally.

Intersectional approach (intersectionality) Considers intersecting and overlapping aspects of a person's identity, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability or age, to recognise overlapping forms of discrimination or oppression. In relation to violence against women, this approach highlights that structural and social discrimination such as racism, colonisation, class oppression, homophobia, transphobia, ageism or ableism can intersect with gender inequality to increases the prevalence and/or severity of violence, and barriers to accessing help.

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Mayor's Message

Welcome to the *Equal and Safe Strategy: Improving Gender Equality and Preventing Violence Against Women*.

Despite significant changes since the *Royal Commission into Family Violence* (March 2016), and increased community knowledge and awareness, violence against women and family violence remains a significant health and safety issue in the City of Whittlesea. Research shows, above any other factor, gender inequality is the key driver of violence against women.

Thank you to the stakeholders and community members who have helped us to develop this strategy. In-depth consultations with local service providers, who spoke about local experiences and complexities of family violence, emerging trends and issues have helped shape our objectives and priority actions. Community members have shared their aspirations and ideas for achieving an equal, safe and respectful community - your ideas of what a more equal and safe world would look like and what we should do to get there.

We have also drawn on *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence* (2015), a national framework with direction provided by state and regional violence prevention and gender equality strategies.

There are social and structural changes required to move us to a more equal, safe and respectful world and to prevent violence against women and family violence. We also know that improving gender equality can improve economic, civic and community participation and productivity, access to resources and opportunities, health outcomes, respectful relationships and community connections for everyone.

Change of this nature is long term work. This is work that Council is committed to, that is vital to creating a healthy and safe community. A world that is safer, more equal and more respectful benefits us all.

Cr Lawrie Cox

MAYOR

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Overview

Violence against women and family violence is a significant community safety and health issue in the City of Whittlesea and one that Council has a long-standing commitment to addressing. Above any other factor, gender inequality is the key driver of violence against women. There has been a great deal of progress in incorporating a gender equity approach into Council's work, but there is still work to be done – internally for the workforce; in the services, programs community facilities and public spaces Council delivers; and in how community capacity for gender equality and the prevention of violence against women is supported. To date, the City of Whittlesea has had two separate strategies to address the interconnected issues of family violence and gender inequality. This integrated strategy will continue to build the recognition and understanding across the organisation and community that gender inequality is the driver of violence against women and will shape Council's work in improving gender equality.

Policy Context

There is a strong policy basis for local government's role in preventing violence against women and improving gender equality. Through preparation of their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans, the Victorian Government requires councils to respond to gender inequities and disclosures of violence through its services, facilities, programs and workplaces and requires councils to "report on the measures they propose to take to reduce family violence and respond to the needs of victims"[i]. The City of Whittlesea's **Health and Wellbeing Partnership Plan 2017-2021** articulates that Council will review and update its strategy to prevent violence against women and their children. It highlights the importance of considering the way that other components of identity – for example, culture, race, ability, age, sexuality – can impact on peoples' experiences of violence and inequality.

This Strategy includes responses to the relevant recommendations from the Royal Commission into Family Violence. Local government is identified in the findings of the **Royal Commission into Family Violence** (RCFV) as a key partner for gender equity improvements, preventing, intervening and responding to family violence and violence against women and their children in local communities and as a workplace.

Key Government policy

This Strategy is aligned and informed by the following State and National frameworks:

- ***Change The Story***[ii] Provides a shared National framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia 2015

- ***Changing The Picture***[iii] A National resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children 2016

- ***Free From Violence***[iv] Victoria's Strategy to Prevent Family Violence and All Forms of Violence Against Women 2017

- ***Safe and Strong***[v] – Victoria's Gender Equality Strategy 2016

- ***Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change***[vi] outlines how the Victorian Government will implement the *Royal Commission into Family Violence Recommendations*[vii] 2016

- ***Building from Strength: 10-Year Industry Plan for Family Violence Prevention and Response***[viii] 2017

Key Regional Strategy

City of Whittlesea is committed to the implementation of the Northern Metropolitan Region Preventing Violence Against Women Strategy, led by Women's Health in the North, ***Building a Respectful Community 2017-2021***[ix]. This commitment involves undertaking one or more strategies from each goal area, providing data to inform the shared action plans, achievements reports and evaluation and engaging in shared advocacy, submissions or grants proposals.

City of Whittlesea policy

The work undertaken through this Strategy will contribute to three of the four goals in ***Whittlesea 2040: A Place for All***:

Goal 1: Connected Community

- A socially cohesive community
- A healthy and safe community
- A participating community

Goal 2: Liveable Neighbourhoods

- Well-designed neighbourhoods and vibrant town centres

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Goal 3: Strong Local Economy

- Increased local employment
- Successful, innovative local businesses

This Strategy will complement and intersect with Council's other Strategic work.

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About Whittlesea

The City of Whittlesea is located on Melbourne's metropolitan fringe, approximately 20km north of Melbourne's Central Business District. Covering 490 square kilometres, it is a large municipality containing established urban, growth and rural areas. The municipal area includes the major rural centre of Whittlesea Township, the rural localities of Beveridge, Donnybrook, Eden Park, Humevale, Kinglake West, Wollert, Woodstock and Yan Yean, as well as the established and growing urban suburbs of Bundoora, Doreen, Epping, Lalor, Mernda, Mill Park, South Morang and Thomastown. The adjoining municipalities are the Shire of Nillumbik to the east, the City of Hume to the west, the Cities of Banyule and Darebin to the south and the Shires of Murrindindi and Mitchell to the north.

The population is currently estimated at 229,791 and expected to reach 382,304 by 2040[x]. Residents have a younger median age than Greater Melbourne (34 years, compared with 36), and a larger proportion of two parent families with children (42.3 per cent compared with 33.5 per cent)[xi]. There is significant cultural and linguistic diversity, with almost half of the population of the City of Whittlesea speaking a language other than English at home (44.1 per cent) and more than a third of the population being born overseas (35.5 per cent)[xii]. The City of Whittlesea has the second largest population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Metropolitan Melbourne[xiii].

The Wurundjeri Willum people were the original inhabitants of the area and are the traditional owners of this land.

About gender inequality and violence against women

Violence against women is driven by gender inequality. Gender inequality is a social condition characterised by unequal value afforded to women and men and an unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunity between them. Individuals (women and men) who do not believe women and men are equal, and/or see them as having specific roles or characteristics are more likely to condone, tolerate or excuse violence against women. [xiv] Gender inequality is influenced by other forms of systemic social, political and economic disadvantage and discrimination.

Australia's national prevention of violence against women organisation, Our Watch, identifies the gendered drivers of violence against women that must be addressed to reduce and prevent violence against women and reinforcing factors that can increase frequency or severity of violence, within the context of the gendered drivers.

Gender inequality indicators

Violence against women has been shown to be significantly and consistently lower in countries where women's economic, social and political rights are better protected, and where power and resources are more equally distributed between women and men.

- There is low support for gender equality locally, 39.1 per cent of residents recorded "low gender equality scores" indicating a low level of agreement with concepts that promote the equal status of women and men. The proportion of City of Whittlesea residents who record a low gender equality scores is slightly above the Victorian average of 35.7 per cent, with male residents significantly more likely to record a low score (49 per cent) than female residents (29.2 per cent).[xv]

- Women are more likely than men to report feeling unsafe during the day in the public areas of the municipality (11 per cent compared to 9.6 per cent) and are significantly more likely than men to report feeling unsafe at night (45.5 per cent compared to 35.3 per cent).[xvi]

- Women in the City of Whittlesea are more likely than men to do over 15 hours of unpaid domestic work each week (29 per cent compared with 8 per cent), more likely to care for a person with a disability, illness or elderly (14 per cent compared with 9.5 per cent) and more likely to provide unpaid childcare (35 per cent compared with 27 per cent)[xvii].

- Australia's national gender pay gap 2017-2018 stands at 14.1 per cent with men working full-time earning $25,717 on average a year more than women working full-time[xviii]. Over 20 years, the gender pay gap has ranged between 14.9 per cent in 2004 and 18.5 per cent in 2014.[xix]

- While City of Whittlesea women are more likely than men to hold a Bachelor Degree or higher (20 per cent compared with 16 per cent), they are still over-represented in lower income brackets - 63 per cent of women aged 15 years and over are in the lowest and medium-lowest income quartiles compared with 43 per cent of men[xx].

- Nearly twice as many women in the City of Whittlesea (31 per cent) report getting no exercise during a week compared to men (17 per cent)[xxi]

- Within the City of Whittlesea organisation, as a key local employer, while women comprise 62 per cent of the overall workforce, they are underrepresented in the Executive Leadership Team [xxii].

- Currently only four of the 11 elected Councillor positions at the City of Whittlesea are held by women.

Community attitudes to violence against women and gender equality

The National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) provides information about people's understanding of and attitudes towards violence against women and gender equality and what influences their attitudes, any changes over time and whether people are prepared to intervene when witnessing abuse or disrespect towards women[xxiii]. The strongest predictors of attitudes supportive of violence against women are people having a low level of support for gender equality and a low level of understanding of the behaviours constituting violence against women (relative to other respondents).[xxiv] The key findings are that most Australians support gender equality and are more likely to support gender equality in 2017 than they were in 2013 and 2009. However there are some concerning results - a proportion of Australians believe that gender inequality is exaggerated or no longer a problem and there continues to be a decline in the number of Australians who understand that men are more likely than women to perpetrate domestic violence.

Family, domestic and sexual violence indicators

At least one women is killed a week by a partner or former partner in Australia. Intimate partner violence contributes to more death, disability and illness in women aged 15 to 44 years than any other preventable risk factor[xxv]. Family violence is the largest driver of homelessness for women and is a common factor in child protection notifications. It results in a police call-out on average once every two minutes across the country.[xxvi] The 2016 Personal Safety Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that since the age of 15:

- One in three Australian women has experienced physical violence.
- One in five Australian women has experienced sexual violence.
- One in six Australian women has experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner.
- One in four Australian women has experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner.
- Australian women are most likely to experience physical and sexual violence in their home, at the hands of a male current or ex-partner.
- Of women who had children in their care when they experienced violence from an ex-partner, 68 per cent reported that the children had seen or heard the violence.

- For 93 per cent of women and 92 per cent of men who have experienced violence since the age of 15, the perpetrator was male.

Specific groups of women (for example Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with a disability and culturally and linguistically diverse women) can be particularly at risk of violence due to the intersection of a number of complex factors and their access and experience of service support and government agencies. There is no evidence to suggest that any one cultural group is inherently 'more violent' than any other. What is clear is that multiple forms of inequality, discrimination and disadvantage intersect and interact with sexism and gender inequality to create the underlying conditions and social context in which violence is more likely to occur[xxvii]. Some communities are at a greater risk of harms from family violence and/or experience greater disadvantages when it comes to accessing services and supports. For example:

- Intimate partner violence contributes to 10.9 per cent of the burden of disease for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women aged 18 to 44 years, more than any other health risk factor, 6.3 times higher than for non-Indigenous women[xxviii]. Evidence outlines that non-Indigenous men make up a significant proportion of perpetrators of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children[xxix].

- Women and girls with disabilities are twice as likely as women and girls without disabilities to experience violence throughout their lives. Over one-third of women with disabilities experience some form of intimate partner violence[xxx].

- Gender-based and disability-based discrimination increase the risk of violence for women and girls with disabilities. Men who use violence often target women who they perceive are less powerful, such as women who are unable to communicate to others what has happened to them, and those restricted in their physical movement[xxxi]. In addition to being at a greater risk of violence, women with disability also face greater barriers to obtaining support and accessing justice in response to family violence[xxxii].

- Women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may experience a range of barriers, structural and systemic, to accessing help and support for family violence and other forms of violence against women[xxxiii].

Along with the tragic impact that violence has on the individual lives of women and their children, it also has community and economy-wide impacts. The total annual cost of violence against women and their children in Australia was estimated to be $22 billion in 2015-16.[xxxiv]

Local family violence incidents including children present

The prevalence of violence against women and family violence is primarily measured by Victoria Police 'family incident' data and 'crime against the person' assault and sexual offence data. In 2017-2018, City of Whittlesea continues to have one of the highest rates per 100,000 of population of family violence in the Northern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne (1,428.9 per 100,000 of population, compared to Victoria 1,176.7) and children are recorded present at a much higher rate than other municipalities (436.7 per 100,000 of population, compared to Victoria 323.2)[xxxv].

Females are far more likely than males to be victims of family violence. Males are far more likely than females to be perpetrators of family violence. In 2017-2018 in the City of Whittlesea, males made up 100 per cent of alleged offenders of sexual offences in family incidents and 80 per cent of assault offences in family incidents[xxxvi].

Local sexual assault offences data

Of all victim reports of sexual offences, females were the majority of victims - 84.36 per cent females compared to 13.74 per cent males. Of those sexual offences that were family violence related, 90.47 per cent were female victims (males 13.74 per cent) and of those that were non-family violence related 80.31 per cent were female and 16.54 per cent were males[xxxvii].

It is important to note that many victims of sexual assault and family violence will not report the violence to police for various reasons including fear of engaging with the criminal justice systems and/or child protection systems; racism, sexism and ableism; and a feeling that they will not be believed. It is therefore widely acknowledged that Victoria Police Family Incident data and sexual offence data are an underrepresentation of the prevalence of family violence, violence against women and sexual assault. Many victims may engage a health or community service or no service at all; their experience may not be recorded in key data sets.

Factors that can increase the harms of violence against women and family violence

Alcohol

Increased availability of alcohol has been shown to correlate with increases in the severity and frequency of violence against women[xxxviii]. Research in Victoria[xxxix] has found that there is a strong association between family violence and the concentration of take-away packaged liquor outlets in an area. The

study concluded that a 10 per cent increase in these liquor outlets was associated with a 3.3 per cent increase in family violence. Increases in family violence were also apparent with the increase in general (pub) licences and on-premise licences. Other studies have demonstrated a similar correlation between litres of alcohol sold at off-licence liquor outlets and higher risk of violence in residential settings[xl].

Gambling

Recent Australian research shows that people who have significant problems with their gambling are more likely than people without gambling problems to be victims and perpetrators of family violence – family violence is three times more likely to occur in families where there is problem gambling than in families in which there are no gambling problems.[xli] In a recent Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation (VCGLR) decision in the City of Whittlesea there was discussion regarding Electronic Gaming Machines (EGM) density and its association with family violence. Data presented to the VCGLR described a very strong positive correlation between financial losses per adult and police call out rates for the Northern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne in 2015-2016. Where there were higher financial losses per adult there was a higher number of police call outs for family violence.[xlii]

Lack of local access to specialist family violence services

The City of Whittlesea has a rapidly growing population meaning the already high demand for family violence support is set to grow exponentially. There is limited access to specialist family violence services locally, with key service hubs located outside the municipality. Local services report an increase in demand for their services, with over 65 per cent noting family violence as a specific concern[xliii]. Rapid population growth coupled with limited access to early intervention services exacerbates family violence harms experienced by women and children and fails to hold perpetrators to account for their violence.

About Local Government's role

As a large employer and through its role in delivering a wide range of services, local government intersects with many settings where people live, work, learn, socialise and play – across the lifespan. These are settings where social and cultural values are developed and influenced and they present a significant opportunity to influence the social norms, organisational practices and structures that can drive change. In addition, local government is legislated to build safe, healthy communities and provide equal access to services and facilities through the Local Government Act, 1989. *Change The Story*[xliv] and the *Gender Equity in Local Government Fact Sheets*[xlv] have informed the below descriptions of how the City of Whittlesea can interact with some of these key settings.

Sports and recreation settings

Sports, active recreation, social and leisure spaces are an important setting because these environments can have a powerful influence on gender relations through their modelling of attitudes, behaviours and social norms. Sporting contexts can reinforce gender inequities if they are male-dominated and exclude women and girls. By increasing gender equality in these settings, local government can reach a large proportion of people in the community. Sports, active recreation and social settings receive significant funding and resources from Council and the State Government. It is crucial that everyone in the community is able to benefit from this investment.

Workplace

The workplace provides a significant opportunity to influence social norms and practices and can reach large populations including groups who may not be reached through other settings. Access to employment and financial security and independence are important factors to protect women from the impacts of family violence or enable them to leave a violent situation. The workplace can provide paid leave and other supports to victims of violence to help facilitate their safe exit from violence. As a major employer in the region, the City of Whittlesea is well-placed to maximise gender equality in the workplace.

Communications and online presence

Various awareness raising and social marketing resources are available to local government to promote to the community. Sharing this information with the community can help to build a community conversation about gender equality and is an important contributor to improving community awareness of the gendered drivers of violence against women and family violence and services to seek support. Increased awareness can contribute to the broader cultural change required to end violence against women. City of Whittlesea can play a role locally to support state-wide and regional, social marketing campaigns, and can promote local stories and local voices that promote dialogue about gender inequality, prevention of violence against women and family violence support services.

Facilities and infrastructure

Consideration of equity and diversity during planning and development can have a significant bearing on the extent of women's economic, social and civic participation and also on access to facilities, transport and public spaces. Council provides a wide range of essential infrastructure including vital social infrastructure and community facilities and makes land use planning decisions that affect the community's use, access and experiences.

Partnerships

The City of Whittlesea, Councillors and staff, interact with many different communities and organisations regularly. These partnerships, projects and engagement can influence community change by supporting local agencies and community organisations in their prevention efforts and in their advocacy on behalf of the communities they represent. Collaborative relationships with organisations and individuals and respect for lived experience and expertise is essential to understanding the cultural and contextual complexities of inequality and violence against women.

Engagement

Beyond the evidence base, this Strategy was developed with input from key local service agencies and community members which strengthened the understanding of local issues, complexities and priorities. Local services that have a role in frontline family violence response, prevention programs, working with priority population groups or who provide more generalist family support were targeted. Namely:

- Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Network (representatives from key Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and health services including the Northern Hospital's Koori Maternity Health Service and mental health service, Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and City of Whittlesea)

- Berry Street

- Brotherhood of St Laurence

- Council's Family, Children and Young People Department

- Dianella Plenty Valley Community Health

- InTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence

- The Orange Door – North East Metropolitan Region

- Project Respect

- Victoria Police – Whittlesea Family Violence Unit

- Whittlesea Community Connections

- Whittlesea Early Years Family Violence Working Group (including Anglicare, Northern Hospital, Kids First, Maternal and Child Health and Try Children Youth & Family Services)

Information was sought on experiences 'on the ground' – emerging issues or challenges – that may shape the priorities to be addressed through this Strategy. Engagement will continue with relevant organisations throughout the implementation of this Strategy.

A qualitative survey was conducted with community members, distributed through the City of Whittlesea website and Facebook page, Maternal and Child Health Centres, libraries, service agencies, the Whittlesea Disability Expo, public Immunisation sessions and at each Council service centre. Key networks and committees were targeted to promote to the communities they work with including:

- Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Network

- Community Safety and Crime Prevention Committee

- Whittlesea Disability Network

The community survey asked:

- Thinking about yourself and others in your life, describe what an equal, safe and respectful community would look like locally

- What changes would you like to see locally in order to achieve an equal, safe and respectful community?

The survey received 50 responses in total; of the 42 responses who answered the question about gender 95.2 per cent answered 'female' and 4.8 per cent answered 'male' (eight did not respond). The majority of respondents live in Epping (25.5 per cent) and Doreen (12.8 per cent), 19.1 per cent live outside the municipality (e.g. Reservoir, Northcote, Preston, Craigieburn).

In analysing the community responses, and reflecting on the feedback with service agencies, strong themes have been identified in the emerging issues, key challenges and priorities identified to help shape this Strategy.

Social isolation

The social isolation of individuals and families in the community emerged repeatedly in conversations with service agencies and in the survey results – both as a contributing factor for family violence to occur and as a barrier to seeking help. Using social isolation as a mechanism of control can also be a form of violence in itself. Services commented that social isolation increased the importance of the 'soft entry points' for accessing help – how universal services can have a role in reaching isolated women (see more on this in *Universal Services as Access Points*). The community survey respondents suggested "continuing community groups, women's groups especially, to empower women", respondents emphasised the importance of bringing together women through women's-only groups and "opportunities for women to meet and connect" through community events, "programs and activities that area accessible for women and girls" to "stop local loneliness and isolation".

Culturally diverse communities – migration status and racism

Several service agencies (Victoria Police, InTouch, Berry Street, Project Respect), described an increasing prevalence of cases where migration status and visa-related vulnerability were used as a tool of abuse and as a significant barrier to seeking assistance. InTouch described several cases where women have been brought to Australia on a spouse visa, only to find themselves in a household with a partner and children already present, where she is then held for domestic duties. Threats to family in the country of origin, financial dependency and fear of deportation are then tools used to deter her from seeking help. For Project Respect, a service that supports women working in the local sex industry – the majority of their clients locally are from migrant backgrounds (many of them recent arrivals with low levels of English proficiency). This increases their vulnerability in a high-risk industry and impacts their awareness of their rights and ability to navigate assistance available. Project Respect specifically highlighted that 80 per cent of the women they work with experience not only violence in their place of work but family violence from intimate partners or extended family as well.

Agencies talked about the importance of meeting a woman 'where she is at' – women's inequality and rights might not be the language/terminology that appeals to women from diverse cultural backgrounds, especially if visa status, employment, housing or recovery from trauma are more pressing, immediate concerns.

In the context of their prevention work, Dianella Plenty Valley (DPV) Community Health described the challenge of women experiencing multiple types of discrimination – i.e. racism and sexism. Employment is a significant issue for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women. Racism and bias is described as a significant issue for CALD women finding jobs and gaining interviews locally.

CALD women can also experience a significant amount of stigma and criticism from within their communities for wanting to go back to work after having children. DPV described some women being shamed by fellow community members for wanting to attend social groups or to work. Conversely, they have also worked with women where there is a strong tradition of female activism in their country of origin – these women are then surprised at the level of inequality they see in Australia.

Financial abuse and hardship

Similar to visa-related vulnerability, several services reported an increase in the use of dowry (or other marriage-related financial transactions) as a means of exploitation and control. In some cases, the perpetrator uses dowry payments to strengthen a sense of ownership, and can use abuse of the woman as leverage to demand further payments from family in the country of origin. Where a woman has come into a multi-generational household, the abuse and control can be perpetrated by multiple people (for example mother in-law, brother in-law). Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) also described dealing with many cases of financial abuse in terms of debt creation – where the woman is left with crippling debts as a result of the perpetrator's use of a credit card, damage to rental property and accrual of fines. WCC legal service supports women to resolve these issues but they continue to have a significant impact on safety and recovery, especially on finding and maintaining secure housing and meeting day to day expenses.

One survey respondent described "less poker machines" as contributing to their view of an equal, safe and respectful community. Another talked about "places for people that are not expensive", others talked about local employment and access to childcare as important to them and many talked about equal pay for equal work.

Services described the importance that Council consider ways to support women financially impacted by family violence such as through financial hardship supports to meet rates payments, fines and other Council-related payments. Proactive programs to build financial literacy and support female employment locally were also considered crucial.

'Back to basics' – education and information provision

Several services (Victoria Police, DPV, WCC, Project Respect, InTouch) described a need for strengthening awareness, amongst the people they work with, of the core concepts of family violence – what behaviours constitute family violence and where they can go for help - 'What happens if I call the police?' and so on. Services discussed the need to build community capacity to support each other – how to recognise 'relationship red flags' and how best to support their friends and loved ones. This also needs to occur in the context of online dating and the potential for harm through grooming, especially of young people. Local services told us that within newly arrived communities understanding of family violence as a crime needs to be strengthened. The collaboration between Victoria Police, WCC and local community groups through the Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project (lead by WCC) has been a successful model to build this awareness and to build trust and connection with local authorities.

Education about gender inequality, sexism, bystander action and information about family violence services available were described in the community survey responses as local changes needed to achieve an equal, safe and respectful community. This theme was very strong – respondents suggested "better understanding of the impact of sexism and gendered violence in the community", "profiling local women in sport and industry", and "respectful relationships programs at schools and sporting clubs". Respondents expressed the need for information about gender-based violence and gender inequity, "more sessions with parents through schools [about] domestic violence" and the importance of this to be translated and for "information [to be] displayed in the environment".

Universal services as access points

In the context of the afore-mentioned themes, culturally safe and inclusive access to universal services was emphasised as both a protective factor against family violence and as sometimes *the only* avenue for connection and support for victims. In many instances, women who are being actively socially isolated by a perpetrator of family violence, services connected to the care of their children – Playgroups, Maternal and Child Health Centres, Kindergarten – may be the *only* ones they are permitted to access, and therefore their only avenue of support which may lead to a disclosure of family violence and seeking help.

This feedback is echoed by the experiences of City of Whittlesea staff in particular those working in community centres and directly with community members. It highlights a need for these staff to be suitably equipped to provide inclusive, culturally safe responses to disclosures of family violence, and to be protected from vicarious trauma or harms from these disclosures.

Women's safety in public realm

A very common theme emerging from the community surveys was women's safety in public realm. Respondents described their vision for an equal, safe and respectful community being one where women could "go for a walk at night without the fear of being hurt", where women and girls "would feel safe walking through my neighbourhood at day and night" and "without harassment" and where "I could walk home from the train without worrying about whether it is safe". Respondents referred to "walkable streets connecting neighbourhoods" with "more lights", "toilets… in public spaces", public places such as shopping centres which should "reduce the gender stereotyping of how they also advertise" and provide "change facilities that are accessible to men and women". Safety in public realm was linked to the need to develop active bystander behaviours in the community – "people looking out for each other and standing up together to combat racism, sexism and hatred in public places".

Equal access to recreation and sport

Respondents to the community survey described sport and recreation settings as key environments for gender equality, safety and respect. From basic needs such as "separate change rooms in sporting clubs" to "more female friendly clubs", "better female facilities", "equity of access to facilities" and "less stereotypes of genders – females work in the canteen". What is clear from these responses is that the community value the role Council has in providing environments and settings for sport and recreation but that these environments need to be more accessible to and inclusive of women and girls.

Equal rights and respect

In describing their vision of an equal, safe and respectful community, a large proportion of respondents to the community survey talked about gender equality – "boys and girls are given the same chances and choices", a "community that supports gender diversity" where "all people should have the same rights and opportunities to obtain work, equal pay for that work". One respondent said their vision for an equal, safe and respectful community was one where "women

can find relevant and fulfilling employment, and can balance their paid work with caring for children due to an expectation that parenting roles are supported by society and corporations".

A good proportion of respondents talked about leadership opportunities, empowerment of women and the need for more women in decision making positions – "more women on local Council and in positions of leadership making decisions for our community" and a desire for "more women's involvement in organisations" and to have "women and girls among those walking and meeting in public spaces".

What is already happening

City of Whittlesea has been working to improve gender equality and prevent violence against women for several years. For some areas, this work is embedded and is an ongoing part of day to day work. City of Whittlesea participate in and support many local partnerships that build sector capacity and share information in response to changing demands. Although City of Whittlesea do not directly provide family violence services, Council are involved in many advocacy efforts to increase provision and access to specialist services locally.

Some of the key highlights of this work include:

- Investment and support of women's cultural groups and employment programs, e.g. Stepping Stones program
- Promotion of female participation in sport through annual grants and an education program
- Improved integration of gender equitable design into community facilities
- Increased monitoring and responses to key gender equality workforce indicators
- Actions embedded in the Active Whittlesea Strategy to remove social and structural barriers to women's participation in sport and recreation
- A Family Violence Workplace Support Policy to support staff impacted by family violence
- Capacity building of staff to apply a gender lens to their work
- Ongoing Respectful Relationship Education work in schools in partnership with NCASA
- Annual celebration of International Women's Day
- Promotion of opportunities for local women's leadership, e.g. through choice of Welcome to Country speakers
- Funding received to explore employment outcomes for women in growth areas

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- Ongoing support of women in business through forums and network events
- Improved screening for family violence during key Maternal and Child Health appointments
- Participation of key Maternal and Child staff in training and information sharing reforms emerging from Royal Commission into Family Violence recommendations
- Early Years Infrastructure Development Program - designing inclusive, flexible, accessible and welcoming environments
- Provision of a family violence training program for educators and professionals supporting families and a range of parenting support programs

The Objectives and Priority Actions identified in this Strategy will build upon these strong foundations and seek to further extend Council's work and commitments to improving gender equality and preventing violence against women.

Equal and Safe Strategy

Goal The City of Whittlesea is a gender equitable, safe and respectful community	
Objective 1 Build a safe and respectful workplace where gender inequality is understood and actively challenged	**Priority Actions** a. Improve organisational performance against key workforce gender equality indicators b. Ensure gender equality within our workforce planning, processes and culture c. Build the knowledge, skills and capacity of staff to understand and respond to family violence and violence against women d. Build the knowledge, skills and capacity of staff to apply a gender lens to their area of work
Objective 2 Provide services and programs that normalise gender equality and are responsive to the needs of our diverse community experiencing family violence	**Priority Actions** a. Ensure Council's financial and information processes minimise secondary harms and risks to safety for residents impacted by family violence b. Increase the number of local services and programs that promote gender equality and challenge gender stereotypes within our diverse community

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c. Build knowledge within existing services and programs of the cultural and contextual complexities of violence against women and family violence

d. Increase breadth of local employment opportunities for women

e. Advocate for increased access to specialist family violence services in the municipality that can respond to the impact that culture, race, ability, age and sexuality can have on experiences of gender inequality

f. Incorporate a gender and family violence-responsive approach in planning for emergencies and the delivery of relief and recovery services

g. Support the work of partners focussed on preventing and responding to family violence and gender inequality within new and established multicultural communities

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Objective 3

Ensure that community facilities and public spaces enable safe and gender equitable access and an active community life for all

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Priority Actions

a. Build a gendered community safety approach into Council's master-planning for public realm, reserves and facility development

b. Include gender equity criteria in the process of prioritising and planning capital works

c. Improve employment, recreation and safety outcomes for women and girls through the review of public realm and land use planning strategic documents

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	d. Utilise appropriate Council levers to minimise harms from alcohol and gambling locally
Objective 4 Build a well-informed, connected community who understand and embrace gender equality and are empowered to prevent violence against women	**Priority Actions** a. Increase community understanding of the types of family violence, early warning signs and where to get support b. Increase community understanding of healthy relationships and their role in challenging sexism and gender stereotypes c. Develop the capacity of underrepresented women to engage and influence civic and community life d. Support community initiatives that reduce social isolation and vulnerability to family violence

Implementation and evaluation

These objectives and priority actions will be implemented by the organisation through annual action plans. Progress against these action plans will be monitored through corporate reporting processes and by the Governance Group for the Equal and Safe Strategy. Regular updates will be provided to Council throughout the life of the Strategy. The impacts of the Strategy and action plans will be evaluated in line with Council's Evaluation Framework.

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