



Consultation for a new Queensland Women's Strategy

A submission to:
The Queensland Government

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Prepared by:
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yourtown
let's create brighter futures

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yourtown is a national organisation and registered charity that aims to tackle the issues affecting the lives of children and young people. Established in 1961, **yourtown's** mission is to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their quality of life.

yourtown provides a range of face-to-face and virtual services to children, young people and families. These include:

- Accommodation and therapeutic responses to young parents with children who are at risk
- Accommodation and therapeutic responses to women and children seeking refuge from domestic and family violence, including post refuge support
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse, or been exposed to violence
- Young Parent Programs offering case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children
- **Parentline**, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers
- **Kids Helpline**, a national free 24/7 telephone and online counselling and support service for 5- to 25-year-olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues
- Employment and educational programs and social enterprises, which support young people to re-engage with education and/or employment, including programs specifically developed for those in long-term unemployment
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old and their families with moderate mental health needs

Kids Helpline is unique within Australia as the only national 24/7, confidential support and counselling service, specifically designed to meet the needs of children and young people, aged 5 to 25 years. It offers counselling support via telephone, email, and real time webchat, and is staffed by a paid professional workforce, with all counsellors holding a tertiary qualification. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, contacts to **Kids Helpline** have risen by more than 20%, of which, 75% or 63,754 contacts were from those identifying as female^[1]. The top issues for those identifying as female include mental health concerns, emotional wellbeing, family relationship issues, and suicide related concerns.

yourtown's domestic and family violence service also provides refuge accommodation followed by outreach support for women and their children escaping domestic violence in South East Queensland. From 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2020, **yourtown** has provided accommodation at our refuge for a total of 50 families, including 5 mothers without their children and 45 mothers with their children, to support a total of 105 children.

^[1] **yourtown** Kids Helpline Insights 2020 Report at <https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/Kids-Helpline-Insights-2020-Report-Final.pdf>

For 60 years, **yourtown** has delivered critical services to support Australia's most vulnerable and at-risk young people. We have a proud history of helping to create brighter futures for hundreds and thousands of young Australians, including many women and girls, and for being there when they need it most. This includes working closely with women and children when they are most vulnerable, whether from crisis housing and counselling, through to employment services, and parenting and education support.

yourtown welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Queensland Government on the discussion paper regarding a new Queensland Women's Strategy (the Strategy).

The need for one single strategy for women and girls

Recommendation 1: That the Queensland Government explore working with the other state, territory and Commonwealth governments to develop one comprehensive and unified national framework that promotes and addresses women's empowerment, and barriers to gender equity.

yourtown supports proposals to advance the 'free and full participation [of women and girls] in the vast opportunities that Queensland has to offer,' and the intent to address the persistent gender inequalities that face women and girls. However, **yourtown** proposes the Queensland Government reconsider its approach to developing another strategic plan for women.

The discussion paper notes that the needs of women and girls are priorities across the work of the Queensland Government, and cites at least six separate Strategies and policy frameworks¹ (excluding associated policy frameworks, action plans, and performance reports) identifying the intersectionality of the proposed new Strategy. Yet, despite the plethora of Commonwealth, state and territory plans, there remains no coherent and cohesive national approach to addressing the social, economic, and political empowerment of women and girls, and addressing gender inequity nationally.

yourtown strongly recommends the Queensland Government re-examine its current approach to developing isolated and disconnected strategic plans that impact on women's social, cultural, political and economic participation. We recommend the Queensland Government engage with other state and territory leaders, and the Commonwealth government to engage in holistic, national reform and to undertake an integrated national approach to address the empowerment of women and girls, and the drivers of gender inequity.

The Strategy should adopt a human-centred, life-stage based view of girls and women's needs.

¹ Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Strategy 2016-21 (and associated policy frameworks); Prevent. Support. Believe. Queensland's Framework to address Sexual Violence; Queensland Housing Strategy 2017-2027; My Health, Queensland future: Advancing health 2026; Multicultural Action Plan 2019-20 to 2021-22; and the Department of Education's Respectful Relationships Program.

Women's rights are human rights.² The empowerment of women, and gender equality are human rights that go hand in hand. The drafting of a new Strategy provides the Queensland Government with the timely opportunity to review its current approach towards addressing gender inequity by re-framing its primary focus upon the recognition of the rights of women and girls to be empowered as agents of change throughout their life journey. Since the development of the current Strategy, the Queensland Government has demonstrated national leadership in the recognition of human rights through introduction of the *Human Rights Act 2019*. The development of this new Strategy provides the government with the further opportunity to advance recognition of human rights in Queensland, particularly through meeting Australia's obligation to take 'all appropriate measures to ensure the full development, advancement and empowerment of women in the enjoyment of their human rights'.³

There are several key issues in the current Strategy and the discussion paper that could be addressed to facilitate greater recognition of such rights. The language of both focuses upon women as passive recipients. There is only limited mention of empowerment of girls and women socially, economically and politically, and this is only at certain points in their life journey (primarily as adults). There is also limited recognition of specific needs of key cohorts of women, particularly refugee and immigrant women and girls, and those who are gender diverse and identify with the LGBTQIA+ community. It is also critical that the new Strategy take into consideration the impact of COVID-19. There is strong evidence to suggest COVID-19 will continue to have long-term implications – far beyond these immediate impacts – for people's health, wellbeing and society more broadly.⁴ It is forecast that the impacts of the pandemic will be felt for a decade or more, and that significant intervention will be needed to avoid an acceleration towards poorer health, social and economic outcomes, and more extreme patterns of inequality, such as threats to women and children's safety and wellbeing⁵.

Further, it is critical to view gender diversity and empowerment through the lens of the life journey of a woman. Failure to do so will inevitably skew the Strategy towards addressing issues for women as adults, and miss opportunities for investment in empowering girls at the earliest stages of their life. For example, there is no mention within the current Strategy or discussion paper of specific issues facing girls such as mental health issues, disability, disrespectful relationships, or as victims of family violence or abuse. And yet, these factors have significant impact upon their resilience, mental health and wellbeing, and life trajectory as adults.

² Beijing Declaration article 14, Fourth World Conference on Women.

³ Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (art. 2), which urges States to condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end. See also, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (art.6) that recognizes the multiple discrimination that women with disabilities are subjected to, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art.2) that recognizes the need to respect and ensure the rights of children within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (art.7) prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (art. 2), condemning all forms of racial discrimination. See also the general recommendation No.25 (2000) on gender-related dimensions of racial discrimination, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; and also the Committee against Torture, which monitors the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment that also regularly addresses issues of violence against women and girls.

⁴ COVID-19: Protecting People and Societies, OECD (2020) at [COVID-19: Protecting people and societies - OECD \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/covid-19/protecting-people-and-societies)

⁵ The COVID Decade: Understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19 (2021), The British Academy at [The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19 | The British Academy](https://www.britishten.org/covid-decade)

If the Strategy is intended to address gender inequality for women, it should:

- take a holistic perspective of girls and women across their life journey, identifying opportunities for empowerment, and vulnerability to disempowerment at each life stage,
- be human-centred by design, and driven by, and infused with, the voices, experience and influence of girls and women at all life ages,
- empower girls and women through delivery of social, economic, cultural, and political services or supports at every stage of their life from pre-birth to death, and
- be set within the real-world context of COVID-19.

Further, to ensure the Strategy is informed by the views and aspirations of girls in Queensland, the Strategy should leverage off consultation mechanisms by existing agencies charged with advocating the views of girls in Queensland, such as those conducted by the Queensland Family and Child Commission.

While the current Strategy identifies priority areas of participation and leadership; economic security; safety; health and wellbeing, these are areas that should be tracked across each life stage, with focus on the particular vulnerabilities faced at each of those life stages. Only by clearly identifying and understanding the key life events and stages of a woman's life; and the vulnerability factors and events that might occur, will the Strategy successfully identify the key entry points to provide services, supports and programs that will empower girls and women, and address gender inequality. By understanding these key points, the Strategy will then also be able to articulate and define potential impact opportunity areas for the government, non-government, business and community sectors to engage in.

Recommendation 2: The new Strategy should be:

- re-designed to take a human-centred, life-stage based needs view of girls and women,
- underpinned by evidence-based services and programs that are known to work in empowering girls and women for social, economic, cultural and economic success, and
- set in the real-world context of COVID-19

Include the key performance indicators and measurement of success within the new Strategy

Strategies risk being meaningless without clearly defined objectives. These objectives should be comprehensive, quantitatively defined, and measured to understand success. While the current Strategy provides only a commitment to the development and tracking of performance indicators, the new Strategy should include clearly identified goals and measures of success. Such performance indicators should be quantifiable and include measurements of success based upon: what women and girls say they need; their experiences; and whether solutions have met their unique needs. A subsequent evaluation of success should be based upon development of evidence-based measures of impact.⁶

⁶ This could include use of emotional wellbeing indexes such as the Social-Emotional Wellbeing (SEW) Framework ([SEW-Info_Doc-Background.pdf \(acer.org\)](#)); or Future vulnerability indexes such as the Strengths and Stressors Tracking Device (SSTD) ([\(PDF\) Validation of the Strengths and Stressors Tracking Device with a child welfare population \(researchgate.net\)](#)).

For example, the Oxfam's Empowerment Index⁷ is one tool that the Queensland Government could explore to aid measurement of the empowerment of women and girls. It combines a variety of indicators describing characteristics of empowerment into one composite index to rigorously assess, measure meaningful change and demonstrate best practice approaches, strategies, and interventions to improve women's empowerment.

The current Strategy would also benefit from identifying the ecosystem required to deliver supports, services and programs, and the critical capabilities within government, non-government, private and community sectors required to achieve these goals. This could include mapping the public, private and non-government organisations playing in the opportunity spaces (including service coverage, scale, competitiveness, and partnering capability). Mapping and identifying the capabilities of each sector against the needs of women and girls across their life stages could also assist in identifying which sector is best equipped to deliver the services and supports needed, and aid identification of complementary services or supports to 'plug-in and play'.

Recommendation 3: The new Strategy should:

- include key performance indicators with clearly identified goals and measures of success
- identify the ecosystem required to deliver the identified supports, services and programs to empower women and address gender inequity, and
- identify capabilities within the government, non-government, private and community sectors required to achieve these goals, and where capabilities are required to be upskilled.

Other innovative opportunities for strategic reform

Developing a new Strategy also provides an opportunity for the Queensland Government to lead by example. While the Queensland Government already has a strong commitment to gender equality within its public service, consideration could be given to extending this commitment beyond the public sector

A key means by which the government could demonstrate their commitment to the principle of gender equality is through the introduction of a Gender Equality Act that obligates action to address gender equality. The Victorian Government has already taken the lead among Australian governments by introducing the *Gender Equality Act 2020* which commenced on 31 March 2021. The purpose of the Act is to improve workplace gender equality in the Victorian public sector, universities and local councils, by requiring these entities to consider and promote gender equality in their policies, programs and services, as well as to take positive action towards achieving gender equality in their workplaces.

⁷ Oxfam Policy and Practice, A 'How To' guide to measuring women's empowerment: Sharing experience from Oxfam's impact evaluations, [A 'How To' Guide To Measuring Women's Empowerment: Sharing experience from Oxfam's impact evaluations - Oxfam Policy & Practice](#)

International evidence has shown that when organisations are compelled to identify gender gaps and develop a plan to address these gaps, they undertake deliberate and positive action. **yourtown** recommends that the Queensland Government take similar steps to Victoria by introducing an equivalent or even stronger Gender Equality Act. This could include mandating the public sector, local governments and universities to report upon, and take positive actions to improve gender equality in the workplace through: the meeting of quotas and targets, completion of gender impact statements and action plans, public reporting, as well as regularly audits of progress towards achieving gender equality in the workplace.

Recommendation 4: The Queensland Government should introduce a Gender Equality Bill in Queensland to enshrine gender equality in the Queensland public sector, local councils and universities in line with the Victorian *Gender Equality Act 2020*.

It is also recommended that the Queensland Government explore leveraging its broader funding power by requiring agreements with the non-Government sector to include clauses to advance gender equality. It is also recommended that the Government explore development of best practice guidance for the government and the non-government sectors in areas of gender equality. This could include development of gender impact analysis tools to build gender equality capability within the public service, and more broadly within the community. Consideration could also be given to developing girl and women's 'safety by design' guidance for use across a broad range of service systems, businesses and community organisations, including schools, educational or training facilities, workplaces, in building design, event planning, or design of facilities or places accessed by the general public.

Recommendation 5: The Queensland Government should provide leadership in promoting empowerment of girls and women, and addressing gender inequality by considering inclusion of the following ideas in the new Strategy:

- contractually obligating all Queensland Government funded organisations to commit to advancing gender equality within their organisation,
- developing best practice guidance for the government and non-government sectors on how to build gender equality capability within organisations, and
- Develop safety-by-design guidance for use by the government and non-government sectors for use across a broad range of service systems, sectors and industries.

Conclusion

To support development of the Strategy, we have also attached a copy of the submission recently made by **yourtown** to the Commonwealth Department of Social Services in relation to the next National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children.

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you further in more detail. Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact Kathryn Mandla, Head of Advocacy and Research at **yourtown** via email at kmandla@yourtown.com.au.