



Talking about power #MeToo

Opinion by Sorcha Walshe & Dr. Alice Clark, Shelter SA

The viral #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns have brought to public attention the critical need for urgent change in deeply embedded community and cultural attitudes. The unnerving frequency of complaints by women, detailing gendered mistreatment, surely must be sufficient in prompting real social change?

Social media movements are highlighting the difficulties of speaking out against gendered mistreatment and abuse taking place in our society and sadly, it is our children who are missing out on the conversation. We need to use the momentum generated from #MeToo and #TimesUp to educate our future generations about the intersection between power and gender, to stop the perpetuation of gender inequality.

Rates of sexual, physical and emotional violence against women and girls are not improving. Many men face 'social pressures of masculinity that equate male power and status with violence', cementing the stereotype that 'real' men are aggressive and dominant.¹ This harmful social norm needs to change.

For most women in our society, facing some form of harassment is an inescapable part of everyday life. Whether it occurs on public transport, the streets, in the workplace or the home, unwanted attention and intimidation by men is reflective of a historical gender power imbalance.

Inequality between men and women is observable everywhere you turn: men dominate positions of power across the world, media advertisements consistently play into sexist and misogynistic beliefs, and throwaway jokes and comments reveal underlying attitudes of prejudice against women. How many times have you heard the saying, 'behind every great man, is a great woman', or boys being told, 'don't cry like a girl'?

Recently, South Australian female politicians [Michelle Lensink and Tammy Franks spoke out about their experiences of sexist treatment and the 'toxic culture'](#) within the South Australian Parliament. What else is happening behind closed doors? We suspect that it is not only in the entertainment industry where abuses of power run rampant, but that there are many other industries, including politics, where sexual harassment and gender inequality are unreported, ignored and in the worst scenario, even condoned. So when our community leaders are not immune, what hope do we have?

The imbalance of power between the genders within society means that not only are people living with disadvantage more susceptible to power abuse, they are left behind. A gendered power imbalance means that half of our population may struggle to achieve their full potential and be

¹ http://who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/norms.pdf

represented in public spaces. The barriers women face to achieving positions of power are lessening in modern society, but there is still much room for improvement.

Domestic violence is responsible for an Australian woman dying every week. Are we so shallow that we cannot make the link between gender inequality and violence? Why are we not paying attention to the evidence and the experts who say that it is critical to educate our children to break the cycle? When we throw power abuse into the equation, it is even more urgent that programs like Respectful Relationships² are taught to every child, in an age appropriate way, so that boys and girls can learn about equality and how to interact with each other. The States and Territories could all learn from the Victorian initiative.

Shelter SA has done a significant amount of work on the prevention of domestic violence, as it is one of the leading causes of homelessness. Unfortunately, when women are the victims of violence, if they manage to flee, they cannot afford to re-establish a home in the expensive private rental market and our social housing properties are being decimated. Housing affordability plays a role in perpetuating harmful environments.

A new Commonwealth report was released today addressing Indigenous disadvantage.³ When it comes to family violence, the data in the report is disturbing – Indigenous women are 30 times more likely to experience violence than non-Indigenous women and in remote areas, 57 times more likely. We were initially excited to hear that the new report included housing but then quickly disappointed to learn that there are no new initiatives to address the quality and numbers for Indigenous people, and more importantly the withdrawal by the Turnbull government from the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing.

The findings of [Shelter SA's policy and practice research report](#) were tested at a workshop attended by fifty South Australians. The [findings of the workshop](#) and a [video](#) featuring workshop participants all point to the pressing need to educate our children. Shelter SA is calling upon all parties and candidates in the lead up to our State election, to ensure funding is made available for the vital education, policy and services we need to prevent domestic violence to properly address gender equality. You can join us on our [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) profiles by sharing and liking our posts.

² <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/Pages/respectfulrelationships.aspx?Redirect=1>

³ <https://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/ctg-report-2017.pdf>