



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Overview

Women's Health Victoria (WHV) welcomes the Victorian Government's commitment to developing a statewide gender equality strategy. We share the Government's vision for a gender equal Victoria, where women participate equally in the social, civic and economic life of our society.

As the consultation paper indicates, gender inequality plays out in all aspects of Victorian life, including women's workforce participation and remuneration, maternity-related discrimination, gender stereotypes that negatively affect young women, and experiences of sexual and family violence.

Addressing the diverse and complex ways in which gender inequality is maintained in our society is an ambitious, but necessary, long-term project which will require whole-of-community engagement to be effective. All levels of government, businesses of all sizes, not for profits, institutions such as courts, schools, churches and the media, and the broader community will need to be engaged to achieve meaningful cultural change.

The Victorian Government will play a critical role in leading, coordinating and resourcing this whole-of-community effort, and in tracking progress and outcomes. The government will need to draw on the expertise of specialist women's organisations, including the network of Victorian women's health services – who have been leading work to promote gender equality across the community for many years – to ensure that its approach to gender equality is informed by evidence and best practice, and to tap into established partnerships and networks at the statewide, regional and local levels. Valuing and resourcing Victoria's specialist women's services and other specialist women's services should be a key pillar of the government's gender equality strategy.

For a decade, Victoria has been a national leader in work to prevent violence against women. This work has been strongly focused on gender inequality as the primary driver of gender-based violence. The evidence, models and partnerships developed through violence-prevention work provide an excellent foundation for a statewide gender equality strategy. We anticipate that the Royal Commission into Family Violence will recommend a stronger focus on, and dedicated funding for, prevention of family violence; the development of a well-resourced, comprehensive and coordinated gender equality strategy will be essential to implementing these recommendations.

WHV acknowledges that there are limits to the state government's ability to alter legislation, institutions and other structures and mechanisms relating to gender inequality that are the domain of the federal government. This means that to achieve true gender equality in Victoria, the Victorian Government must advocate strongly for change at the Commonwealth and national levels. At the same time, the Victorian Government has the commitment, evidence, partners and models to make major inroads towards improving gender equality across our state and to set a world-leading example of how to achieve whole-of-community change.

This submission draws on WHV's specialist expertise in gender equity and health promotion to propose a conceptual framework for a Victorian gender equality strategy, supported by research and evidence gathered at the state, national and international levels. The submission aims to unpack the complex ways in which gender inequality shapes our society, and how efforts to promote gender equality can take account of these complexities.

## Structure of our submission

**Section 1** of the submission provides an overview of the current state of gender inequality in Victoria and Australia, introduces key concepts relating to gender equality, and outlines current and former initiatives promoting gender equality at the state and national levels.

**Section 2** puts forward six key principles that WHV recommends should underpin a Victorian gender equality strategy. Each principle is explained using models or diagrams and supported by evidence and case studies. In summary, WHV recommends that, in developing a Victorian gender equality strategy, the Victorian Government should:

- 1. Target the norms, practices and structures that support gender inequality**
- 2. Adopt a long term, whole-of-community approach to achieving gender equality, taking an intersectional approach**
- 3. Demonstrate leadership by agenda-setting, gender mainstreaming and coordinating effort**
- 4. Aim to take a gender-transformative approach to policy and programs**
- 5. Engage cross-sector partners and leverage specialist gender equity expertise**
- 6. Establish a monitoring and accountability framework, and invest in data, evaluation, tools and workforce development.**

## What is gender equality and why is it important?

Gender inequality is a social condition characterised by unequal value afforded to men and women and an unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunity between them. Gender inequality permeates all aspects of society, and forms of gender inequality at one level or within one system are interrelated with inequality in other spheres.

We have made significant progress towards greater gender equality in recent decades and the momentum continues to build. There is now an unprecedented focus on family violence and increasing recognition that gender equality is the key to prevention. But there is still a very long way to go. Key indicators suggest that gender inequality is worsening rather than improving in Australia.

There is a dual rationale for promoting gender equality. Firstly, equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and social justice. Women are entitled to full participation in social, economic and civic life and to live with dignity and freedom from gender-based fear and discrimination. In other words, gender equality is a value in its own right, and not only a means to other ends. Secondly, greater equality between women and men is a precondition for (and an indicator of) equitable, prosperous and healthy communities. Addressing gender inequality will lead to improved health outcomes and support increased productivity at both a macroeconomic and organisational level. Evidence gathered in relation to the impact of violence against women suggests that a more gender equitable society can be expected to result in significant cost savings to government.

Governments at the national, state and local levels are also subject to a range of legal obligations to eliminate sex discrimination and promote gender equality. The Charter of Human Rights and

Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic) establishes a right to equality. The state government and other public authorities in Victoria are under a duty to act compatibly with that right and to take it into consideration in their decision making. This arguably includes an obligation not simply to treat men and women alike, but to focus on equality of outcomes and to transform the underlying structures that cause inequality.

## Key concepts relating to gender equality

In the 1960s and 1970s, activists, academics and public policy makers tended to employ the language of 'women's rights', 'women's policy', 'women's equality' and 'sex discrimination' in their work. It was important to make women visible by naming the oppression women experienced as a group on the basis of their **sex**.

More recently the language of 'women' and 'sex' has tended to be replaced with '**gender**' and 'gender equality'. Gender is understood to have been socially and culturally constructed, and is different from biological sex. 'Gender' also signifies that women, men and gender diverse people are impacted by constructions of what it is to be male or female, and implies that everyone has a role to play in, and can gain from, improved gender equality. By addressing harmful gender norms, practices and structures, gender equality improves outcomes for women, men and gender diverse people.

Nevertheless, due to the historic disadvantage experienced by women, there remains a need for special measures to advance women's rights and respond to their needs. As a specialist women's health service, WHV's focus and expertise is around the strategies required to improve the relative status of women.

**Gender equality** means the realisation of equal and measurable outcomes for women, men and gender-diverse people. Depending on the context, what constitutes gender equal outcomes may differ. In some contexts, we may be aiming for 'sameness', in others 'difference' and in yet others 'transformation'. **Gender equity** is the process of intervening in or changing structures or norms that drive inequality in order to produce more equal outcomes.

For many women, the impact of gender inequality is compounded by the way that gender-based discrimination interacts with other experiences of inequality. This interaction, in which one form of inequality impacts on another, is termed '**intersectionality**'. In order to achieve equality in outcomes for all groups of women, we must balance universal strategies with specialist, tailored approaches for women who experience intersectional disadvantage.

## State and national efforts to promote gender equality to date

Victoria has a strong history of taking action to address gender inequality through initiatives such as the establishment of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, the Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities*, and the Victorian Women's Policy Framework (2008-2011). Victoria has also led the way in preventing violence against women, including through the establishment of the first Royal Commission into Family Violence. Reflecting international evidence, Victorian family violence prevention strategies have focused on addressing gender inequality as the key driver of violence against women.

The Commonwealth controls a number of critical policy levers for gender equality, including employment and industrial relations, social security, superannuation and child care, as well as providing a large share of the funding for state-run services, including health services and schools. The Commonwealth is also responsible for a number of key legislative frameworks, including the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012*. There is an opportunity for the

Victorian Government to play a national leadership role by advocating for change at a Commonwealth level that would support gender equality both in Victoria and across Australia.

## Recommended principles to underpin a Victorian gender equality strategy

WHV recommends that a Victorian gender equality strategy be underpinned by six key principles. In summary, the Victorian Government should:

### 1. Target the norms, practices and structures that support gender inequality

Gender inequality is expressed and maintained through norms, practices and structures that overlap in our everyday lives and have a cumulative impact over time, profoundly influencing outcomes for women and men across the life course. A gender equality strategy must simultaneously target and transform norms, practices and structures.

**Gender norms** refer to values, attitudes and beliefs that construct masculinity, femininity and gender difference. Gender norms are deeply engrained, learned and imposed on us from childhood. **Gender practices** are behaviours that express and reinforce gender inequality. Gender practices are played out in both our private and public lives and in all the places where we live, learn, work and play. **Gender structures** formalise gender inequality and the way power and wealth is shared (or not) in society. The under-representation of women in government and pay inequality are examples of structural inequality.

These formal and informal systems are linked and mutually reinforcing. **Case study 1** and **Case study 2** illustrate how gender norms, practices and structures interact to reinforce gender inequality and shape women's lives. Historically, however, gender equality interventions have focused on structural gender inequality, and have neglected the critical role of norms and practices in maintaining gender inequality. For example, little attention has been paid to the role of media in perpetuating gender norms and stereotypes and its potential to contribute to their transformation (**Case study 3**).

Using an **intersectional approach** to gender equality encourages social change leaders and policy advocates to make the links and connections between various forms of discrimination, and will help ensure we achieve equality for all groups of women. This means balancing universal strategies with specialist, tailored approaches for women who experience intersectional disadvantage, including Aboriginal women, culturally and linguistically diverse women, women with disabilities, sexuality diverse women and gender diverse people, and women living in rural areas. Equality for all women can only be achieved with specific and intensive effort for those experiencing the most disadvantage.

### 2. Adopt a long term, whole-of-community approach to achieving gender equality, taking an intersectional approach

Gender inequality permeates all levels of society, from the individual and interpersonal level to the institutional and societal level. It manifests across all life stages and all domains of public and private life. Given the scale and complexity of addressing gender inequality, a comprehensive, long term, whole-of-community approach is required.

The **ecological model of social change** provides an evidence-based foundation for a whole of society approach to gender equality that accounts for the relationships and dependencies between the different levels of society in perpetuating inequality, from individual relationships to our key civil institutions. The ecological model makes clear that it is not sufficient to target efforts to change

attitudes and behaviours at the individual level, but that we must also address systemic and institutional barriers to change.

A gender equality strategy must also engage with people at **every life stage**. This includes, among other approaches, working with young people to support healthy attitudes about gender and respect, recognising the barriers women with caring responsibilities face in the workforce, and addressing the significant financial disadvantage experienced by many older women.

A statewide gender equality strategy will need to address the **four life domains** that cut across all settings and levels of society: the political, economic, social/cultural, and natural and built environments. An example in the political domain is improving the representation of women at all levels of government (addressed under Principle 3), while Women's Health Goulburn North East's CENTSable program for women on low incomes is an example of a gendered approach to the economic domain. **Case study 4** illustrates the benefits of using gender analysis to ensure equal access to the built environment for women and men.

To be most effective, a gender equality strategy must engage people across the **different settings** in which they live, work, learn, socialise and play (such as schools, workplaces, sport and recreation settings, and media). WHV's *Take a Stand against domestic violence: it's everyone's business* (**case study 5**) is an example of an evidence-based program that uses the workplace as a setting to address attitudes and behaviours that support violence against women.

Evidence suggests that government should also adopt a coordinated **multi-strategy approach**, using different levers (for example, legislation, community education and social marketing) to achieve mutually-reinforcing impacts on gender inequality. While gender inequality is a significantly more complex issue to address than reducing the road toll or smoking rates, public health initiatives in road safety and tobacco control offer a useful example of how multiple, mutually-reinforcing strategies can work together to bring about meaningful and measurable change in social norms, attitudes and behaviours.

An **intersectional approach** to gender equality will recognise and be responsive to the ways in which the experience of disability, cultural or racial minority status, sexuality and gender diversity, rurality or socio-economic status intersects with gender to intensify gender-based inequality. **Case study 6** illustrates how an intersectional approach can make visible and respond to the experiences of women with disability, while **Case study 7** explores some of the specific barriers facing women in rural Victoria.

### **3. Demonstrate leadership by setting the agenda for change, gender mainstreaming and coordinating effort**

The realisation of gender equality in Victoria will require strong, long-term leadership from the Victorian Government. To achieve whole-of-community change, the Victorian Government has a critical role to play in:

- Setting the agenda for change by demonstrating an enduring commitment to achieving gender equality at the highest levels within the Victorian government and public sector, as well as advocating for change at the national level;
- 'Mainstreaming' gender equality into all legislation, policy, budgeting, service delivery and procurement, including through local government; and

- Leading and coordinating statewide whole-of-government and whole-of-community effort to ensure a comprehensive and systematic approach to gender equality.

It is critical that the Victorian Government **set the agenda for gender equality** in Victoria through its own actions. It is encouraging to see nine female ministers in the current Victorian Cabinet and a commitment to gender equality in public sector boards and court appointments. However, opportunities remain for the Victorian Government to implement measures that will further increase the representation of women in parliament, state and local government, and the public sector (for example, through the introduction of quotas) and bring greater emphasis to gender issues in parliament (for example, through parliamentary gender equality committees and gender-sensitivity training). As a **major employer**, the Victorian Government should also role model its commitment by supporting gender equality within the public service/sector and promoting gender equitable workplaces.

Recognising that the Commonwealth controls many of the levers required to achieve gender equality, the Victorian Government also has a vital role in **advocating for gender equality at the national level**, including advocating for a national gender equality strategy involving all the states and territories and the Commonwealth at the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

Public policy has the capacity to either perpetuate or eliminate discrimination and gender inequality. **'Gender mainstreaming'**—or the process of ensuring policies and practices meet the needs of men and women equitably—is a key strategy for removing barriers to equality through policy, law making and resource allocation. **Case Study 8** illustrates the potential impact of an intersectional gender analysis on corrections policy.

The Victorian Government should introduce a gender mainstreaming or gender equality law, which would require ministers to outline how they will promote gender equality within their portfolios, a **gender impact assessment** or statement of compatibility to be undertaken for all legislation, policy and funding initiatives, and **regular reporting** to parliament on outcomes and/or monitoring by a parliamentary committee or independent commissioner. The Victorian Government should reinstate a **Gender Budget Statement** and also advocate for such a statement at Commonwealth level. It will also be important to ensure that gender mainstreaming does not occur at the expense of **gender-specific policy and programs**, which continue to be required to compensate for women's historical disadvantage.

As a major **deliverer and procurer of services**, state and local governments should mandate gender equality requirements and reporting and provide incentives to ensure that contracted organisations demonstrate what steps they are taking towards delivering gender-responsive or gender-transformative services and becoming gender equitable workplaces. There is a clear role for the Victorian Government in promoting gender equality at the **local government level**. For example, the state government could mandate and resource the incorporation of gender equality into Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans required under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*, so that a gendered approach is embedded across all local government work. This would further strengthen the action being taken by many local governments to improve gender equality in their local areas.

A whole-of-government commitment will need to be **underpinned by a strong governance framework** which mandates and facilitates involvement of all government departments, as well as cross-sector partners. The governance framework should involve monitoring by an independent body, a cabinet committee to drive whole-of-government action, a coordinating unit within a central agency,

gender 'focal points' in all departments, and an interdepartmental committee with senior representation.

Government leadership must also be underpinned by **adequate, long-term investment**, reflecting the long-term nature of attitudinal and structural change. A **bi-partisan commitment** and sustained funding beyond the three to four year electoral cycle will be critical to the success of the strategy. A long term-funding model will enable successful programs and initiatives to be scaled up, systematised and embedded into ongoing practice, while at the same time short- to medium-term funding will support evidence-building through innovation.

#### 4. Aim to take a gender-transformative approach to policy and programs

Despite the profound impacts of gender inequality over the life course, government policy and programs have tended to take a 'gender-blind' approach, assuming that women's experiences are the same as men's. As a result, strategies, interventions and services across all portfolio areas have not been tailored for women, and opportunities to improve outcomes for women have been missed, reinforcing gender inequality.

**Gender unequal** policies contribute to gender inequality either directly, for example lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services (**Case study 9**), or indirectly, through a **gender blind** approach – that is, an approach that appears to be gender neutral, but which in effect disproportionately harms women. **Case study 10** shows how a gender-blind approach to heart disease has deadly consequences for women.

Undertaking a **gender analysis** is a crucial step towards equality because it makes visible:

- differences in outcomes for women and men;
- how gendered norms contribute to differences in outcomes;
- how policies might be strengthened to reduce gender inequities; and
- how program design and service delivery might be reoriented to meet the different needs of males and females.

A **gender-sensitive** approach involves incorporating a gender perspective into policy and practice, but does not necessarily take action to redress gender-based inequities. **Gender-responsive** policy and practice builds on a gender-sensitive approach by not only identifying how gender norms and structures influence outcomes, but also taking remedial action to respond and ameliorate the impacts of discrimination, bias and inequities. **Case study 11** illustrates how a gender-sensitive and gender-responsive approach to mental health care can promote more equitable outcomes for women.

Where possible, government should aim to take a **gender-transformative** approach to policy and programs. A gender-transformative approach proactively and intentionally transforms and alters the underlying gender structures, norms and relations that perpetuate gender inequality. A gender transformative approach, though ambitious, ultimately benefits men and gender diverse people as well as women by breaking down rigid and limiting gender stereotypes, structures and norms, and the systems of privilege and discrimination that accompany them. **Case study 12** uses paid parental leave schemes in Norway and Sweden as an example of a structural approach to gender transformation, while **Case study 13** shows how the Victorian program *Baby Makes 3* transforms gender norms and practices.

## 5. Engage cross-sector partners and leverage specialist gender equity expertise

The whole-of-community change required to realise gender equality will depend on the ability of government to mobilise and coordinate strategic partners in all portfolio areas across business, local government, faith-based communities and the community sector, and to leverage established organisations and networks.

Engaging cross sector partners and leveraging established organisations and networks will assist the government in the implementation of an effective gender equality strategy because:

- **Partnerships** create reach – gender equality cannot be achieved unless the whole community is engaged and government cannot achieve this on its own. Non-government partners have direct relationships with the Victorian community in their roles as employers, regulators, service providers and peak bodies, and within their own professional or industry networks.
- Specialist state-wide **networks** (such as the network of women’s health services) have expertise in gender equity and can provide advice, as well as coordinating and resourcing regional work and undertaking quality control on behalf of government.
- **Sharing of information, evidence and best practice** are critical for continuous improvement and workforce development.

The **collective impact model** provides a structured approach to making collaboration work across government, business, philanthropy, non-profit organisations and citizens to achieve significant and lasting social change. This model is already used by women’s health services for regional action planning to prevent violence against women, and could be directly applied to mobilise a diverse range of players and sectors within a unified statewide strategy for gender equality.

Gender equity is core business for women’s health services, and is not diluted by competing priorities. Building on twenty years of expertise in gendered health promotion, women’s health services have been successfully leading action on primary prevention of violence against women for a number of years, as outlined in **Case study 14. Valuing and resourcing Victoria’s women’s health services** and other specialist women’s services so they can continue to advocate for change, share best practice, build the capacity of others, and coordinate local gender equity initiatives, should be a key pillar of the government’s gender equality strategy.

## 6. Establish a monitoring and accountability framework, and invest in data, evaluation, tools and workforce development

A comprehensive monitoring and accountability framework, which involves regular reporting against priority outcomes, and is supported by gender-disaggregated data and informed by research and robust evaluation of initiatives, will be essential for prioritising effort, holding government and stakeholders accountable, and tracking progress over time.

Reporting against a clear **outcomes framework** will be crucial for clarifying priorities and measuring change over time. Measuring change is critical for sustaining momentum, strengthening approaches and prioritising investment. Recognising that the road to equality is long, the strategy should establish a unified set of intersecting short-, medium- and long-term goals (or outcomes) that support staged progress towards gender equality. Ultimately, a **Gender Equality Index** should be developed, which synthesises gender indicators into a single summary measure.

The outcomes framework will need to be accompanied by effective mechanisms for holding government bodies, employers and service providers accountable for their performance against the strategy. **Regular reporting against gendered indicators**, for example through inclusion of gendered outcomes measures for all portfolios in Budget Paper 3 and/or publication of an annual dashboard report on outcomes for women, could be a starting point. The outcomes framework should be overseen and monitored by an independent body.

Gendered data reveals differences in the experiences of women and men and exposes gender inequalities. Collection of **gender-disaggregated data** is essential for prioritising action and investment towards gender equality, and supporting outcomes measurement and accountability. Government must play a lead role in improving the availability of gender-disaggregated data, which must also recognise sub-groups of women and men, to make visible the ways in which gender intersects with race, culture, age, ability, sexual orientation and geography to influence women's experiences.

Gendered data also needs to be published, usable and current. The **Victorian Women's Health Atlas**, developed by Women's Health Victoria in 2015, is an interactive web-based resource which provides gender-disaggregated data across key women's health indicators for each local government area in Victoria. With additional investment, the Atlas has significant potential for expansion, for example to include new data sets and indicators, as well as trend/time series data.

Government must invest in **research and evaluation** of gender equality initiatives to build the evidence base for further investment. Victoria and Australia are home to a number of world-leading research organisations and alliances, including Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), VicHealth and the Centre for Ethical Leadership at the University of Melbourne, who are well-equipped to undertake further research into gender equality.

Government will also need to support the development of resources and tools to support gender mainstreaming and implementation of gender equality initiatives. Women's health services have developed **applied gender analysis training and tools** to assist policy makers and implementers in identifying gender equality concerns, and the direct and indirect impact of policies, programs and projects on women and men. The Women's Health Association of Victoria (WHAV) will also shortly release a **Gender Equity Training Manual**. Resources should be brought together in an accessible and user-friendly way, for example through an online resource hub like the WHAV **Equality and Safety for Women** Planning Guide that enables organisations to select and tailor tools and resources that best suit their needs and audience.

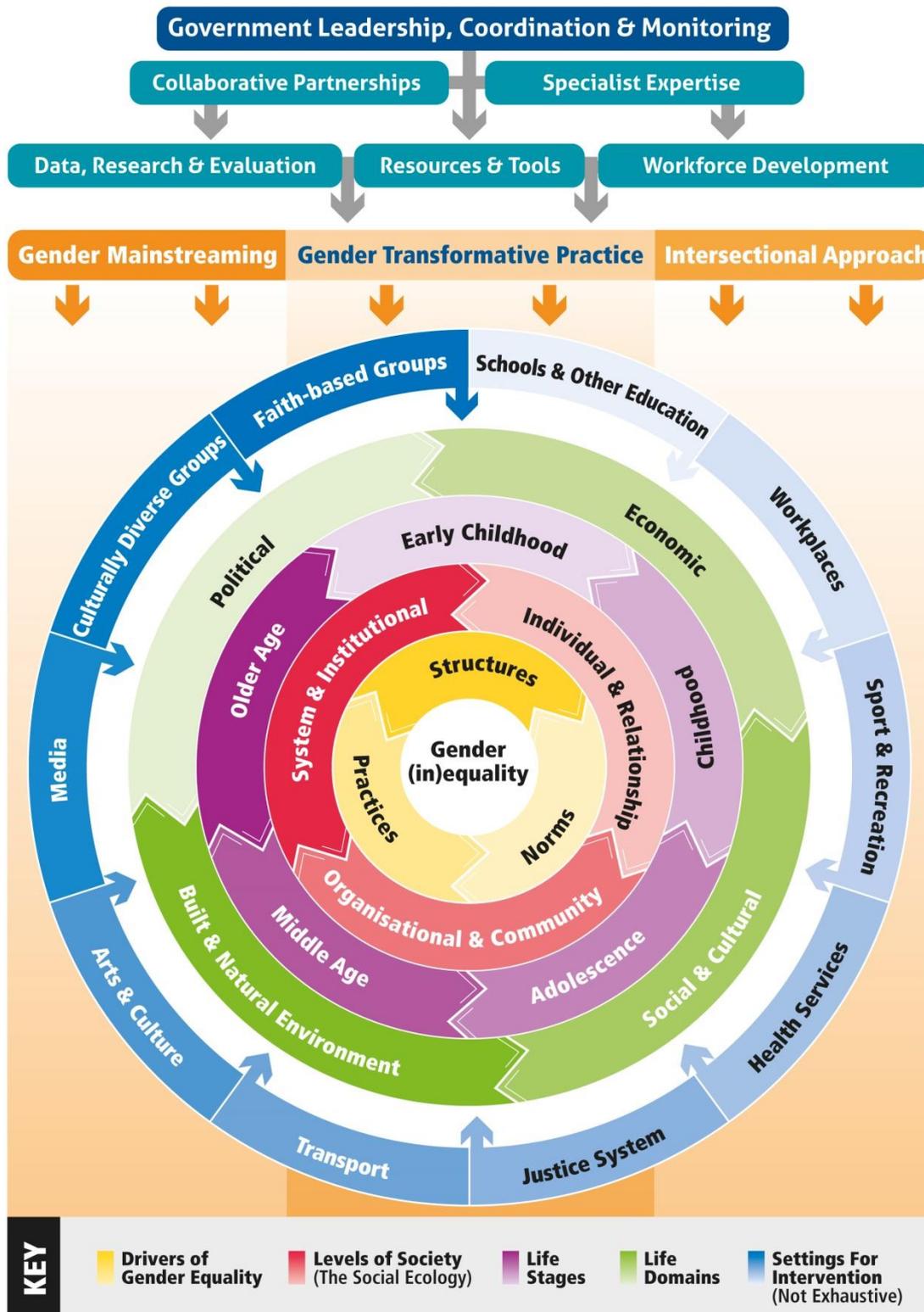
Significant investment in **workforce and organisational development and capacity building** is required to meet existing demand for specialist gender equity expertise, and is essential if we are to expand the reach of current activities in gender equity and primary prevention of violence against women across Victoria. We also need to ensure that people working and volunteering across all sectors, both within and outside government, are **trained in gender equity and gender analysis**. With additional resourcing, women's health services are well-placed to advise on curriculum and provide training.

### **WHV's proposed framework for a Victorian gender equality strategy**

WHV has developed a model which visually represents the six principles outlined in this submission and provides a conceptual framework for a gender equality strategy. The concentric circles represent the **whole-of-community action** required to achieve gender equality (Principles 1 and 2), while the

overarching layers represent the **critical factors and approaches** that must drive and inform gender equality interventions across the Victorian community in order to reverse the cycle of gender inequality (Principles 3 to 6).

## Proposed model for government-led whole-of-community action to address gender inequality



## Conclusion

Gender inequality is expressed and maintained in Victoria today through norms, practices and structures that support rigid gender stereotypes and the unequal distribution of power between men and women at every level of society. These formal and informal systems are mutually reinforcing, creating a cycle of inequality and making the task of achieving gender equality a daunting one.

However, the cyclical nature of gender inequality is also our greatest opportunity to progress comprehensive change. Interrupting and reversing the cycle of gender inequality will require a 'mirroring' of this process such that norms, practices and structures are simultaneously targeted and transformed in order to build momentum towards gender equality.

Our submission has provided what we believe to be a strong, evidence-based foundation for a truly effective and meaningful gender equality strategy for Victoria, supported by clear principles that we hope will ensure a coordinated, collaborative and sophisticated whole-of-community approach.

We congratulate the Victorian Government on the strong leadership and vision it has already shown in relation to improving gender inequality in Victoria, including committing to the development of this strategy. WHV looks forwards to continuing to support the government in this endeavour, working together to create a world-leading model to realise gender equality and set a powerful precedent for others to follow.

**[Read WHV's complete Victorian Gender Equality Strategy submission](#)**