Time for action on gendered violence



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When is enough, enough? At the time of writing this report so far, 30 women have been killed in 2024 at the hands of a man.

Recently we saw the killing of a mother and daughter in WA who were trying to protect another female from her abusive ex-partner. While we know that gender-based violence occurs to all genders, we know that it is predominantly women who are most impacted.

Australian anti-domestic violence organisation Our Watch states:

- Almost two in five women (39 per cent) have experienced violence since the age of 15.
- Men are more commonly the perpetrators of physical violence, sexual harassment and sexual violence.
- Women are more likely to experience violence from someone they know than by a stranger (35 per cent vs 11 per cent).
- On average, one woman is killed every nine days by a current or former partner.
- Women with disability in Australia are twice as likely to have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 years than women without disabilities. The type of disability can intersect with gender and different forms of violence, for example, one in two women with psychological and/or cognitive impairment has experienced sexual violence.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience disproportionally high rates of violence and are 31 times more likely to be hospitalised.
- Lesbian, bisexual and queer women experience higher rates of sexual violence than heterosexual women in Australia. Transgender and gender diverse people also experience very high rates of family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Nearly one in three women (31 per cent) have experienced physical violence since the age of 15.
- Twenty-two per cent of women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15.
- Over half of women (53 per cent) have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime. In most incidents of workplace sexual harassment, the harasser was male.

These sobering statistics emphasise the need for us as a society to do better. We know that more needs to be done in communities to get our men to support other men to break this perpetual cycle of violence and educate youth on the violence experienced online and the messaging around this.

Unfortunately, the impact of this is being felt in our schools and TAFE colleges too.
The rise in gender-based violence, in particular sexual harassment of students and teachers, is being reported at the SSTUWA through the Violence: Report It strategy.
In her book Consent Laid Bare, author Chanel Contos discusses how toxic masculinity underpins a lot of the conversation.

Contos emphasises that toxic masculinity is not the same as masculinity, but rather how it oppresses men too:

“Toxic masculinity is a set of attitudes and ways that are expected of men in order to fit the stereotype of a ‘man’ that has a negative impact on men and on everyone else.”

An example of this is the idea that “boys shouldn’t cry” as a form of toxic masculinity. Teaching this to young boys says that emotions are bad and should be suppressed, rather than the importance of learning how to “express emotions in a positive way” and learning “how to vent emotions in a healthy way”.

Unhealthy ways of pent-up anger and frustration could lead to boys punching a wall, or unfortunately a person.

“Even if the ramifications are not violent, the constant social reinforcement telling boys to repel their emotions can result in them feeling a lack of human connection at different points in their life,” the book says.

Contos further explains that in the secondary school context, toxic masculinity can be sometimes considered cool and where a boy/man gains social currency from three main things: physical intimidation, wealth and sexual conquests.

In this edition of *Western Teacher*, you can also read more about how sexual harassment and misogyny is impacting female teachers in schools.

So what is being done and is it enough?

In all WA schools, consent education has been added to the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum, as a way for our students to navigate ways to be respectful.

In Western Australia, the government’s Stronger Together for Gender Equality 10-year plan aims to build and create a safer, more equitable and just community across Western Australia.

On International Women's Day, the WA government released its progress report on the second action phase of the government's plan.

A total of 98 actions are in place across WA government agencies to support women across the four priority areas, including safety and justice.

A key action of the 10-year plan is the implementation of the Respectful Relationships Teaching Support Program (RRTSP).

The program aims to give teachers the skills to support students to build relationships characterised by non-violence, equality, mutual respect and trust.

In 2022, the state government committed to expanding the program with an additional $2.7 million.

One of the actions within this area is the RRTSP, which has been extended to sport and recreation programs. Eight confirmed organisations are participating in this pilot.

While the SSTUWA welcomes the program in schools and supports its expansion to other community-based centres, evaluation of the program is key. The union has provided feedback of its findings to Department of Communities.

The SSTUWA has contacted a range of schools that participated in the RRTSP for feedback. Members who attended the training found it to be valuable and a necessary part of building positive relationships around respect and consent in schools.

The key issue for teachers is the implementation of the program after training. The extent of the implementation of the program and its capacity to successfully drive change is varied and conditional on several factors.

The main concern is that a program's success is totally dependent on having a properly resourced school, including staff to manage the program that can support its implementation of a whole-school approach.

Currently, every public school student in WA misses out on $1,807 of the minimum funding they need every year.

This funding shortfall significantly constrains the capacity of a school to implement a consent teaching and learning program. Let alone, a complex and transformative whole-school respectful relationship education model.

With the recent announcement of delivery towards almost 100 per cent funding for public schools in WA, we hope this shortfall will be adjusted, so that programs like RRTSP can be properly resourced.

WA Department of Communities and Department of Education provide some funding to enable a school's teaching staff to attend the RRTSP workshops and support its implementation at a school level.

Individual schools can also request for further ongoing support in the form of face-to-face workshops, phone support and a school visit.

Furthermore, teachers felt that a follow up professional learning would be beneficial to schools regarding RRTSP, particularly to support schools where staff who did the initial training have moved to another worksite.

We know that Perth-based charity Starick Services will have more staff to support schools this year regarding RRTSP, this is great news.

It would be timely to do an audit on how schools have implemented the program, particularly the pilot schools.

At the start of Term 3, we will be conducting a gender-based violence survey and we would like as many members as possible to participate in this.

We hope the findings from this survey will help us lobby government to target the current issues.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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