The Men's Project – A Jesuit Social Services initiative

The Men's Project will support boys and men to live respectful, accountable and fulfilling lives, where they are able to develop loving relationships free from violence and contribute to safe and equal communities.

Specifically, the Men's Project will promote cultural and attitudinal change around issues of masculinity and gender to support primary prevention efforts; develop, deliver and evaluate interventions that address violence and other harmful behaviour; share knowledge across sectors about what works to engage boys and men and change their behaviour; and help build capacity across services to recognise and respond to violence and other harmful behaviours in boys and men.

The problem – a gendered issue

Boys and men are over-represented in key indicators of harmful social behaviours and negative social outcomes: the perpetration of violence and other crimes, in suicide rates, and in various measures of social and economic exclusion and disadvantage.

The reasons for these manifestations of systemic dysfunction are complex and multi-faceted. However, studies in Australia and around the world all agree that gender is a key issue. Gender is neither a natural, biological category nor a fixed, clearly defined norm. In contemporary gender studies it is widely acknowledged that gender is socially and culturally constructed, learned and performed. What is considered gender specific has not only been evolving over time, it is also influenced by parameters such as class, ethnicity, age, sexuality or geographical location. This leads to a complex interplay of experiences, ideals, practices and images that makes a clear definition of (one) masculinity impossible. Consequently, one has to speak of the multiple expressions of masculinity – *masculinities*. It is this issue of gender that requires more attention if we are to address the challenges our society is facing.

The issues our society is dealing with derive from deeply embedded social norms and structures that have evolved over generations in a myriad of cultural contexts, and major shifts in social, environmental and economic conditions throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They are also the product of our failure to put in place the processes and settings that foster behaviour change, stem poor trajectories or break cycles of inequality, exclusion and violence. Our contemporary world is profoundly affected by these failures. Violence and abuse within families and in our broader community, in particular, causes untold harm to individuals, families and our society, robbing people of the capacity to live full and productive lives. While both men and women can be victims of violence, men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of violence, whether it be in intimate and other family relationships, between peers, or in the broader community.

As outlined by *Change the Story*, the shared framework for the prevention of violence against women and their children, particular expressions of gender inequality consistently predict higher rates of violence against women. This includes the condoning of violence against women, men's controlling of decision making, rigid gender roles, and male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women. Reinforcing factors such as personal experience of violence, exposure to violence, alcohol abuse, and socio-economic inequality and discrimination can increase frequency or severity of violence.

We also recognise that gender inequality and reinforcing factors intersect in complex and unique ways for different cultural groups such as Aboriginal Australians and may be further complicated by the trauma of dispossession and entrenched social or political discrimination.

At the same time, our relationship with our environment has reached crisis point. This relationship often is confrontational and oppositional rather than relational and restorative, reflected in phrases such as "man versus nature". The consequence of this often violent and exploitative relationship with the natural world is communities and eco-systems facing increasing environmental degradation and depletion in the face of climate change and increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters.

Many men have not adapted to the changing world around them, including the changing nature of work, and to their new roles and responsibilities in a society that is increasingly and rightly a more equal place. Evidence outlined in *Change the Story* suggests that backlash factors can contribute to violence against women when male dominance, power, or status is challenged.

Addressing violence and other harmful behaviours

In addressing violence perpetrated by boys and men, our priority must be to make women and children safe, change structures, norms and practices that regard women as inferior and condone violence against them, ensure that violence is reported and sanctioned, and hold men to account for their actions. At the same time, a range of other vital interventions support victims so that they can live free from fear and be supported to recover and flourish. Stronger policing and restraints will form a necessary part of the response but they will not be enough unless boys and men change their behaviour.

Efforts to address violent actions by boys and men will be strengthened if we also take into account broader contemporary forces that work against the understanding of the human dignity of each person and support the degradation of women. These forces influence how the problem of gendered violence is played out. They include the alcohol industry, violent pornography and the many ways that the degradation of women is given expression across the community including through the media and social media. A well-informed response needs to take into consideration the seminal role that technology and media play in the construction and perpetuation of restrictive and harmful gender norms and stereotypes.

Across the community a wide spectrum of responses is required, from primary prevention measures through to early intervention, having an effective justice system to manage risk and ensure perpetrator accountability, delivering crisis interventions and offering ongoing support to individuals, families and communities so they can recover and flourish.

Strategies and actions to address violence must challenge the normalisation of violence as an accepted expression of masculinity; address the consequences of exposure to violence; and build capacity for positive respectful relationships and social connectedness.

In addressing **family and sexual violence**, while there are currently a number of organisations that lead work on primary prevention of violence against women and support victims of violence, plus advice lines for men and behaviour change group programs for perpetrators of violence generally linked to the justice system, there remains a significant gap in understanding and responding to boys and men who use violence, or are at risk of doing so.

In particular, as detailed in the findings and recommendations of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (*RCFV*), in *ANROWS*' review of the evidence base relating to perpetrator interventions, and in Our Watch's *Change the Story* framework for primary prevention of violence against women and their children, there is an identified need for:

- A broader range of programs and interventions for perpetrators of family violence, including programs for perpetrators presenting with complex or multiple needs such as those relating to drug and alcohol misuse and mental illness, new practice models such as strengths-based programs and fathering-specific models, and programs for perpetrators from diverse communities (*RCFV, ANROWS*)
- Programs to address the use of violence by adolescents against parents and siblings, as well as additional crisis and longer term supported accommodation options for those adolescents (*RCFV*)
- Expanded supports and interventions for children and young people who are victims of family violence (*RCFV*)
- Greater supports for people exposed to violence to reduce its consequences, by strengthening efforts to promote non-violent parenting, and the adoption of healing strategies and other efforts to mediate the impacts of past occurrences of violence, such as child abuse, racially motivated violence, war-related trauma and torture experienced by refugees, or violence occurring in prisons or detention centres (*Change the Story*)
- Organisations working with offenders and youth at risk to adopt gender-informed practice, to understand the importance of addressing and challenging traditional notions of masculinity that condone and promote violence by boys and men; to engage boys and men in gender equality, and in building relationship skills and social connections, particularly in communities experiencing rapid social and economic change (*Change the Story*)
- A space to research, test and lead public discussion about the most effective ways to stop boys and men from becoming violent or continuing to use violence, to foster interdisciplinary and collaborative practices and to complement and support the work of other agencies and organisations addressing violence by boys and men. (*RCFV, Change the Story*)

Boys and men are also overwhelmingly the perpetrators of other forms of violence outside of intimate relationships, including **violence in public places**. The effectiveness of efforts to prevent these types of violence through education and culture change remains uncertain, while there is significant public debate when it comes to regulatory interventions targeting violence in public places such as lock out laws. When boys and men who commit these violent acts enter the criminal justice system, there is a need for more sophisticated, evidence-based and holistic programs to address the causes of their violent behaviour and reduce their chances of reoffending.

It is predominantly boys and men who get swept up in **radicalised religious and cultural activity**. Efforts to prevent and respond to the radicalisation of boys and men work in a constantly evolving environment and must deal with fast changing technology, issues relating to individual identity and social exclusion, and the need for sensitive and sustained engagement with communities. The need to better evaluate and understand what works in this area in a manner similar to public health interventions is well recognised.

At the same time, we see disturbing rates of **suicide, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, and poor health outcomes** amongst men in different communities. Research has shown that men who conform to dominant masculine norms are more likely to engage in health risk behaviours and less likely to engage in health promotion behaviours.

We believe it is critical to establish new approaches to keeping the community safe, and addressing social exclusion and disadvantage. We need to maximise the prospects of intervening effectively to prevent violence; and of building the capacity of boys and men to form safe and respectful relationships and to live healthy, full and productive lives.

Our way of working

Jesuit Social Services works to build a just society where all people can reach their potential and flourish as human beings. A just society is a safe society where everyone can have healthy, fulfilling relationships built on respect.

Our organisation has learned a lot about boys and men over the past 40 years.

We will combine this deep understanding and hands-on experience working with boys and men who use violence, a proven record in delivering programs and advocating for change, and the latest research findings about the root causes of violence to make our community safer.

Our work draws on a broad range of practice models and approaches, including those that adopt structural perspectives, culturally sensitive practice, trauma informed practice, family aware practice and strengths based interventions.

We have also introduced specifically gender-aware practices in our work with men who have been violent and abusive towards women, and strengthening this element of our practice will continue to be a major focus. We believe our expertise and experience can contribute to and complement existing interventions for boys and men who use violence.

Through our existing programs working with offenders, Jesuit Social Services is aware of the critical need for early intervention in the lives of young people to prevent exposure to violence and its effects. One participant in a Jesuit Social Services program for violent offenders said in response to the question *Thinking about your own circumstances, what might have made a difference for you as an adult or earlier in life as a young boy?:*

"Well first of all I needed to stop getting bashed. I was bashed all my life."

We know the importance of engaging well with boys and men, of recognising their specific needs, vulnerabilities and experiences, of looking beyond the criminal behaviour to the person who perpetuates it - while all the while holding them accountable for their behaviour. We know the importance of creating respectful places where boys and men can take responsibility for their actions, explore alternatives to dominant understandings of masculinity, and find ways and make choices to address the use of violence and gender inequity, in their own lives and in the broader community.

Drawing on that work, we will contribute to ongoing public discussion about the imperatives of challenging the normalisation of violence, and of strengthening positive, equal and respectful relationships.

We know the importance of building a workforce with the confidence and capability to engage well with boys and men who use violence, holding them accountable and offering them – and their families and communities – hope for a better future.

The Men's Project – a unique approach

The Men's Project will support boys and men live respectful, accountable and fulfilling lives, where they are able to develop loving relationships free from violence and contribute to safe and equal communities.

The Men's Project will partner with key government service delivery organisations, family violence community agencies, providers of existing men's behaviour change group programs, universities and vital community spokespeople and stakeholders for this purpose; and it will incorporate an inter-agency approach that includes statutory entities (police, courts, child protection, youth justice), women's services, alcohol and drug services, health, mental health, community health, family support services and educational institutions.

The Men's Project will strive to complement the work of women's organisations by engaging with boys and men, and will be informed by frameworks and evidence developed by organisations working to prevent and respond to violence against women including *Our Watch* and *ANROWS*.

The Men's Project will build on evidence-based research and action to design, pilot and evaluate new models of intervention and innovative solutions to promote behaviour change and contribute to the prevention of violence by boys and men. The goals of The Men's Project will be to promote positive social change surrounding masculinity, reduce violent and harmful behaviour by boys and men, and improve their wellbeing and relationships.

The Men's Project will draw together the currently disparate networks of people and agencies that are working to address violence by boys and men, break cycles of disadvantage and exclusion, and foster the growth of good boys and men. It will help identify common objectives across divergent disciplines. It will communicate successful methods of intervention to people working in parallel fields of practice, policy, research and advocacy. Equally, it will itself develop and test new approaches and applications of knowledge and practice, which can then influence the work of others. In doing this, the Project will seek to harness a shared commitment to creating social change by creating a new and collaborative community of effort.

Our purpose

To provide leadership on the reduction of violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men, and build approaches to improve their wellbeing and keep families and communities safe.

Our vision

Good men, respectful relationships, safe communities

Our mission

To support boys and men to live respectful, accountable and fulfilling lives free from violence.

Our goals

- **Good Men – driving positive social change surrounding masculinity**

The Men's Project will take a big picture and holistic approach. It will promote positive change around gender norms and stereotypes and what it means to be a man in the 21st century.

This will include research into the issues facing boys and men. We will share this knowledge, advocate for change, and work with partners to develop interventions in schools, workplaces, sporting clubs, community groups and at home.

- **Respectful relationships – improving wellbeing and relationships**

The Men's Project will support boys and men to establish meaningful relationships, to build hopes and aspirations, and to fully realise their potential.

We will learn from and expand programs that build positive relationship skills and improve the wellbeing of boys and men. We will focus on contributing factors like mental health problems, substance abuse and social isolation. This will benefit not only boys and men but everyone in the community – children, women, friends and families.

- **Safe communities - reducing violence and other harmful behaviour**

The Men's Project will develop innovative ways to stop cycles of violence and harmful behaviour among boys and men.

We will design, deliver and evaluate responses for boys and men from different cultural and geographic groups, young fathers and men who come into contact with the justice system. We will collaborate and build the capacity of others to reduce violent behaviour by boys and men.

Our approach

Our work is based on extensive experience working with boys and men, a big picture, integrated approach and strong partnerships.

We strive to complement the work of other organisations by engaging boys and men.

The voice of people affected by violence informs all our work.

- **Build positive culture and attitudes**

  - ➢ Prevent violence by driving positive cultural and attitudinal change about masculinity and gender equality through community engagement, advocacy and effective alliances
  - ➢ Develop resources to improve understanding and encourage productive, informed community conversations about good manhood

- **Build effective interventions**

  - ➢ Identify groups requiring specialist responses including:
    - o Young fathers
    - o Young people using violence in the home
    - o Young people at risk of or in contact with the justice system
    - o Hard to engage groups
  - ➢ Tailor programs to specific cohorts and ensure they are informed by the voice of people affected by violence

- **Build knowledge**

  - ➢ Build on evidence based research and experience of what works in changing behaviour and keeping women, children and the community safe
  - ➢ Foster collaboration by providing a central hub for ideas and action. Connect with service providers, practitioners, police, the courts, women's services, policy makers, and researchers across sectors to build and share knowledge about trends and effective interventions
  - ➢ Advocate for evidence based, cross discipline interventions and an inter-agency approach

- **Build capacity**

  - ➢ Build the skills and capacity of workers and the community to engage effectively with boys and men and to identify and respond safely to all forms of violence
  - ➢ Establish good practice resources and information that assist workers to identify and respond to violence
  - ➢ Work closely with partners across sectors to develop capacity building resources