

Disclaimer

As a Councillor with [REDACTED] Council I would like to send this submission to the Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Royal Commission as my own opinion. What I write here are based on my own thoughts and experiences and is not the opinions or position of the [REDACTED] Council.

Overview

As an elected member of local government I wish to endorse the submissions from Councils across South Australia who are asking for more support to help their communities end violence against women and children. This submission wishes to place a focus on supporting women with lived experience of gendered violence in leadership roles in their community and particularly in local government.

Submission

I was elected to local government in [REDACTED] With much gratitude I was elected into a Chamber that has equal representation of women and men. Our varying ages and experiences demonstrates that our community voted for representation that reflected them.

It was early on in my first term that I saw we had no position on ending violence against women and children in our community. This was pertinent to me in February 2023 when I stood on the steps of Parliament House at Pay Our Respects. I was holding the number [REDACTED] who was allegedly murdered by her son.

From then I worked with staff and the Chamber to adopt the Our Watch Toolkit for Local Government. We began positively with programs in our community however I believe we have struggled to progress gender equity and bystander intervention within the Council.

But we would not be alone. Currently out of South Australia's 68 councils, 37% of mayors and 21% of CEOs are female, with only 10% of councils having both a female mayor and CEO. With just over a third of elected candidates across the state in local government being women.

Yet local government is where female leaders can thrive. It is where we can balance leadership in our community with careers and family. The demands are not as great as State or Federal politics and it is therefore appropriate for the Local Government Association to be actively advertising for women to run as candidates in our elections.

However I wish to argue that until systems within local government change it is an unsafe workplace for women. Women across many councils are sharing their experiences privately and confidentially of harassment and bullying. Most of which is conducted through complaints to the Ombudsman's office, with lawyers and within the Behavioural Standards Policy.

Research paper authored by Andrea Carson, Gosia Mikolajczak and Leah Ruppner called The Missing Cohort: Women in Local Government cites

“parliaments with higher ratios of women to men recorded lower levels of corruption than those with fewer women.”

With this I find it staggering the number of women who are sharing their experiences of being put through the complaints process in local government. Currently we have no mechanism in place to look at this through a gendered lens within the Office of Public Integrity and this concern falls outside the scope of the Equal Opportunity Act.

A device used for silencing women, and particularly women in public life is fear and isolation. That fear can be created by threats of enacting minor or malicious complaints. I believe this is being used to silence women which in turn isolates them as allies do not speak up in their defence, in fear they will be next.

In Victoria the ASU surveyed members and found Local Government workers have experienced and/or witnessed bullying in their workplace.

- 43% of respondents reported having been subjected to bullying behaviour at their current workplace.
- 45% of respondents reported having witnessed a colleague being bullied in the past 12 months.
- Of those who raised the bullying with management, only 7.5% were satisfied with how the complaint was dealt with.

In the 2022-23 Annual Report for the Office of Public Integrity of the 886 complaints received the third highest number were in Local Government. While it could be argued this may be warranted what is not being documented is the severity of these complaints or gender of who is delivering and receiving the complaint. This is the data we need to truly examine how the system is being used.

I have witnessed women with lived experience of gendered violence be targeted and subjected to fear and psychological distress for sharing a difference of opinion or speaking up. There is a personal impact and triggers from trauma we need to acknowledge in this.

“Disrespecting women doesn't always lead to violence but all violence against women begins with disrespect.” - Prime Minister Turnbull

When women come to their role as elected members in local government with a lived experience of gendered violence we treat them as rare. However statistics show that for a woman to have a lived experience of abuse, harassment or gendered violence is actually the norm.

Yet by making their experience rare or an ‘oddy’ we negate what this lived experience can do when preventing violence in our communities. Also, when we minimise a woman’s lived experience we are disregarding the courage and strength it takes to not only disclose but we send a dangerous message to victim survivors in our community that what they live with, is insignificant.

I believe with this Royal Commission we should be recommending an investigation into the treatment of women in local government. We can no longer look at the drivers of gendered violence in a general way. Without drilling into the macro parts of

systems that are preventing women from actively participating in their communities and public life we will not get to heart of what must change.

The first step in the Our Watch Toolkit for Local Government asks Councils to look at their gender equity and make a commitment to be the leaders to ending violence in their communities. This is a very big ask and one that I believe local government is not ready for. Without the evidence it is hard to argue that a desperate change of culture of disrespect needs to be addressed.

Kate Manne recently wrote in her article “Why Didn’t They Save Me?” The Unhelped and the Unmoved: A tale of two traumas and the violence of indifference, “...third parties are so often indifferent and apathetic. And that does further harm to victims. In some cases, it even exceeds the original harm of being subject to the wrongdoing in the first place. Third party indifference in the face of second party violence is itself a form of violence.

“The flipside of this is that third parties who bear witness—and intervene, when possible—can do a great deal of good, even independently of the outcome.”

I see this Royal Commission as being the third party that can intervene. By addressing how women in leadership with lived experience are being treated in their workplace we can start to create the change we need. Because we know these women are powerful champions to ending violence in their communities, and they will in turn inspire more women to run as candidates – and be future leaders.

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