The rhetoric and reality of preventing family violence at the local governance level in Victoria, Australia

TRACY CASTELINO MSW
Doctoral Candidate, Urban Planning, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

CAROLYN C WHITZMAN PhD*
Senior Lecturer, Urban Planning, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

ABSTRACT
This is an opportune time to review current policies and plans for responding to family violence in Australia. The recently elected Labor government has developed new promises and plans to respond to violence. Both the community sector and the various government tiers have used many terms to describe family violence, violence against women, community safety, and crime and violence. This article argues that the terms used matter for the formation, communication and implementation of policies and programs. In particular this article will explore how family violence prevention at the local governance is influenced by state and federal communications and policies. In the State of Victoria, Australia, local government–community partnerships have been key to engaging the whole community on women’s issues and women’s experiences of violence in the home by intimate partners and to the development of programs and projects that are innovative and responsive to local priorities and politics. But this work has occurred within a shifting and sometimes contradictory set of policies at the federal and state level. We have selected Maribyrnong as a case to highlight the relationship between state government rhetoric and funding, and local government responses to family violence.

Key words: family violence; gender; local governance; Australia; Victoria

* Correspondence to: Dr Carolyn Whitzman, Senior Lecturer, Urban Planning, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria 3010, Australia; tel: +61 3 8344 8723; e-mail: whitzman@unimelb.edu.au
NEW GOVERNMENTS – NEW PROMISES – NEW LANGUAGE

The newly elected Rudd Labor promises to implement a National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children, to better protect women and children from domestic violence and sexual assault. This national ‘Prevention and Protection’ policy includes many measures with local governance implications, including boosting ‘White Ribbon Day’ men’s education activities in rural and regional communities, supporting community role models to visit high schools with respectful relationship messages, and $150 million to construct 600 additional housing units to accommodate women and children escaping violent relationships who are at risk of homelessness (Australian Labor Party 2007).

The term ‘violence against women and children’ represents a shift in language as well as policy from the previous Liberal government, who preferred the more gender-neutral term ‘family violence’. This article explores how the usage of terms such as ‘crime and violence prevention’, ‘family violence’, ‘community safety’, and ‘violence against women’ has differing impacts on the development of government policies, which in turn, has ramifications for responses from local governments, community agencies and partnerships. Our particular study is grounded in the preliminary findings from the Gender, Local Governance, and Violence Prevention (GLOVE) Project, a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage grant between the University of Melbourne and the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth). This project is using current international best practice on violence prevention to support four local government–community partnerships in Victoria. Lessons from these four partnerships – in the inner Melbourne suburb of Maribyrnong, the rural–suburban interface of Casey, the regional city of Bendigo, and the rural shire of Loddon – are intended to inform state and national policy on violence prevention.

CHANGING INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE ON VIOLENCE PREVENTION

What is included – and excluded – in these key terms? Who creates the meanings and how are these meanings represented to the community and in policy? These are important points of clarification as language has the power to create realities and has policy implications. For instance, Johnson, who helped develop a Canadian violence against women survey (Johnson & Sacco 1995), which in turn influenced international violence against women surveys (eg WHO 2004a), argued that ‘the discourse and practice of crime prevention has tended to be gender neutral, and traditional crime prevention programs and initiatives have developed independent of efforts to prevent those violent crimes which affect women disproportionately’ (Johnson 2007: 69–70). Crime prevention has traditionally focused on law-breaking that takes place in the public sphere and has couched programs in language that masks the gender of the perpetrator(s) and victim(s).

Violence that may not be against the law (such as men raping their wives or parents violently ‘disciplining’ their children) and violence that is located in the private sphere of the home becomes hidden in discourse and policy. This is true of both rich and poor countries, with poor countries suffering from higher levels of both politically-based community violence and lower levels of services to prevent violence against women (Smaoun 2000). Hume (2004) provided an example of how ‘youth gang violence’ is treated as a major public issue in El Salvador, while sexual and physical assault of women remains hidden from public policy.

Johnson, along with Shaw, Andrew and Capobianco (Shaw & Andrew 2005; Shaw & Capobianco 2004) pointed to a further complication. While there is a split between ‘mainstream’ crime prevention and the prevention of violence against women, feminist work has, in turn, split into two streams. Violence against women, as the term suggests, deals with all acts of violence, criminal
and non-criminal, covering physical, psychological and sexual harm to women specifically because of their gender. Feminists view patriarchy as the root cause of violence against women, which affects women’s everyday lives in both public and private spaces, while women’s safety focuses on the prevention of violence in public spaces, primarily through local planning and governance mechanisms.

Violence against women encompasses a number of contentious terms. Domestic violence is preferred by some governmental and non-governmental organizations, as it contrasts violence committed in homes, as opposed to public streets and workplaces. Family violence is preferred by others, for its emphasis on violence committed within relationships, as opposed to violence committed by strangers and acquaintances. Family violence would include child abuse, elder abuse and sibling abuse. Both domestic violence and family violence are terms still debated by many feminists for their gender-neutrality. The term wife assault used to be used to make clear that most partner assaults were by men against their female partners. Recently, intimate partner violence has been used to include unmarried couples (both heterosexual and homosexual) and importantly, names and overt the violence in private and intimate relationships. Woman abuse, violence against women, male violence against women, and gender-based violence are all clear about gender, and can be used to encompass both sexual and physical assault, although perhaps less clear about the spatial or familial locus of violence. In short, there is no perfect term to use that encompasses the multiple aspects of gender, private and public sphere, and family versus acquaintance violence (see Shaw & Capobianco 2004).

Despite the difficulties over language, both international public health organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and urban planning and governance bodies such as the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements (UNCHS, or as it is better known, UN-Habitat) have developed a broad consensus that crime and violence is best addressed through the development of multi-level strategies across sectors and across all levels of government (Vanderschueren 2006; WHO 2002). All of these international governance organizations, plus many others, are also implementing gender mainstreaming in research and policies. Gender mainstreaming is defined as:

Gender mainstreaming is defined as: the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, or programs, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic, and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality. (UN Economic and Social Council 1997: para 4)

AUSTRA LIAN POLICY ON VIOLENCE PREVENTION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Crime prevention and community safety is the responsibility of all levels of government in Australia. The Australian Government has responsibility for criminal justice issues, the Family Law Act (which includes marriage and divorce and child custody issues), income support policy, and national policies concerning the provision of health, education, welfare and housing. The States and Territories have primary responsibilities for the criminal justice system and police, and the delivery of public housing, health, education and community services. Local government plays the main role in planning safer communities and responding to the everyday issues identified by its constituents. While state and federal governments are funded by income taxes that are progressive in nature (the higher your household’s income, the higher your level of taxation), local government is dependent on property taxes, which are regressive (generally, lower income
households pay a higher proportion of their income on taxes). Furthermore, due to socio-spatial disparities, lower income communities often are in greater need of local government services such as community centres and public health nurses. This means that local government is highly dependent on state and federal government for grants to support everyday needs identified by their residents.

In Australia, while there has been rhetoric agreeing with the international discourse on crime and violence, the last 35 years have seen piecemeal federal government responses and strategies, with a continual separation between violence against women and crime and violence (Egger 1997; Phillips 2006). From the early 1970s onwards, Australian feminists were instrumental in getting domestic violence, as it was then known, onto the policy agenda of governments. In Australia, as in many western countries, the response by the feminist movement initially happened at a very local level (Ramsay 2006; Weeks 1994). A dominant feminist discourse argued that women’s right to safety required housing options so that they could leave violent relationships (Spinney 2007; McFerran 2007). This discourse fed a funding and service system supporting the link between domestic violence and housing. Other services developed such as domestic violence crisis services, rape crisis centres, counselling, women’s health centres and community based child care (PADV 1999). Despite these positive developments, this discourse solidified the position of domestic violence as a ‘women’s issue’ best addressed through funding for service provision rather than primary prevention measures (Laing 2001; Spinney 2007). The feminist movement also worked on criminal justice and police response issues, with incremental success over time.

This well-organized and independent feminist movement worked well with the federal Labor government of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating (1983–1996), leading to the employment of ‘femocrats’ to carry out a range of policies supporting women, and the establishment of ‘femocracies’ such as the Office for the Status of Women. However, the Australian government continued to address violence against women and violence and crime issues independently. There was a National Committee on Violence in 1989, which in turn led to policies on ‘Creating a Safer Community’ in 1992 and a ‘Safer Australia’ initiative in 1995, while the parallel National Committee on Violence against Women in 1992 was not brought under this crime and violence prevention umbrella (Egger 1997: 89–90).

Furthermore, there was by no means a unified feminist stance on violence issues. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were uncomfortable with the term violence against women, preferring family violence, since the latter was felt to encompass more extended relationships (OWP 2002). Indigenous writers are among those who prefer a more nuanced consideration of race, class and culture as well as gender in their analysis of violence, abuse and oppression (Lucashenko 1994, 1996; Nancarrow 2006). While recognizing that the majority of victims are women and children and the men who use violence are responsible for their actions, indigenous and other feminists did not wish to preclude the restoration of relationships between these men and those family members they have hurt (Nancarrow 2006).

Over the years of the Liberal–National Coalition government of John Howard (1996–2007), many of the advances on family violence were rolled back. Maintaining the centrality of the intact ‘family’ as the locus of all that is central to community wellbeing and safety meant diminishing funds to women’s services, the loss of femocrats from federal government positions and a diluted violence against women national public education campaign (Kirkwood 2007; Phillips 2006; Summers 2003). There was increased funding for family relationship centres as a mechanism for solving ‘relationship issues’, and compulsory mediation for couples going through divorce proceedings, despite concerns that ‘family
conflict resolution’ would re-victimize women and children facing violence from husbands and fathers (Kirkwood 2007).

The Coalition government developed a National Community Crime Prevention Program (NCCPP) that featured a relatively well-funded community grants program. The funds were allocated to grass roots projects designed to enhance community safety and crime prevention by preventing or reducing crime and anti-social behaviour, improving community safety and security, and reducing the fear of crime. Despite this financial support, from a non-gendered perspective Homel (2005) and Cherney and Sutton (2007) were critical of the federal government’s failure to provide vision and strategic direction to state and local governments. From a gender mainstreaming perspective, it can be concluded that the Coalition government has failed to link violence against women and crime and violence, and further, has undermined the gender analysis of the violence against women initiatives that existed under the previous government.

**VICTORIAN POLICY ON PREVENTING VIOLENCE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

Each state and territory has developed different legislations and policies on crime and violence. These policies, like their federal counterparts, have been highly political, leading to a ‘cyclical’, if not cynical, tendency in crime and violence prevention (Sutton & Cherney 2002: 325). In Victoria, many reforms occurred at the state level during the Labor governments of John Cain II and Joan Kirner from 1982 to 1992, including significant legislative changes allowing women to take out intervention orders under the Crimes (Family Violence) Act 1987, the establishment of government funded peak bodies like Domestic Violence Victoria, No To Violence, and Centres Against Sexual Assault, and the formation of the Victorian Community Council Against Violence. Various government agencies and departments such as Victoria Police, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Human Services developed policies on domestic violence and sexual assault. Victoria was considered to be at the forefront of Australian crime and violence prevention policy (Egger 1997; Sutton & Cherney 2002). However, there was no co-ordinated, clearly articulated Victorian Government policy statement on violence against women, nor did the Good Neighbourhood Program (a local governance-based social crime and violence prevention initiative focused on youth launched in 1988) have any gender analysis or relationship with concurrent violence against women initiatives (Sutton & Cherney 2002).

The Safer Communities Pilot Program was launched in 1991 in the waning days of the Labor government. Based in a new division, VicSafe, housed within the Department of Justice, the program drew heavily from women’s safety programs and tools from Canada, New Zealand and the UK, including the use of women’s safety audits and an emphasis on violence against women and children as a priority area of concern (Egger 1997: 90–91; Sutton & Cherney 2002: 331). Under this project, eight pilot local governments received $50,000 to cover the cost of a community safety officer to coordinate the prevention of both intentional (crime and violence) and unintentional (eg fire and pedestrian) injury.

The Coalition state government of Jeff Kennett was elected in 1992, but at first, little changed for the VicSafe Program, other than a more explicit emphasis on ‘law and order’. The 1997 Safer Cities and Shires Program extended funding to 32 of Victoria’s 78 local governments, under the expectation of matching funding from local government. In return, the local government was to coordinate a comprehensive needs assessment, including analyzing crime and violence in relation to particular groups such as women and children, and work with state government, social services and the private sector to develop strategies to improve community safety (Community Safety and Crime Prevention Unit 1997). The policy’s emphasis on ‘whole of government’ approach and locally coordinated
responses had much in common with the Labor government’s rhetoric when it regained power in 1999.

The Labor government stated that one of its 10 priority issues was reducing violent crime and the fear of violent crime, and by 2002, it had developed two policy documents specifically dealing with crime and violence prevention. *Safer Streets and Homes* was labeled a crime and violence prevention strategy for Victoria and was supported by Crime Prevention Victoria, the renamed division of the Department of Justice. The *Women’s Safety Strategy* provided a framework for a coordinated approach for reducing violence against women and was a parallel three-year strategy administered by the Office of Women’s Policy, a division of the Department of Victorian Communities. While developed and administered separately, both initiatives stressed the importance of coordinated local government action to prevent crime, fear and violence and noted the connection between public and private violence and fear of crime. Both initiatives were not renewed after three years, and there are no new policy documents to suggest the next steps, nor evaluations of the programs’ effectiveness (Homel 2005; Whitzman 2008).

However, the Women’s Safety Strategy, with its emphasis on women and children’s safety and wellbeing, perpetrator accountability for violence and abuse, and a gendered analysis was the basis for a new *Family Violence Strategy*. A joint effort between Office of Women’s Policy (OWP) and Department of Human Services (DHS) have produced reports and policy documents on a way forward for an integrated approach for responding to family violence, while sexual assault has remained within separate government units, with different funding sources and thus distinct policy contexts. In addition, there has been a loss of focus on the primary prevention of violence at the local level, as well as any attempt to link violence prevention in the public and private spheres (Whitzman 2008). A 2006 survey undertaken for the GLOVE project found that 15 of 31 local governments within the Melbourne metropolitan area had community safety or municipal public health plans which included prevention of family violence as a priority issue; the same number of plans mentioned graffiti as a priority issue (Whitzman & Zhang 2006).

Family violence is now the preferred term by the Victorian state government, rather than violence against women. In general, this term has been accepted by feminist agencies because of its deference to the experiences and views of Indigenous Australians (DPC, 2005, 2007; Laing, 2000; SSCRFV, 2005). The Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence (SSCRFV), convened jointly by the Office of Women’s Policy and Victoria Police, is well-represented by key people across government units in criminal justice, police and community services as well as key senior staff from the community organization peak bodies (such as Domestic Violence Incest Resource Centre, Domestic Violence Victoria, Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Services and No To Violence). The foundational principle for all the signatories to the family violence system reforms is a commitment to a gendered analysis of power and control in intimate partner relationships.

In 2005 the SSCRFV launched its report detailing system reform for family violence. The main initiatives were:

- The Victorian Police Code of Practice for Police Response and Investigation of family violence;
- Pilot family violence specialist courts;
- An indigenous family violence strategy;
- A common risk assessment framework for family violence services; and
- An integrated family violence service model to organize and rationalize responses that had grown in a mainly ad hoc way.

The latter point is worthy of further description as it was to embrace collaborative partnerships at the regional levels, by including services that worked with women and children and services...
that worked with the men who perpetrated the violence and abuse.

The feminist service systems considered men who committed domestic violence as perpetrators and the exploration of discourses on men and masculinities was relegated to the periphery. Hence, the men's sector, responding to those men who perpetrated intimate partner violence, and academics acknowledging the construction of dominant masculinities (Braithwaite & Daly 1994; Connell 1991) and the link to violence, male privilege and control, developed in relative isolation from the women’s sector. In Victoria, men’s behaviour change programs developed through the men’s health sector, with little funding and political segregation from the women’s domestic violence sector. As program accountability and women’s safety have become almost universal benchmarks for the men’s anti-violence programs, they have achieved more mainstream and feminist agency support. These two points have influenced the establishment of a community and government partnership, with a multi-agency and integrated response to family violence at the state and regional levels.

However, the current family violence strategies have been criticized by many community agencies and local governments as intervention has become the focus at the cost of prevention policies and strategies. First, a state government program under the Women’s Safety Strategy, which hired regional coordinators to support local family violence prevention strategies, was dropped in 2005. Second, the tender process for regional delivery of ‘integrated family services’ left many agencies competing against one another for state funding, rather than working together to provide coordination at the local governance level. Third, the total abandonment of Safer Streets and Homes left several local governments who were trying to integrate family violence within community safety and/or municipal public health strategies without any policy, funding or coordination support from the state government.

To some extent, VicHealth has stepped into the vacuum left by state government. VicHealth is an independent foundation that receives funding from the Victorian State Government, but has a board of governance that includes representatives from both major political parties as well as community leaders. VicHealth continues to prefer the gender specific terminology of violence against women over family violence, and has been a strong advocate for primary prevention (VicHealth 2004). Their most recent report on preventing violence against women before it occurs (VicHealth 2007) has been accompanied by a grants program that has funded seven local governments to do work on prevention of violence against women.

INNOVATIVE LOCAL GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES TO PREVENT FAMILY VIOLENCE: THE CITY OF MARIBYRNONG AS A CASE STUDY

The City of Maribyrnong is one of the seven municipalities to receive VicHealth funding, and is also one of the four sites for the GLOVE project. The local partnerships in the GLOVE project were chosen on the basis of their commitment to developing policy that addressed violence in both the public and private spheres, and also on the basis of working with a variety of settings, from an inner suburban municipality, to a suburban fringe municipality, a regional centre and a rural municipality. In all cases, the localities were identified by state level organizations as places where there was strong interest in addressing family violence as part of a community safety or municipal public health strategy, but which needed a little extra assistance in getting started. In the case study which follows, we will focus on the inner suburban municipality of Maribyrnong, which has been progressing most rapidly in its development of violence prevention policy.

The City of Maribyrnong is located immediately west of the City of Melbourne. Its population of 60,000 people within 31 square kilometers makes Maribyrnong the most densely populated municipality in the state. It is one of
the most diverse parts of Metropolitan Melbourne, with 40% of the population born overseas. The largest new migrant community is from Vietnam, but Maribyrnong is also experiencing an influx of newcomers from the Horn of Africa. Braybrook, one of the nine suburbs in this municipality, is ranked lowest in the state on a series of socio-economic indicators, while other suburbs, such as Footscray and Yarraville, are rapidly gentrifying.

**Past Actions**

Maribyrnong has had a community safety taskforce since it received state funding as part of the Safer Cities and Shires program in 1996. While Safer Cities and Shires had an explicit focus on crime and violence in the public sphere (Community Safety and Crime Prevention Unit 1997), its successor state-level program, Safer Streets and Homes, addressed ‘preventing family violence – safety in the home’ as well as ‘improving safety in streets and neighbourhoods’ (Crime Prevention Victoria 2002: 5). In response to the initial funding criteria, the mandate of the Maribyrnong Local Safety Committee initially focused on accident prevention as well as crime prevention in public space. It used the framework developed by WHO’s Collaborating Centre on Community Safety, which prioritized unintentional and intentional injuries from a gender neutral perspective. The Maribyrnong City Council’s Safer Communities Policy for 2003–2006 (City of Maribyrnong 2002) thus linked itself to state government policies such as Occupational Health and Safety, Falls Prevention, and Emergency Management, but did not mention the Women’s Safety Strategy (Government of Victoria 2002b). A public consultation process on ‘Our Community’s Future’ in late 2001, which contacted 20,000 people, found that safety issues were the largest single areas of concern, but the responses emphasized ‘the need for more police, better lighting, personal safety in public, reduction or elimination of syringes discarded inappropriately, and a reduction in crime’ (City of Maribyrnong 2002).

A change in discourse can be discerned by the time of Maribyrnong’s Safer Communities Action Plan 2003–2004 (City of Maribyrnong 2003). For the first time, actions like ‘support initiatives to reduce family violence’ and ‘support initiatives to increase the women’s feeling of safety in public places’ appeared in policies. A key factor, according to the staff person most closely working on the initiative, was a western region public forum on ‘the rising tides of violence’ in October 2002, organized by Women’s Health West (Western Region Network Against Family Violence 2003) with Women’s Safety Strategy funding, which led to increased participation by organizations concerned with family violence in the Maribyrnong Safety Taskforce.

**Forward-Looking Plans**

By 2005, the Maribyrnong Safety Taskforce had a Family Violence Working Group, led by Women’s Health West, and a community forum in March 2007 brought together over 50 local groups, including many ethno-specific organizations, to brainstorm about local actions to prevent violence against women. A new two-year Action Plan, focusing on Violence Against Women, was adopted by Maribyrnong City Council in October 2007 (City of Maribyrnong 2007). In contrast with the earlier action plan, Maribyrnong City Council’s Preventing Violence Against Women Action Plan 2007–2008 does not explicitly link itself to a Victorian State strategy. Instead, it uses VicHealth’s Public Health Model for Preventing Violence Against Women (VicHealth 2005) as a framework for action.

However, it would be simplistic to posit a straightforward relationship between government funding and local government priorities. The transformation of crime and violence prevention priorities is due to a more complex dialogical process. As has been identified in an international overview of ‘engendering crime prevention initiatives’ (Shaw & Andrew 2005), there has been a growing empowerment of women in governance, particularly at the local level. This has resulted in
the election of a new generation of female local government councilors more likely to be concerned about issues of family violence, including those with strong ties to grassroots women’s organizations. As well, there is a new generation of women in senior management positions, again including those with ties to women’s and violence prevention activities.

Equally, there is a growing recognition from organizations hitherto uninvolved in local governance that the local level is about more than ‘roads, rates, and rubbish’; that local coordination, advocacy, and supports can be developed that are effective in addressing violence. Similarly, ‘the application of public health approaches to violence against women, which encourage a much broader and integrated “whole of government” approach’, have encouraged women’s organizations and health organizations to look at local governments in a new light, as enablers of this kind of coordination (Shaw & Andrew 2005: 300). Both of these processes – engendering local governance and a growing understanding of public health approaches to primary prevention – have been occurring in Maribyrnong.

**RE-NEWED LOCAL VISION**

While traditional local family violence partnerships focus on policing, justice and the coordination of women’s services such as rape crisis centres and shelters for assaulted women with health and other support services, Maribyrnong City Council has carved out a much more ambitious role for itself. It has pledged to work with local agencies and research institutions to research, monitor and evaluate activities, including preparing a local profile of violence against women, mapping out current and previous violence prevention initiatives and working on an evaluation plan to measure whether the suite of actions is working to strengthen partnerships and prevent violence. It will provide council staff and external organizations with training to incorporate violence prevention and the promotion of healthy relationships into their everyday work, with a specific focus on promoting healthy relationships in Maribyrnong-area schools. It is seeking further resourcing to specifically work on violence prevention initiatives targeted at boys and young men. It is developing organizational processes and policies to mainstream violence prevention, for instance, through reviewing the design and management of ‘council-operated facilities to ensure that they are safe and welcoming for women, model respect for gender relations, and non-violent means of communication and conflict resolution’ (City of Maribyrnong 2007: 41).

As part of a commitment to strengthen local community participation in violence prevention initiatives, it will be supporting and encouraging the participation of women in local government and local decision-making; identifying and supporting local champions, advocates and mentors, particularly among culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups; and supporting existing and new women’s programs such as women-only swim nights in local pools. Maribyrnong City Council will actively develop and promote local social marketing and communications campaigns to increase awareness of violence against women, and advocate to local agencies outside the family violence sector to develop primary prevention initiatives (City of Maribyrnong 2007: 32–50).

In order to develop this range of services, Maribyrnong City Council had to rethink the role of local governance in violence prevention. According to the 2007 *Preventing Violence Against Women Action Plan*, Maribyrnong City Council can provide local leadership and coordination, foster partnerships for a whole of community response, promote a positive example to the community that violence is unacceptable, advocate to all levels of government, including input into state and federal policies and to relevant local services, to address violence against women; promote integration of violence prevention planning and actions in all relevant Council strategies and programs; and facilitate ongoing public discussion, debate and information sharing regarding
primary prevention of violence against women (City of Maribyrnong Council 2007: 30).

This suite of interventions is influenced not only by the VicHealth 2007 Preventing Violence Against Women model, but also by international best practice as identified by WHO’s Global Campaign for Violence Prevention (WHO 2004b). Its primary focus is gender-based violence, particularly in its research, monitoring and evaluation activities, and in its discussion of City Council’s role. This may be due to the involvement of Women’s Health West and other feminist agencies, as well as the external source of funding (VicHealth’s Violence Against Women program). However, there is acknowledgement of male-on-male violence in the discussion of safer council-operated facilities, a broad commitment to supporting healthy and non-violent relationships in local schools and workplaces, and a recognition of the need to target interventions to men and boys as well as females. The action plan avoids the dichotomy between intervening in the public and private spheres which has been noted in so many recent analyses of crime and violence prevention initiatives (Johnson 2007; Shaw & Andrew 2005; Whitzman 2007). It can thus be considered an innovative set of local governance strategies that address a wide range of violence concerns, using best practices that have been identified in international and local materials.

CONCLUSION

Local government–community partnerships do not occur in a policy vacuum. This article recognizes the role of federal and state governments and peak bodies in influencing and promoting what can be achieved locally. In turn, all levels of government are affected by the terms they use to define violence, and the extent to which these terms develop a holistic understanding of violence. In Australia, the development of violence prevention policy has been highly politicized. As Labor governments replace Liberal–National Coalition governments and vice versa, previous policies are rejected and funding programs revised or destroyed. This creates considerable uncertainty for both local governments and for locally-based community agencies. Local partnerships have to be highly attuned to changes in rhetoric, using the terms crime and violence, community safety, violence against women, and family violence depending on the whims of government funders.

Crime and violence, including family violence, is international in its prevalence and impacts, but measures to prevent violence are best coordinated at the local level. Local partnerships react to local circumstances, build on local resources, and often are hothouses of innovation, as described in the Maribyrnong case study. However, local partnerships are dependent on state government policy, funding and coordination. The federal and state governments have not provided adequate leadership on the vision and have provided mixed messages and contradictory policies. This confusion is played out in local governance, where responses depend on differing and often confusing interpretations of violence, limiting political activism, leadership and resources. Without a whole of government consensus on violence and/or family violence, there will continue to be a myriad of valid local community programs that are individualized and isolated, and lack accountability or performance measurability to the broader state and national vision.

Currently there is hope and optimism that the new Rudd government will produce a national policy that has a strong vision and action plan for all forms of violence. The sector awaits the federal government’s National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children that promises a renewed focus on the gendered nature of violence, women’s and children’s experiences as the main victims of family violence and the need for multi-layered strategies and programs for all members of the community at the local level. The Victorian state government continues to strengthen its response to family violence with the inter-departmental committee that is collaboratively co-ordinating the family violence systems.
reforms and developing a five-year Family Violence Reform Strategic Framework. Both state and federal governments highlight the importance of linkages with local government and community partnerships. Let’s hope that this is not just rhetoric and as 2008 progresses, the espoused vision becomes reality.

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