

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Anti-LGBTIQA+ Hate Crimes in Victoria

Melbourne – Thursday 25 June 2026

MEMBERS

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES

Helen Bolton, Chief Executive Officer, and

Laura Vines, Manager, Prevention Policy and Influence, Respect Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the last session today of the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into anti-LGBTIQA+ hate crimes. I am Joe McCracken. I am Chair of the inquiry. We will also go through and introduce the members of our committee.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Hi. I am Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Michael GALEA: Hello. Michael Galea, South-Eastern Metropolitan Region and Deputy Chair.

The CHAIR: And do we have any – no, we do not. There might be some that might appear online. I know Ann-Marie Hermans might be online. Sheena Watt might be online.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Anasina may also be online.

The CHAIR: Anasina might be online. So we have got one from each of our parties that might come online at one point in time. If you see them come online, that is all okay.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and say the same thing you may not be protected by the same privilege that exists within this situation right now. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript after today's hearings, but ultimately that will be made public because once it is all finalised, it will be put on the committee's website.

Just for the Hansard record, can you please say your name, your title and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of. Just to make it simple for us all, I will go from my left to right, if that is okay. So, Helen, over to you first.

Helen BOLTON: Wonderful. Thank you. I am Helen Bolton, CEO of Respect Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Laura VINES: And I am Laura Vines, Manager, Prevention Policy and Influence at Respect Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time and coming along today. We look forward to hearing your evidence. I want to hand it over to you. The floor is yours. Welcome.

Helen BOLTON: Wonderful. Thank you very much. I would really like to thank the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee for the opportunity to submit to this important inquiry and appear for you today on behalf of Respect Victoria to discuss the important work that we are doing alongside the LGBTIQA+ community towards the prevention of gendered violence. I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, pay our respects to elders past and present and acknowledge the significant ongoing impacts of colonisation, including the over-representation of First Nations people as victim-survivors of domestic, sexual and family violence.

Respect Victoria also acknowledges the significant impact of family and sexual violence and all forms of violence on individuals, families and communities, including the violence that LGBTIQA+ communities experience and the strength, trauma and the resilience that they face. For children, young people, and all adults who have experienced and are still experiencing this violence, we acknowledge those whose lives were taken from them and the trauma of their friends, families, and communities.

We all know that addressing gendered violence is a bipartisan issue. Respect Victoria was established through a shared commitment to preventing violence before it occurs and building a safer, more respectful Victoria for everyone. As Victoria's dedicated agency for the primary prevention of family violence and gendered violence, we are alarmed and disheartened by the ongoing and intensifying violence against the LGBTIQ+ communities in Victoria, Australia and internationally. We note the rising tide of coordinated and targeted anti-LGBTIQ+ hate and violence, including a number of violent attacks against gay and bi men through online dating apps. These are not isolated, episodic or fringe events. Rather, they reflect a proliferation of rigid and harmful gender norms amplified by anti-LGBTIQ+ online influencers and hate groups.

Violence against women and violence against LGBTIQ+ people and communities is deeply interconnected, with overlapping drivers. Both forms of violence are rooted in the same harmful beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Respect Victoria's submission to this inquiry highlights the shared and overlapping drivers of violence against LGBTIQ+ people and violence against women and the critical role of primary prevention in stopping violence before it starts by addressing and shifting the cultural and systemic conditions that allow this violence to occur. The evidence underpinning Australia's *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* demonstrates that rigid gendered norms that privilege heterosexuality and position LGBTIQ+ identities as abnormal enable the social conditions where violence towards women and LGBTIQ+ people is minimised, normalised and condoned. We particularly call the committee's attention to the disproportionate impact on trans women, trans fem, trans masc and gender-diverse people, who face the compounding force of transphobia and misogyny. Transmisogyny is an additional and distinct driver of violence experienced by this community and must be explicitly named and addressed in prevention efforts. Addressing violence towards trans communities will have a measurable impact on decreasing domestic, family and sexual violence and make us safer and more respectful communities in Victoria.

Primary prevention is the key to stop violence and change attitudes and harmful social norms before they start. By targeting the harmful attitudes and beliefs that enable violence to occur, prevention is the essential pathway towards a Victoria where people of all genders and sexualities are safe, respected and free from discrimination and violence. If we do not invest in genuine co-design prevention, we will continue to see an increase in social harms. This should be an issue of importance to all Victorians. Preventing all forms of gendered violence is fundamental to community safety, reducing crime and building a Victorian community where all people feel safe, equal and respected. The social and economic benefits to our community are compelling.

We are seeing an increase in misogyny, anti-feminism, homophobia and transphobia that is particularly amplified in online spaces. Online influencers are increasingly using social media algorithms and recruitment strategies that appeal to the insecurities of young boys and men and that present hateful ideas as advice and entertainment. This content encourages harmful masculine norms and behaviours that condone and encourage violence against women, LGBTIQ+ people and people of other cultures. The Man Box 2024, as you would have just heard, a nationally representative survey of Australian men conducted by the Men's Project at Jesuit Social Services in partnership with Respect Victoria, found that one-quarter of young men in Australia agreed that it is not okay for straight men to be friends with gay men or gender-diverse people and 39 per cent agreed that a transgender man is not a real man. These statistics are deeply concerning, because the study found that men who most strongly agreed with these Man Box rules were 17 times more likely to express violence-supportive attitudes and to self-report having used physical, sexual and verbal violence. Similarly, JSS did an Adolescent Man Box research project and found that boys who most strongly hold these rigid views are more likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes and to use violence.

What this research shows is the opportunity for education and community mobilisation, such as we are implementing in Ballarat through the community prevention saturation model, Respect Ballarat. An example of our prevention work in Respect Ballarat is an initiative called Respectful Queer Relationships, being led by Drummond Street Services, QHub Ballarat, Ballarat Community Health and Women's Health Grampians. This project aims to address drivers of gender-based violence by increasing queer young people's knowledge of healthy relationships and their capacity to recognise and respond to gendered violence. Without safe and supportive environments, queer young people are left vulnerable to misinformation, often incurring online abuse and exposure to harmful pornography. This program includes the co-design of queer-specific, respectful relationships and sexual health workshops. It uses creative, peer-led approaches to explore safe, respectful, equitable relationships. This is just one example of prevention with the LGBTIQ+ community.

Additionally, in the co-design phase of Respect Ballarat, we employed community connectors to engage broadly throughout Ballarat to meet with communities and talk about gendered violence and how it was showing up in Ballarat. One connector focus area was with the LGBTIQ+ community. This was foundational, engaging with the community members and taking their experience into service co-design. Victoria has a strong history of nation-leading family violence reform, and the Victorian government has taken welcome actions to address violence against the LGBTIQ+ communities. Prevention efforts seek to engage individuals and communities while also addressing systems, structures and social norms that create and reinforce harmful gender stereotypes. This is critical to addressing the drivers of all forms of violence. We acknowledge the recently announced program to prevent family and gender-based violence, as well as work underway by Our Watch and Rainbow Health Australia to develop the forthcoming national framework for the prevention of violence against LGBTIQ+ people. We note the significant expertise and experience of LGBTIQ+ community-led organisations in delivering inclusive and effective prevention initiatives. Their involvement and leadership are critical to ensuring impact.

Another important initiative Respect Victoria implemented this year is Love You Queerly, a collaboration between Zoe Belle Gender Collective and Respect Victoria. Trans and gender diverse people have the right to enjoy safe and respectful relationships and live free from discrimination and violence. Transphobia, transmisogyny and harmful beliefs about gender can lead to hate crimes and other forms of violence, and they often go unchallenged and can be reinforced in the media and upheld by systems and policies. The project Love You Queerly aims to share positive messaging that celebrates connection and collective care, highlighting that hope, love and community safety and allyship are the pathway to change. We have seen unprecedented engagement with Love You Queerly, particularly the Affirming Family series and resources celebrating the LGBTIQ+ community. They are needed more than ever. The feedback that we have received from the community and from individuals about having a restorative sense of pride and inclusion is truly transformative. This is prevention. One of my colleagues wrote:

One of the most important things that we have learned at Respect Victoria is that prevention cannot be done to communities, it has to be done with communities. Communities know their own strengths, their own challenges, and importantly, what hope and safety look like in their own lives. Our role is to listen first, partner genuinely and create the conditions for their voices to be heard.

This philosophy underpins our partnership with Zoe Belle and Love You Queerly. The campaign was not designed around statistics or institutional messaging. It was built around something much more human: messages of love, affirmation and solidarity collected from Victorians at Midsumma carnival that have then been shared back through the voices of trans and gender-diverse community members themselves. At a time when trans and gender-diverse communities continue to experience discrimination, hostility and heightened public scrutiny we made a conscious decision not to contribute more to the debate. Instead we wanted to contribute something that many people had told us that they needed: visible support, belonging and hope. The campaign positions love, community safety and allyship as a pathway to that change. That approach reflects an important principle for Respect Victoria: violence prevention is not only about challenging harmful behaviours, it is also about strengthening the protective factors that allow people and communities to thrive. Belonging, connection, dignity and inclusion are all protective factors. When people feel seen, respected and valued, communities become stronger and safer for everyone.

Partnerships with organisations like Zoe Belle and Rainbow Health are essential because they bring lived expertise that government agencies simply cannot replicate. Community organisations understand the nuances of language, culture, trust and experience in ways that only communities themselves can state. Our role is not to replace those voices; our role is to invest in them, amplify them and help ensure they reach broader Victorian audiences. Importantly, Love You Queerly demonstrates what respectful partnerships look like. Respect Victoria brought to the campaign capability, communications expertise and government reach. Zoe Belle brought lived experience, community leadership and cultural authority. Together we created something neither organisation could have achieved alone. One of the most powerful aspects of this work is that it reminds us that prevention is not always about telling people what not to do. Sometimes it is about showing people what is possible – showing that there is an overwhelming kindness in our community, showing that allyship can be active and visible, showing trans and gender-diverse Victorians that they are valued, respected and that they belong. That is how we begin to shift culture over time. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. I will start off and then we will go through the rest of the committee members. Obviously one of the large impetuses of this inquiry was to do with a series of attacks that

have been made on various people in the LGBTIQA+ community through dating apps and the violence that came as a result of that fear and stigma – all those horrible things that people have suffered because of those sorts of incidents. Some of those incidents have occurred from people outside the community, some within the community, for various different reasons. What role do you think Respect Victoria has in helping educate those – for example, a gay person being critical of a trans person and setting up those sorts of interactions with the intent of harm? What role do you think Respect Victoria has in helping prevent or helping those to recover from those sort of instances? They are just awful incidents.

Helen BOLTON: Yes, they are awful. Unfortunately, we do see that in the communities that we work in more broadly and within the community. It is not a homogenous community, as much as we would love it to be.

The CHAIR: That is the hard part, isn't it?

Helen BOLTON: Yes. Our message is about respect, equality and safety for everyone. So the more that we can bring that message of primary prevention to change the social norms, community attitudes and behaviours and individual attitudes and behaviours, the safer society will be. People will understand and be more respectful and open to different ways of thinking and belonging and inclusion. It is incredibly important – that underpins the drivers of violence and of gendered, family and sexual violence that we see – to challenge those harmful behaviours and attitudes to demonstrate different ways of behaving and thinking.

The CHAIR: I was going to ask too – we have had Grindr in here, and they have been talking about both their own actions and broader actions across dating apps and websites: what obligation do you think those organisations have on the users that engage on those platforms to the safety of their users?

Helen BOLTON: I mean, there need to be some guardrails in place, and probably one of the strongest ones I would say is around identification. I think part of the issue is that people can remain anonymous on those apps.

The CHAIR: We keep hearing from a lot of members of the community that anonymity is an important part of their exploration into their sexuality and that if they were not able to be anonymous it might limit their ability to engage in that space. It is a really hard line to draw about a company like Grindr: at what point is someone anonymous or not anonymous? I am interested to hear your thoughts, because I find it fascinating – I am probably weird. But I do not know where that line is.

Helen BOLTON: I think there are many places for people to explore their sexuality, and for me it crosses a line when it becomes harmful behaviour; you lose that entitlement to be anonymous. I think it is black and white, and yes, we need to have in place sanctions or people to lose that ability to remain anonymous when they are causing harm and crimes. A platform can have an interface at the opening that has a sense of anonymity, but there should be a way to trace behind the scenes who that person is.

The CHAIR: We heard from Victoria Police before, and indeed others as well, that if a user is on a platform and they receive some bad treatment, whatever that might be, they have to go to the police. That is probably the best way for them to deal with it, because then the police can essentially get a search warrant to find that person's identity, as opposed to making a report through the platform, which does not trigger that higher process. What systemic changes would you like to see in order to increase those protections for people that are engaging in it aside from just going to the police? Because some people feel really afraid to do that.

Helen BOLTON: I think having accessible police support for the LGBTIQA+ community is important. There are liaison officers and there are ways that people can engage, and there is probably some work and improvement there. I do not know if my colleague Laura wants to say anything about that.

Laura VINES: Thank you, Helen. I think the part of the question I was keen to respond to is around systemic issues. I suppose from Respect Victoria's remit, our focus is really primary prevention. Of course you need, absolutely, accessible police and accessible complaint mechanisms, but we would really love to see attention and prioritisation on preventing the violence before it happens. I think there are a range of opportunities to do that through whole-of-population social change campaigns, education awareness. There is also opportunity through collaboration between the tech sector and the primary prevention sector. We have obviously seen with AI that rapid technological advancement is possible. With the will and the partnerships and

perhaps incentivisation, there is real capacity I think to develop new technological responses as well, if that is informed in strong partnership with the primary prevention sector to really look at safety by design principles or other things like that. Respect Victoria has been working in collaboration with the eSafety Commissioner recently on preventing tech-facilitated harm, and that is an area that we are increasingly interested in and continuing to work on. I think that is a space where focus and attention would be really valuable in the future.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I appreciate that, and I know that one silver bullet is not going to solve the problem; I get that. But it is just a really difficult one to manage. I appreciate your comments anyway. Mr Galea, over to you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both very much for joining us. I would just like to return to the previous question of the Chair in terms of anonymity on apps and the question of age verification. I take your point in terms of when you are looking at the offenders, yes, it probably is black and white – there is no inherent right to anonymity for them. But my question would go more to the everyday users or the victim-survivors of these attacks, or the innocent people, if we can say, many of whom, even in a modern progressive state like Victoria, may well be in family or other situations where to be open about their sexuality puts them in extreme danger. In fact we have had major reported breaches of data from companies as well known as Medibank, Optus and Qantas. Is there a justification for some people to perhaps fear putting that information on to a third-party app that is probably based overseas? How do you balance the two needs in your mind?

Helen BOLTON: It is possibly beyond our remit. As Laura said, we are kind of primary prevention before any violence occurs. But we can certainly take that on notice and come back to you.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I note as well you mentioned the eSafety Commissioner. We did ask them to appear. Unfortunately, they have declined the invitation to talk to this inquiry about this issue. But indeed it is good to hear that you have got some engagement with them and that they are responding in some way in this space.

Helen BOLTON: Yes. Great. Thank you.

Michael GALEA: Yesterday we had some evidence from a practitioner in the field of hate crimes, Geoffrey Steer. I am not sure if you are familiar with it, but he outlined five different offender typologies. I am not going to go into each one of them, but one of them was intrafamilial. Given Respect Victoria's expertise in the field of family violence, I would like to ask you about this. His contention was that where hate crimes occur in a domestic violence setting – so within the family, perhaps because of an intolerance towards a family member's gender, sexuality or affirmed gender, whatever the case may be – that is then dealt with typically through a family violence response, which is indeed appropriate. But in that process, the role of that also being a hate crime is ignored. Do you have any perspective on that and how we balance the two when it is in a very tricky situation within a family?

Helen BOLTON: I think it is good to have the specialist services funded that we do, such as QHub. They are certainly central in Geelong and in Ballarat, where we have some connection to supporting families where there might be kind of intrafamilial violence. I think that intersection between hate crimes and gender-based violence is one that we really need to think deeply about, and it is an emerging field that we are starting to kind of really consider: at what point is gender-based violence and a hate crime overlapping? So yes, it is an area for greater understanding. I do not know if Laura has anything further.

Laura VINES: I think from our perspective, if we are really focusing on addressing the drivers of the violence – our submission points to many of the drivers that lead to harmful gender stereotypes, harmful social norms that normalise or endorse hatred or discrimination against particular groups and can lead to violence – I think from a primary prevention perspective, the evidence is quite clear on those drivers of violence. If we focused on those, we would be having a really measurable impact on all forms of gendered violence and hate crimes as a component of that.

Michael GALEA: Indeed. And I would assume that you would agree with the assertion that homophobia and transphobia are often very closely linked with misogyny?

Helen BOLTON: Absolutely.

Michael GALEA: You have spoken about some of the very good campaigns, such as with the Zoe Belle Gender Collective, that you have undertaken and the quite exciting transformation, as I think you described it, that programs like that can have. As specialists in prevention, I can completely see how this work is so important. We know that this is not an issue that ends at the borders of this state or this nation. What can state and federal governments realistically do to combat that or to address the other side of the coin when it comes to prevention and the online influences of hate that are coming into our country?

Laura VINES: I think you are correct. Obviously, there are no state boundaries when it comes to online content, and that is a real challenge for the primary prevention movement. As Respect Victoria, one of our legislative roles is to report every three years to the Parliament on the progress of Victoria's prevention efforts. Our last report was published in December last year and really looked at the rise of online misogyny and the increasing proliferation of tech-facilitated violence as an emerging challenge for the primary prevention sector and something that warrants significant increased investment and attention. So there is certainly a cross-jurisdictional approach that is required, and we have a number of recommendations that point to that.

But we would also say there is a lot that Victoria and the states can do, including investing in prevention infrastructure organisations, such as Respect Victoria and a number of the others that Helen has mentioned, and investing in social change campaigns, such as the What Kind of Man Do You Want to Be? campaign that Respect Victoria is running at the moment, which is an online campaign that seeks to share real stories of real Victorian men about the social pressures that they face around misogyny, homophobia and transphobia – how they navigate those and how they resist those harmful social pressures to have safer, healthier lives. That is a Victorian campaign that is online. You do not have to be in Victoria to view it. I think over 3 million Victorians have had access to that, and the video content has been viewed over 22 million times. That is something that is really powerful in that online space – about seeking to reach people where they are at and challenge some of the algorithms that do exist that are offering hateful content to the Victorian public.

Michael GALEA: Not just ceding that space but actually diving in, leaning into it.

Laura VINES: Absolutely, seeking to provide something different to challenge those attitudes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Over to you, Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, and thank you for appearing before us and participating in this inquiry process. In this inquiry it has been well documented where some of this hate ends – things like tech-facilitated attacks, threats and some of the violence that has been perpetrated against LGBTQA+ community members – but we have also, importantly, been looking at and examining where some of the hate begins, some of the factors that feed it and drive it on a pathway towards potential acts of violence. We heard yesterday, for example, about misogyny acting as a gateway to radicalisation into the type of violent extremism or hate that precipitates some of the publicly reported attacks that LGBTQA+ people have experienced. Can you tell us a bit more specifically about ideas like the manosphere and the relationship that that has with, say, findings that you have made in your work?

Laura VINES: Yes, absolutely. I can start, and Helen might add to it. Australia's national framework for the prevention of violence against women sets out four primary drivers of that form of gendered violence, many of which overlap and are shared with violence perpetrated against LGBTQA+ communities. We also have the Pride in Prevention framework in Victoria, which really articulates those specific drivers of violence for the LGBTQA+ community. A lot of those pertain to attitudes and social norms that reinforce homophobia, biphobia, rigid gender norms and masculine peer cultures that emphasise aggression, dominance and violence. The detail of that is outlined in our submission.

I think one of the challenges with the manosphere, as we have also outlined in our submission, is it is a pipeline for young men and boys into those attitudes. Often it might operate initially with seemingly humorous memes or less explicit content around fitness or business or advancement that appeals to young men and boys. Then it quite rapidly can increase to more explicitly homophobic or hateful behaviour and can contribute to that radicalisation, as you have seen. I think we have referred in our submission to some studies that have been undertaken that look at just how quickly that escalation can occur. For example, people have set up dummy social media accounts where there is very little information given aside from the gender of the person. If it is a

boy or a man, the pace with which this manosphere content is served to them, regardless of their interactions and preferences, is incredibly quick. I think in some of the studies it can be as quick as 2 minutes. We have also got a research report that Respect Victoria has released called *Your Image*, which explores some of these issues and the impact that it has on young boys being fed this content, often against their wishes. The guilt and shame that that can create really highlights that opportunity for primary prevention and education to show a pathway out of these sorts of attitudes and to offer that to young men and boys today.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That pipeline that you are describing I would like to examine a bit more, even in a sort of case study sense – I am not sure. Can you step us through what radicalisation into something like anti-LGBTIQA+ hate might look like when it is entered into initially from, say, a place of misogyny?

Laura VINES: Yes, certainly. We would be happy to provide some more detailed information on notice after the fact. But I guess at this stage it is really that idea of slowly escalating content. As I said, it might be initially memes that seem humorous, have some sexist jokes, so a misogynistic element might be coming in, but it might be something that, sadly, in our culture appears innocuous to some people. Often it can begin in that way, and then the explicitly hateful content can escalate. I guess the challenge with this content is, as Helen said, it can appeal to insecurities that young people have, and it can be slow building in a way that then that behaviour and those attitudes become normalised and become accepted. That is where I think you can reach that point of misogyny quite quickly.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: You touched on peer culture dynamics. Something that has been in the submissions but not so much in the hearings is the world of sport and where that is a space that people are interacting and existing in their day to day. Where does sport fit into some of these dynamics, particularly things like peer culture, say, if you are in a team setting?

Helen BOLTON: Certainly sports clubs play a key role within community settings where attitudes and cultures of respect can either grow or dissipate. They are an incredibly important setting, as are workplaces, education facilities, early years, a whole range of settings. With sport, we are seeing a lot more growth around programs of respect on and off the field, where sporting leaders recognise the role and responsibility that they have to set the standards and to embed respectful relationships, respectful conduct, inclusive and embracing conduct, within their clubs. More and more clubs are standing up and taking a lead in preventing harmful attitudes and behaviours and creating respectful social norms.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Are there particular areas of the sporting community where there is still clearly a long way to go? I think about sports like the AFL, for example. How are we going, would you say, in terms of progress in embedding healthier views in terms of masculinity but also openness and inclusion of the breadth of the community as it actually exists which is not heteronormative? There are so many different ways that we are so wonderful and diverse. How is it progressing, in your view?

Helen BOLTON: I think the issue that we face is that prevention is not funded at scale. We know to truly address and prevent gender-based violence over the next 10 years or so we need more investment into communities and into initiatives that we know work. Currently, there are many millions that go into the response end as appropriate, and we need a well-funded continuum of support services from that crisis through to recovery. In terms of prevention and early intervention, we have such a small amount of funding going in there. While there are a number of sporting clubs that are take initiatives and apply for grants, we know that grants are short-term pilot projects – 12 months, two years – and then funding can be hard to attract. So we actually need longer term sustained funding across a range of settings, including sporting clubs, so that we can make significant inroads into that cultural change that we want to see over time.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I –

The CHAIR: We have got people online as well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Oh, you do, I am so sorry. Go to them in that case.

The CHAIR: I have just learned they have come online. All good. We have got some members online too. Have we got Anasina or Ann-Marie? Yes. They are both there.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Go to Anasina first. I am happy to go next because it is a bit noisy for me.

The CHAIR: Okay. Anasina, straight over to you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you both. Good to see you, Helen. Thank you for your presentation. Can I just pick up: I found it really interesting in your submission around the role of algorithms and how research is showing that YouTube and TikTok are actively pushing misogynistic manosphere and violent content. A lot of what we have been hearing over the past two days is about young men that are going online to look for a sense of belonging, a sense of community and a way to express what is going on. Obviously it is a period of vulnerability as well. Can you just speak to us on what we can do as a committee and recommendations that we can offer to the government in terms of what we can tackle from a primary prevention perspective?

Helen BOLTON: Thank you, Anasina. Lovely to see you, and I appreciate your question. Thank you. I am not sure if Laura can answer that one meaningfully. Otherwise we might take it on notice.

Laura VINES: Thank you for the question. I think it is a really important one, because sometimes there is an assumption that algorithms are neutral or are driven only by your own individual behaviour. But as we have seen from the research and as noted in our submission, a lot of algorithms are actively designed, and they are designed to often prioritise divisive content – content that will get a response, which is often more likely to be divisive, discriminatory, hateful content. There is certainly opportunity to address that actively through, as I mentioned before, partnerships between the primary prevention sector and the technology sector to design and deliver specific primary prevention programs that challenge that algorithm or redirect that algorithm. There are also different things being explored around safety by design principles or guardrails or requirements out there. I think one of the key things really is to emphasise for technology platforms and social media companies to move beyond a mere compliance approach, but to actually take responsibility for proactive action to safeguard the safety of their users, and to actually recognise the responsibility they have to shape the online environments that they are responsible for.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Can I just ask a question about addressing isolation of young men? From your research and work in community and evidence, is there a relationship between people not engaging in public group programs or institutions and then being isolated and fed into this information online and driving these sorts of behaviours and rigid attitudes which may lead to violence?

Laura VINES: I think there is certainly a lot of research. We are happy to provide some details offline. I am aware of some research, for example, by the eSafety Commissioner that looks at online experiences of young men in Australia today. There are a range of different resources. I suppose the key really is if we look at the established drivers of gendered violence, rigid stereotypes of masculinity is one of the key ones there. As we have heard about the Man Box study, some of that pertains to always appearing tough – not showing fear, not asking for help. A lot of those social norms in effect isolate people and make it harder to form genuine connection and harder to seek help. I think primary prevention activity that looks at transforming some of those gender norms is incredibly helpful for people of all genders in eradicating violence but also allowing people to live more connected, healthy lives.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Chair, do I have time for one very quick question?

The CHAIR: Because it is Thursday arvo, Anasina, and because I like you, of course you can have it. Thirty seconds: it is all yours.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair. I just wanted to quickly finish my point. So does this radicalisation, from what you understand and know, particularly happen in private settings, like perhaps people who have disengaged from their peers in public spaces?

Helen BOLTON: I think, Anasina, it is probably more prevalent in private spaces now that we have such access to social media and the internet and those sorts of environments. I think COVID had an impact on young people's socialisation and participation in community settings. I think that is part of it. What else?

Laura VINES: I think you are right, Helen. I think it is certainly part of it. But like the question before about, for example, sports settings, I think social norms and masculine peer groups are certainly settings where people are coming together and reinforcing those harmful norms or radicalising each other as well. I would say certainly the online environment is cause for attention and concern, but I do not think it is the only area we see

these issues, and it really points to the importance of that whole-of-population, whole-of-community approach to addressing and preventing the underlying drivers of violence.

Helen BOLTON: I know in our kind of man campaign one of the young men reflected on his participation in the online gaming community and just the misogyny and discrimination towards particularly women players. Yes, I think it is a whole different environment really, that online world, that we really need to get across. It is another kind of setting of prevention that we are entering into. It is very important that it is considered in a way that is well resourced and understood, and there are the obligations of those platforms to have the guardrails in place.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you so much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: That is okay. Mrs Hermans, over to you. Lucky last.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thanks. Thank you so much for what you have been sharing and the manner in which you have shared it. I wrote some notes while you were speaking as best as I could, given I am having some technical issues here. You talked about not doing things to community but doing them with community. You talked about the affirming families program that you have got running and the opting in and the effects of opting in. I can see from what you are saying that there is a lot more for us to do in the space of men and boys. I found these last two days very, very difficult because I have had to look up a lot of terminology and I find it difficult to find the words I need to express the things and questions that I want to ask without being labelled or boxed in or made to feel that I am prejudiced or that others have a prejudice against me. I am wondering: in terms of the empowerment of the everyday person in the community that is not largely exposed to relationships within the transgender community, there seems to be a divide in the terminologies and the communication and the methods of communication. It is so easy, I think, to be considered to be offending or speaking in hate when there is no hate. What suggestions do you have for doing this with community instead of to community? What thoughts and processes have you been brainstorming so that it is an opt in and not a sense of people feeling violated in their own lives with their own beliefs and in their own families?

Helen BOLTON: Thank you for your question. I appreciate your honesty and also vulnerability in how you have phrased that to all of us and appreciate your participation in the last few days in this very important inquiry. Our experience through Respect Ballarat in particular, where it is a community-led mobilisation project, is we as a statutory authority are there as kind of the infrastructure, the backbone to support what they need. So part of going in there was building up trust for the first few years: meeting with community, meeting with organisations and local government leaders, asking them what they are experiencing and how they are seeing violence in their community. It is very different than any other community – not that the violence is different, but it is being led by a community, and we need to tailor the response for their community. They had had the murders of three women, so Samantha Murphy, Hannah Maguire and Rebecca Young. It was a community that was grieving. Having worked with them for the last two years, we now have a community that is proud of the leadership that they are taking, the hope that they see and know for prevention being possible. They have been empowered to lead it themselves, whether they are laypeople and community members or whether they are professional leaders. We are listening to them about how they describe violence, in their words and their experiences – not putting our kind of theoretical constructs on them but actually empowering them to speak and to find solutions. It is important to walk alongside community to respect that they have the solutions and to empower them and resource them to be able to do that.

The CHAIR: No worries. Thanks.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: In terms – sorry, is that my time up?

The CHAIR: It is, but if you want 20 seconds, Ann-Marie. We are really short.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Twenty seconds. Okay. You could take this on notice. In terms of de-escalating violence in this area, if you have thoughts on how we do that as a community – de-escalating violence, hatred violence – we would love to have you share some of that. Even if you have to take it on notice and send us something in writing, I would value reading what you have to say.

Helen BOLTON: Thank you, Ann-Marie. We will take that on notice. We appreciate the opportunity. Thank you for asking for that.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. That brings our time to a close. Thanks very much for your contribution today. You will get a proof version of the transcript, and that will obviously ultimately be going on the committee's website, so thanks very much for that.

While I have got the microphone, because I do not get this power very much, I want to thank our Secretariat too, who have done an amazing job over this inquiry and indeed all the other inquiries in the term as well. This is our last hearing for the Parliament. Thanks everyone in the Secretariat. Patrick and the team, you have done an awesome job, so well done.

Michael GALEA: Chair, if I may join in on that and acknowledge that as you are retiring at the end of the term this is also your last hearing as Chair. I very much want to acknowledge the way that you have led our committee over the past several years and thank you and acknowledge you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Michael. You did not tell me you were going to do that – you sneak.

Michael GALEA: I did not tell you I was going to do that. Of course not, you would not have let me.

The CHAIR: That brings this session to a close. Thank you very much again.

Committee adjourned.