
A statement on the role of universities in addressing gendered violence

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Sharon Claydon, Member of Parliament

As an elected representative in the Australian Parliament, I can see no more urgent priority, nor any more important test for our nation, than driving down the rates of gendered violence that plague our communities.

Gendered violence is widespread and knows no boundaries. But its continued existence is indefensible. Its cost to individuals and to society is enormous. Despite good intentions and, in some cases, significant investment, the shocking statistic that one woman is killed by her partner or former partner in Australia each and every week, remains doggedly in place.

As someone who maintains a deep engagement in gender policy, I am often asked why these rates remain so diabolically high – and what we can do to turn things around. It's clear that there's no simple answer, or we would have solved the problem long ago.

But I believe we need a survivor-centred approach that engages all sections of society. Legislators, community groups, law enforcers, educational institutions, health professionals, employers and community members all have a role to play. Of course, we need properly funded, effective and responsive primary prevention initiatives and on-the-ground programs. But we also need to change the culture – to encourage respectful relationships and challenge the underlying assumptions that perpetuate gender inequality, which is so strongly linked to gendered violence.

In both of these aspects, universities can play a pivotal role.

As thought leaders and conduits for social change, universities are uniquely placed to influence the leaders of tomorrow at a critical time in their development. As society's knowledge holders, they can also contribute to addressing gendered violence by partnering with community-based organisations on frontline program delivery. There is a real opportunity to co-design more evidence-based projects that combine the real-world experience and local intelligence of frontline community organisations with the theoretical grounding and research nous of universities.

Elements of this approach can be seen in a University of Newcastle pilot project that I committed \$1.65 million in funding towards in the 2019 election. It consisted of four complementary sub-projects to help women who have experienced domestic violence to move into higher education and change the prevailing culture in the community. The project would give women personalised support to build confidence, address challenges and navigate university life. It also included a training program to be offered to all high schools in the region, that would raise awareness about the damaging impacts of gender inequality and provide young people with the tools to challenge harmful attitudes.

The pilot was devised in consultation with key local community-based organisations, who would also play an active role in providing referral pathways for participants. Regrettably Labor wasn't able to form government and deliver funding for this important pilot, which would have leveraged the skills and experience of academics and frontline workers alike.

However, my support for these sorts of innovative initiatives remains resolute.

I look forward to working with the University of Newcastle and everyone who has a role to play in stopping violence against women. This national scourge remains unfinished business for Australia - no more excuses, we have to do better.