



## Safeguarding Women in Politics:

Submission to the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces

## Contents

Acknowledgement of Country.....	3
Researchers .....	3
Special Advisors for Women and Politics Statement.....	4
Statement of the CEO.....	5
Executive Summary .....	6
Recommendations.....	10
About GEN VIC.....	13
About our submission.....	14
Research methodology.....	14
Special Advisors on Women and Politics .....	14
Enough is Enough: Safeguarding Women in Politics .....	14
Enhancing online safety for women .....	16
The need for an intersectional lens .....	17
Structure of parliament that creates gender inequity.....	17
Types of gendered violence experience in the Australian Parliamentary Workplace .....	18
Physical violence and threats of physical violence .....	18
Psychological violence & online abuse of women in politics.....	20
Sexual violence and Harassment .....	21
Economic Violence.....	22
Semiotic violence.....	22
Other settings of Gendered Violence towards MP's .....	24
Gendered Violence within Political Parties.....	24
The Press Gallery as a source of violence towards women MPs .....	24
Special Measures to address Gendered Violence in Parliament .....	25
A Gender Safety Audit of Parliament House .....	25
Codes of Conduct within Parliament and Political Parties.....	25
Gender Equality Audits of Parliamentary Workplaces .....	28
National Gender Equality Strategy and Legislation .....	28
Implement Respect @ Work .....	29
Moderation and Practice guides for online gendered violence .....	30
International Reporting and accountability.....	30
Conclusion .....	31
Bibliography.....	32

## Acknowledgement of Country

Gender Equity Victoria acknowledges the traditional custodians of land and the waterways across our State and the Nation and we pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

We recognise the suffering and injustice that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced as a result of colonisation and generations of discrimination and marginalisation. We express shame and horror at the actions and atrocities that have been perpetrated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We also bear witness to the gendered dimensions of dispossession – acts of sexual violence, familial displacement and the stealing of children and land – which were designed to undermine First Nations relationships and values of care and the nurturing of each other and country.

We particularly acknowledge that the removal of children has and continues to devastate individuals, families and entire communities and that the gendered intention of those policies has been to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and separate them from their mothers. We recognise this as a policy of genocide.

We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a sovereign people who have never ceded their sovereignty of this land.

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's human right to self-determination.

We commit to working in solidarity and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – to truth-telling, treaty and justice – and to bringing the Uluru Statement of the Heart to the heart of all that we do.

## Researchers

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We would like to acknowledge and thank  
The Victorian Government for their support.



## Special Advisors for Women and Politics Statement

As former Federal MPs and women who have lived experience as Members of the Australian Parliament, we are pleased to endorse Gender Equity Victoria's submission to the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces led by Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins.

Having stood for election, sat in the Chamber and walked the corridors of power we have a deep understanding of the culture of the Australian Parliament and political workplaces. We understand how challenging the environment and certain behaviours can be.

Though our experiences in parliament were very different and at different times, we share an understanding of the difficulties women MPs and staff face when confronted by a workplace culture where men dominate positions of power and enable a toxic workplace which is unsafe for women. While politics is by necessity a workplace for robust debate, it is not acceptable for gendered violence, sexual innuendo and harassment, bullying, predatory behaviour or unchecked poor attitudes and bad behaviours to be allowed to run rampant. Having witnessed that behaviour across all political parties and its well past time that it stopped.

We are committed to developing practical strategies to end unequal, unsafe and harmful cultures within the Australian Parliament and more generally political life.

As advisors to Gender Equity Victoria, we call for a gender equal transformation of Australian politics – beginning with reforming Australian Parliament into an exemplary, gender equal workplace – that prioritises the protection of women's safety, the occupational health of its employees and respect to all people.

Trish Crossin  
Former Senator,  
Australian Parliament  
Special Advisor, GENVIC



Julia Banks  
Former Member of House of Representatives  
Australian Parliament  
Special Advisor, GENVIC



## Statement of the CEO

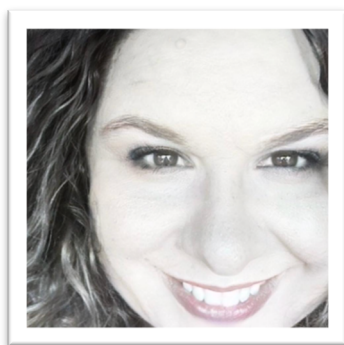
When MP's come together across the political divide to make change in the interests of women, the outcomes can transform women's lives. So it was when Labor, Coalition and Democrat women Senators (Claire Moore, Judith Troeth, Fiona Nash and Lyn Allison respectively) united to overturn a ban on the abortion drug, RU486 in 2006, making safe, pharmaceutical reproductive choice available to all Australian women.

GENVIC knows that if gender equal change within Australian Parliaments is to take place it will need broad, diverse voices calling for reform. The nature of politics has for too long enabled the project of ending the harm of gender inequity to be partisan. Effective strategies for creating gender equality and preventing gendered violence must be elevated beyond short-term party-political agendas. The health and safety of Australian women and our economy depends on it.

We thank Trish Crossin and Julia Banks for their courage and leadership – both during their days as Members of Parliament and in taking on the role of advising us on the strategies needed to create more gender equal parliaments.

Safeguarding women in politics matters because the laws we need to end gendered economic injustice, unequal health outcomes and gendered violence depend on safe and equal parliaments. This submission is only one part of GENVIC's commitment to keeping all women who seek election safe from harm.

Tanja Kovac  
CEO  
Gender Equity Victoria



“It is vital that Parliamentary practices, procedures and spaces are audited to assess their fitness to enable the full, safe and equal participation of women. If parliaments continue to ignore the ways in which they entrench gender inequality by their own conduct and rules, we will continue to see cultural problems leading to sexual and gendered violence against women political leaders and up and coming women staffers with political ambition”

- Tanja Kovac  
CEO GENVIC

## Executive Summary

Gender Equity Victoria (GEN VIC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces led by Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins.

GEN VIC understands violence against women as a violation of human rights, a consequence of structural gender inequality and centuries of poor attitudes and bad behaviours towards women. Ending gendered violence requires long term, dedicated intergenerational policy commitment and activity that only democratic parliaments, legislation and policy making can deliver.

Which is why it is so devastating for organisations and individuals committed to gender equity like our members to see Parliament revealed not as a place for ending violence against women but a site of significant abuse, harassment and victimisation. At a critical time for progress for gender equity in Australia – on the eve of the Second National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and while women’s economic security, mental health and wellbeing takes a hit from the COVID19 pandemic - it is shameful to have learned from so many women with lived experience in Federal Parliament - Brittany Higgins, Julia Banks, Kate Ellis and all of the speakers on Annabel Crabb’s acclaimed television series *Ms Represented* – about the culture of violence and discrimination.

How can any woman have confidence in public policy making and legislation to keep them safe from harm while the very institution designed to do that is dangerous and unsafe? An unsafe parliament for women is counter-productive to advancing gender equity in Australia.

This is why GENVIC prioritises the safeguarding of women in politics. A diverse and gender equal Parliament is critical for a representative democracy in Australia. Without a safe and equal Parliament we cannot expect safe and equal laws or gender equal budgetary investment.

The obligation to ensure women can participate equally, safely and freely in political institutions and activities is enshrined in several international instruments including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; and the Beijing Platform for Action and Sustainable Development Goals. The Committee on the Standards of Public Life (2017) states that “the increasing prevalence of intimidation of parliamentary candidates and others in public life, should concern everyone who cares about our democracy.”

Long before the *March4Justice*, GEN VIC recognised gendered violence towards women MPs and their staff as a threat to gender equal policy making. We brought together experts with lived experience working in Parliament House to consider strategies to address violence. Former Members of Parliament Julia Banks and Trish Crossin joined our organisation as Special Advisors and we began researching the prevalence of the problem.

Our research discovered, sadly, that violence and harassment of women in parliament and their staff is commonplace in Australia and across the world. A study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, interviewing 55 women politicians across 33 countries, found troubling levels of gendered violence. 81.8 per cent of parliamentarians experienced psychological abuse; 32 per cent had witnessed acts of sexual violence; 25.5 per cent had experienced physical violence; and 32 per cent had experienced economic violence.

In Australia, there are no statistics kept on incidents of violence against women MP's at a state or national level. This is because there has never been a national investigation into the experience of violence towards MP's before. In Commonwealth countries, Australia's lack of data makes it an outlier. The United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada have all conducted surveys of politicians to investigate personal safety within their parliaments and while running for election.

Instead, to understand the extent of the Australian problem to date, we have had to rely on anecdotes and stories from women MP's with lived experience. Thanks to the #MeToo movement, public disclosures by victim-survivors have become normalised, with a resultant increase in Australian women MP's sharing their own stories.

These voices matter.

**“I’ve had placards with my face, defaced...drawn all over...making me look like a pig and a witch....horrible slogans like “baby killer” and “It’s open season on politicians” with an image implying I was fair game to be shot”**

- Ged Kearney  
Member for Cooper



**“Last night after Senate estimates, which is like 10 o'clock at night, I had to ring my partner in Melbourne to say, ‘can you walk me to my office, stay on the phone’, because it’s so scary here at night, there’s no one around,”**

- Lidia Thorpe  
Senator for Victoria



If women MP's are courageous enough to share their stories, we need to listen.



The abuse women receive within parliamentary workplaces starts off from the very beginning of their involvement in the political process, acting as a deterrent to running for election and having negative implications for Australian democracy.

Within the culture of political parties themselves, dangerous and unsafe behaviours have been allowed to flourish without adequate Codes of Conduct, spilling into Federal Workplaces with little concern for occupational health and safety. Cultures of toxic verbal abuse, belittling of people, inter-factional physical and mental “warfare” become so normalised during pre-selections and other intra-party contests that they risk extending dangerous and unsafe cultures into one of our most important Australian workplaces. A workplace that should be exemplary.

While changing the cultures and behaviours of political parties is not within the realm of influence of this review, it is an important and critical factor for considering how best to respond to creating a safe, respectful and healthy workplace within Australian Parliament. We would argue that political cultures require MORE occupational health and safety oversight, because of the adversarial, hyper-masculinist and gender unequal competitiveness that underpins political cultures within political parties.

The risk of violence and abuse of women continues throughout a woman’s political career and can occur during early years of political engagement and training, through pre-selection, on the campaign trail as well as in Parliament – both in the public spaces of the House of Representatives and the Senate Chambers and committee rooms – but also behind closed doors in Parliamentary and electorate offices. The risk is also present online and in the press.

While this review focussed on Federal Parliament, the reality is that no level of government – local, state or federal - in Australia is immune from this problem.

At a recent GEN VIC event “Women in the Spotlight”, local government councillor Georgina Oxley disclosed the abusive content sent to her through social media threatening the physical safety of herself and her grandmother. As a result, she had to apply for intervention orders through the court against a voter.

During that same election cycle, GENVIC tracked the defacement of local councillor corflutes and posters noting the highly sexualised abuse directed to mere depictions of women candidates.



Helen Healy - Looking out for Mildura

9 Oct · 🌐

You might look at this and your first reaction is to laugh... but let’s dig a little deeper and have a think about what drives this kind of behaviour a... See mor





This review has the possibility – not just in creating safe, respectful and healthy Australian Parliamentary workplaces – but providing the opportunity to further address the dangerous toxicity in Australian political culture more generally.

As we know, it is not only parliamentarians that suffer from abuse within parliament and political parties, it is also women employed in parliamentary and electoral offices, too. Brittany Higgins' rape allegations show us that women staffers are particularly vulnerable to all forms of gendered violence, particularly at the start of their careers. An unchecked, everyday hyper masculinist toxicity and that more men than women hold powerful positions within Parliament House makes women staffers particularly vulnerable. Add to that a culture of drinking, the provision of alcohol and partying during sitting weeks to “de-stress” and it is a highly dangerous situation. Staffers are often powerless to take action when they feel unsafe, threatened or subject to abusive behaviour. Parliamentary predators, rely on the fear of losing employment, future career prospects, pre-selection possibility, gaslighting, undermining or being seen as troublemakers to ensure women remain silent about bad behaviour.

That political staff jobs are so precarious and can be terminated at any time does not help. These staff are also not confident about raising issues within political parties for a variety of reasons including the impact on their own political career and that political party's traditionally are more focused on reputation and electoral prospects than the safety of employees.

To address gendered violence within the Australian Parliament will take more than strengthened complaint systems. There is long term behavioural change required that goes to the heart of how our parliaments are formed and how the business of decision making takes place.

We will need new complaints systems of course, along with a more rigorous code of conduct, but more importantly we need gender equal parliaments with strong national legislation and policies which commit Australia to the long-term project of driving out cultures of gender inequity across society.

The March4Justice highlighted how urgent Australian women believe this kind of reform is.



*"This march is an expression of our collective voice, it is a roar: it is one of the single most defining moments for women in Australia. It's driven from a force that's bigger, much stronger and more powerful than the centre of power. It's driven from 51 per cent of the population."*

Julia Banks, Federal MP 16-19  
GENVIC Special Advisor  
Safeguarding Women in Politics Project

**G+V**  
**GENVIC**

#March4Justice #EnoughisEnough

## Recommendations

### For the Review

- All forms of gendered violence within Australian Parliamentary Workplaces should be addressed in this review – physical, psychological, sexual, economic and semiotic. The parameters of the parliamentary workplace must encompass incidents and experience of workplace sexual assault, harassment, bullying, violence and discrimination within Parliament House, as well as while running for election to Parliament and in the execution of roles as Members of Parliament and parliamentary or electoral staff. This review should extend to include an examination of the way in which incidents of online gendered violence and abuse impacts on the Parliamentary Workplace culture as well.
- Independent reviews into parliamentary workplaces should be encouraged for every state and territory to address abuse experienced by women.

### For the Australian Parliament

#### Gender Safety Audit of Parliament House

- That a Gender Safety Audit be conducted of the Commonwealth Parliament House, developed in consultation with a multi-party advisory group of MPs and staffers, to assess the safety of the building and risks of gendered violence.

#### Parliamentary Code of Conduct

- That a Code of Conduct for Members of the Australian Parliament and their Staff be developed that addresses all forms of gendered violence – including sexual assault, harassment, bullying and gender discrimination within parliamentary workplaces. That the Code of Conduct be based on a model code prepared by the Australian National University's Australian Political Studies Association and Global Institute for Women's Leadership and be in addition to any Ministerial Standards.
- That the Code of Conduct encompass rules about the appropriate use of alcohol consumption within the Parliamentary workplace, with consideration being given to making parliamentary offices "dry" environments, zero tolerance and/or limits on blood alcohol levels of Members of Parliament in Chambers and Committees and the responsible service of alcohol at onsite Parliamentary functions.
- That a Code of Conduct contain options for dispute resolution and where appropriate penalties for serious breaches including suspension from Chambers without a pair, fines and other measures.

## **Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority**

- That the Code of Conduct establish an Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to confidentially review allegations of all forms of gendered violence in the Australian Parliament. An Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority would oversee an individual complaints mechanism, dispute resolution and where appropriate penalties for breaches of Code of Conduct. The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority must be independent of the Presiding Officers of the House of Representatives and the Senate or risk being compromised by party political interference. For this reason, the Foster Review recommendation of Parliamentary Service Commissioner reporting to the Presiding Officers is unsatisfactory.
- That an Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority provide annual reports on the safety of the Commonwealth Parliament, outlining the number of incidents of sexual harassment, assault, discrimination and abuse within Parliamentary Workplaces.
- That a mandatory Parliamentary Safety Survey of all MP's be conducted by the Parliamentary Standards Authority every three years, aligning to National Election cycles, to investigate the personal safety of Members of Parliament and monitor the impact of strategies and improvements.

## **Gender Audit of Australian Parliament**

- That a Gender Equity Audit be conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission of the Australian Parliament every four years, examining its rules, procedures and practices, as well as the configuration of building, human resource management and training and development of staff.
- That the Gender Equity Audit include research into the establishment of a gender quota system in the Australian Parliament.

## **National Gender Equality Strategy, Commonwealth Gender Equality Act**

- That a National Gender Equality Strategy set out strategies and measures to address gender inequality within Australia, including in the Australian Parliament and public sector, setting goals and indicators to improve our performance on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index.
- That as part of the National Gender Equality Strategy, a Gender Equality Act be legislated creating a positive duty on Commonwealth public sector, including parliament, to promote gender equality.

## **Moderation and Practice guides for online gendered violence**

- Digital or other moderation platforms be adopted to redirect or carbon copy dangerous and threatening online material to a specialist moderation and law enforcement team focussed on keeping MP's safe from harm.

- The Australian Federal Police, Parliament House Communications and Security develop Practice Guides containing best practice on how to swiftly respond to stalking, rape and death threats through email and social media.

#### **International Reporting and accountability**

- That Commonwealth reporting to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on Australia's performance under CEDAW include reports on the occupational health and safety of Australian Parliament and public sector.
- That the Commonwealth publish an annual State of Gender Equality in Australia Report measuring progress against World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Indicators.

## About GEN VIC

Gender Equity Victoria (GEN VIC) is the independent peak body for organisations, practitioners and individuals promoting gender equity in Victoria. Our Vision is for a gender equal society where all people are free from the harm of gender inequity. We have over 50 organisational members committed to feminist principles who strive for change, along with thousands more individual members and supporters.

GEN VIC is led by a strong board of governance and two Special Advisors for women and politics, former Federal MP's Julia Banks and Trish Crossin, who lead work to address abuse against women in politics and enhance our democracy by making it gender equal.

We recognise that gender inequity harms everyone – men, women, children, non-binary and gender diverse people - but that special measures are required to particularly address the problem for all people who identify as women in our community.

Gender inequity doesn't affect everyone in the same way. To think so is privileged and dangerous. Culture, language, race, ability, gender identity, sexuality, regionality and social status change the nature, intensity and prevalence of gender inequity. A truly gender equitable transformation of our society must be intersectional and see the whole person.

## Ending the Harm of Gender Inequity

Gender inequity is the primary cause and key driver of gendered violence, especially violence against women. Poor attitudes and behaviours towards women, such as sexist jokes, language and the objectification of women, as well as the application of rigid gender roles and stereotypes at home, in the workplace and in community, creates the foundation for threats, abuse, harassment and violence.

Gender inequity leads to poor health consequences for all Victorians, but especially women and gender diverse people, who face sex and gender discrimination at work, at home and in community. Health consequences include both physical and mental health impacts of inequity.

Gender inequity also leads to a persistent gender pay and superannuation gap as well as a higher risk of poverty for women across the lifecycle, who face lifelong economic barriers as a consequence of unequal, gendered beliefs and attitudes towards paid and unpaid work and the sharing of parental responsibilities.

Gender inequity drains the wealth and productivity of women and, in turn, the wealth and productivity of the State of Victoria.

Our role is to champion, coordinate, educate and advise on strategies to end the harm of gender inequity. To do that we have unique ways of working:

- We **challenge** harmful attitudes, structures and unequal power
- We **connect, coordinate, and amplify** voices from different sectors
- We provide **leadership innovation** with new skills, experience and networks
- We **collaborate** at local, regional, state, national and global levels
- We **educate**, train and support individual change agents
- We **share** evidence and best practice informed by our members
- We **communicate** the cause of gender equity with accessible infographics and data.
- We **mobilise resources** through membership, training, consultancy, communities of practice and entrepreneurialism.

## About our submission

### Research methodology

This submission has been prepared with reference to international best practice on the growing problem of violence towards women in politics. It builds on GENVIC's expertise in online gendered cyberhate, addressing online abuse towards women in politics and proposes recommendations for a safe and gender equal parliament. It relies on the voices of women MP's with lived experience of the Australian Parliament. Our report has been developed in partnership with GEN VIC's Special Advisors for Women and Politics, who have provided practical insights into women's experiences of parliament as a workplace. We have also relied on #MeToo style public disclosures made by women MPs in Member Statements to Parliament, press interviews and published articles and books.

While we also hoped to undertake a personal safety survey as well as focus group interviews with women MP's, doing so was beyond the resources of our project at this time.

### Special Advisors on Women and Politics

In 2019, following our ground-breaking work in protecting the Online safety of women journalists, GEN VIC embarked on a new project to safeguard another group of women in power subject to gendered cyberhate – women in politics.

We appointed two Special Advisors to guide our work to enhance gender equity for women in politics. Trish Crossin former Senator of the Labor Party and Julia Banks former Liberal and Independent Member of the House of Representatives. Trish and Julia work with the GEN VIC Board and Management to advise on effective interventions to keep women in politics safe and to advocate for gender equity and have advised GEN VIC to make this submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces.

### Enough is Enough: Safeguarding Women in Politics

In January 2021, GEN VIC launched its campaign, *Enough is Enough: Safeguarding Women in Politics* calling on State and Federal Governments to jointly fund three initiatives to protect women parliamentarians and staffers.

Working with 50/50 Foundation, together with experienced former women Members of Parliament, GEN VIC's Special Advisors the Safeguarding Women in Politics Project works towards resourcing:

1 – An independent review of politicians and staffers exploring experiences of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in Parliaments.

Building on the Sexism, harassment, and violence against women in parliaments in Europe report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union Bureau of Women Parliamentarians, GEN VIC supports calls for the Sex Discrimination Commissioner to be resourced to conduct anonymous interviews with members of parliament and staffers to assess the prevalence of gendered violence within Australian Parliaments.

Following the Brittany Higgins and Christian Porter allegations, GENVIC joined calls for the Sex Discrimination Commissioner to be empowered to review incidents of gendered



violence in the Australian Parliament. We were pleased with the outcome of this advocacy and hope that it will extend to other jurisdictions

## 2 – Immediate Gender Equality Audits of all Parliaments across Australia

Parliaments must be designed to be safe spaces for all people. To ensure this, an audit of the rules, operations, spatial and geographic safety and inclusivity of all Parliaments should take place as a matter of urgency. Gender audits are essential to creating parliaments free from sexism, bullying and harassment and encouraging greater gender equality.

## 3 – Support to enhance the online safety for women in politics

Women leaders online are at higher risk of exposure to gendered cyberhate than male leaders. GEN VIC has developed industry strategies for the media to improve protections for women journalists. We now need to extend this work to ensure parliaments and political parties are equipped to support women politicians and their staffers in managed gendered cyberhate. This project will draw from GEN VIC's successful resource *Don't Read the Comments: Enhancing Online Safety for Women Working in Media* (2019), a world-leading report on the actions media organisations must take to create safe online spaces for women journalists, who likewise face elevated levels of online abuse.

To implement these projects, GEN VIC has received both government and crowd sourced funding.

GEN VIC has been funded by the Victorian Government to enhance the online safety for women in politics. This work began in July 2021 and will continue to June 2023. It will interview politicians and their staffers anonymously to understand how they would like to address the issue of online abuse and what solutions can be offered to provide better protections for women in politics. It will then provide a series of recommendations to be launched with industry partners in 2022.

GEN VIC has also crowd sourced funding for an inaugural survey of Victorian parliamentarians, their staffers, and local councillors on the abuse experienced by women in both an in person and online context. The survey will ask a series of questions to ascertain the breadth and depth of the problem within political parties, parliamentarians' roles, and online abuse. This survey is set to commence in 2022 surveying parliamentarians, their staff and councillors anonymously. This survey will be completed again in four years to measure the prevalence of violence towards women in politics over time, to assess whether abuse has decreased or increased and what supports are required to address this abuse.

“We can't just rely on politicians alone to regulate themselves and make parliaments safe. We need ordinary citizens to help us make Safeguarding Women in Parliament a reality by funding prevention and safety projects directly, which is why we have opened a crowdfunding campaign for all people who want to contribute to creating safe and equal Australian Parliaments”

- Tanja Kovac  
CEO GENVIC

## Enhancing online safety for women

Since 2018 GEN VIC has been leading work to address the online abuse of women. This started with addressing violence through an active only bystander approach, creating a community which comes around and supports women when they are abused online and calls out violence and abusive behaviour. GEN VIC released two animated videos, the first being “Together We’re Stronger” targeting those who are likely to respond to abusive comments online but do not know how to, and the second being “Your Voice Matters!” an animated video targeting young men aged between 16-24 showing them it is their responsibility to say something online when they witness harassment of women. Your voice matters video was viewed over 16,000 times. This has resulted in GEN VIC developing and delivering training for online active bystander action targeted at young people aged between 16-24.

GEN VIC also identified that journalists were particularly vulnerable to online attacks because the nature of their professions means that they often have public profiles and may be seen as ‘outspoken’ by people who prefer that women remain silent. An active online presence is a critical part of the job for many journalists, and they cannot simply disconnect from the internet to avoid harassment. This was backed by statistics of two thirds of women journalists experiencing gendered hate and violence online and multiple studies worldwide. GEN VIC then released “*Don’t Read the Comments: Enhancing online safety for women working in the media*” report in partnership with the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance researching the impact and solutions to violence against women in media. This report made several recommendations to create a safety online space for women journalists including: a whole-of-organisation approach to addressing online violence; training on implicit bias and bystander intervention; treating gender based abuse against women journalists on social media and websites as an issue of workplace health and safety; Moderation guidelines and training that explicitly address gendered and other identity-based abuse as a subset of abuse; a comprehension quiz; Requiring media organisations to provide specific support for freelance journalists.

In 2019 GEN VIC was funded again to implement the recommendations of the Don’t Read the Comments report and has been working to implement moderation guidelines for the sector, support for online journalists document for media organisations; specific media training about online abuse and implicit bias; and trialling a comprehension quiz. This package of resources was launched in March 2021 with partners Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance and Australian Community Managers.

GEN VIC then identified there were two other critical cohorts of women who experience significant levels of abuse. These were women in sport and women in politics. In relation to women in politics, GEN VIC has been working with our Special Advisors for Women in Politics to develop a project plan for addressing the online abuse of women, modelled on *Don’t Read the Comments*, to set out a number of recommendations for addressing online abuse. GEN VIC has recently been funded to complete this work by the Victorian Government and a report will be launched in 2022.

## The need for an intersectional lens

Across the literature both quantitative and anecdotal evidence suggests that women with intersecting attributes of difference and disadvantage bear the brunt of sexual harassment and misogyny in parliaments across the world (Committee on the Standards of Public Life, 2017). For example, Black and Asian women, despite representing only 11% of all female MPs in Westminster, received 35% more abuse tweets than white female MPs (Committee on the Standards of Public Life, 2017). In a report released by GENVIC member EMILY's List Australia, [\*A Truly Representative Democracy: Increasing the representation of Indigenous and Culturally Diverse Women in Australian Politics\*](#), Stephanie Milione observed that at the most recent 2019 federal election, racist smear campaigns were particularly directed at culturally diverse women, with flyers distributed in Western Australia that sought to smear Anne Aly MP using her Egyptian heritage and Islamophobic vandalising of campaign signs of Shireen Morris, the ALP candidate for Deakin.

Any investigation into the safety of the Australian Parliament should aim to explicitly consider how women who are disabled, of colour, queer, First Nation or belong to any other intersectional group, uniquely experience sexual harassment and misogyny in the federal parliament.

## Structure of parliament that creates gender inequity

The underlying driver of violence against women is gender inequality and it is gender inequality that sets the necessary context for violence against women to occur (Our Watch 2015).

It is well known that representation in parliament is not gender equal. Currently women in parliament make up 38 per cent, falling far behind equal representation. This problem particularly impacts the Liberal Party whose representation is currently 21 per cent women, while Labor have currently 43 per cent women, nearing party parity.

Before the 2019 federal election, Australia was 48th in the world in terms of women's lower house representation, falling below other countries such as Rwanda, Nepal and Ecuador. Australia is now ranked 50<sup>th</sup> in the world (Inter Parliamentary Union 2021).

Gender inequality is even further visible in the ministerial cabinet, with 30 percent being occupied by women, and 70 per cent occupied by men. In countries with low representation of women in cabinet, quotas have been brought in to create greater gender parity in leadership.

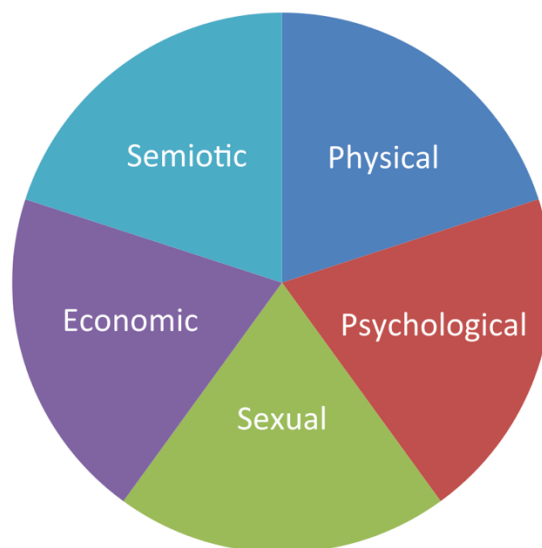
The lack of gender equal representation in Parliament contributes to gendered violence.

## Types of gendered violence experience in the Australian Parliamentary Workplace

Gendered violence towards women MP's is political violence. It's the use of force or threatened or implied use of force to achieve political ends. (Della Porta 1995). Political violence occurs when one group of people in politics uses fear of injury, harm or death to get their own way. A threat to democracy, fear of injury, harm and death is designed to silence debate and reduce opportunities for participation in political life of people with opposing views.

Gendered political violence is designed to silence women MP's, put future women candidates off from running and stifle debate. Gendered political violence takes many forms. In important research undertaken by Mona Lee Krook and Juliana Restrepo San'in, *The Cost of Doing Politics? Analyzing Violence and Harassment against Female Politicians*, they identified 5 types of violence experienced by women politicians.

**Figure 2**  
**Types of violence against women in politics**



GENVIC identifies all five types of violence operating within the Australian Parliamentary Workplace.

### Physical violence and threats of physical violence

Physical threats to the safety of women MP's in the Australian Parliament is a significant issue in Australian politics. Labor MP for Cowan, Anne Aly reported she was told she'd be *"shot dead at your local shopping centre carpark in the near future"*, Susan Templeman, Member for Macquarie disclosed she, her family and staff were subjected to regular *"threats of violence and death"* while Nicole Flint the former member for Boothby observed she had been the victim of high level of *"online abuse, trolling, victim shaming and blaming during her time in Parliament House."*

Threats of physical violence take place in other political jurisdictions too. Samantha Ratnam, Victorian Greens MP received physical threats of abuse, not only towards herself, but towards her

newborn child. One tweet read *“let’s just hope your kid doesn’t get shot in the head like the real Malala.”* In Victoria, Councillor Sarah Carter was told her *“dead body would be found in the bushes”*.

No level of politics is immune from physical threats made to women MP’s.

It is only luck that we have not had a serious physical attack on a woman MP.

Internationally, other jurisdictions have not been so lucky. The death of UK MP Jo Cox, brutally murdered by a member of the public, occurred after months of threats of violence by angry anti-immigrant and pro-Brexit voters. The UK has also seen an escalation of threats, with a man being charged with bringing a machete to a function with the intention of killing UK MP Rosie Cooper. We have also seen the assassination attempt of Gabby Giffords, a US Senator, who was shot in the head.

While in Australia we have not seen abuse escalate in this way, there have been near misses. In 2012, a man was jailed for sending explosive packages and disturbing threats to former Queensland Premier Anna Bligh and former Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Physical threats are experienced so regularly by parliamentarians now that it is sometimes seen as “part of the job” of being a woman in politics. No workplace should allow employees to be exposed to a daily risk of physical harm and injury without having strategies in place to prevent, respond and build cultures of resilience to such behaviour. There is little to no evidence of a systemic approach to addressing threats of physical violence towards women MP’s in Australian Parliaments.

A real concern of receiving violent physical threats is that the issue will not be treated seriously by the Police. This is something that GEN VIC has heard anecdotally through our research in the area of online abuse of women is that the police do not know how to handle serious threats of abuse from the public, particularly when online, or that they do not take it seriously. In Victoria, GEN VIC has been working with the Victoria Police to develop a practice guide for police officers to understand the issue of online abuse and to act appropriately. It is strongly recommended a practice guide for is developed for the Australian Federal Police and is encouraged for all states and territories.

As Brittany Higgins alleged rape within Parliament House has disclosed, Parliament House is a site of physical violence for women MP’s and staffers.

Although the new Parliament House was built to provide members of parliament, staff and the media with more room and better technology, the space was not designed with the safety of women in mind. Private offices down long, quiet corridors – which resemble a rabbit warren or maze to the un-trained eye – provide ample scope for predatory behaviour to take place away from public view. Along with a laissez-faire or cavalier attitude to accessing parliamentary offices after hours, the intensity of Parliamentary sitting weeks and the isolation of Canberra itself, Parliament House is a physical and cultural environment with risks for women.

Despite Parliament House being patrolled heavily by Parliamentary Security and the Australian Federal Police, after hours, the space is experienced by women as dangerous. Reflecting recently on her own experiences in the building, Greens Senator for Victoria, Lidia Thorpe observed:

*“Last night after Senate estimates, which is like 10 o’clock at night, I had to ring my partner in Melbourne to say, ‘can you walk me to my office, stay on the phone’, because it’s so scary here at night, there’s no one around”*

Great lengths are taken to secure the Australian Parliament from threats of terrorism and vandalism. But the threat to physical safety of women MP’s has been given little consideration.

## Psychological violence & online abuse of women in politics

Online abuse is an everyday occurrence for women in politics. In a survey conducted across 39 countries, 44 per cent of women politicians reported having received threats of death, rape, assault or abduction, with a majority of these occurring online (Westminster Foundation for Democracy 2018). This is markedly different to the experience of men in politics. For instance, it was reported that Julia Gillard received about twice as much abuse on Twitter as Kevin Rudd, who she deposed as Prime Minister (Hunt, Evershed & Liu 2016).

Online violence against women in politics has increased steadily as women have increased their profile and presence in politics (Westminster Foundation for Democracy 2018). This violence takes the form of sexualised and extreme abuse, including sexual harassment, image-based abuse, slutshaming, doxing, rape threats and death threats. This also includes violent threats to family members.

These findings reflect the same trends amongst women internet users who disproportionately experience online abuse when compared to men. A 2016 study found that 76% of Australian women under 30 and 47% of all Australian women experience online harassment (Symantec 2017). Women are also more likely to be targeted by online abuse if they belong to multiple marginalised groups. For example, studies have shown that online violence increases for women of colour, women with a disability and LGBTI women. Gendered online abuse of women can have significant impacts on their mental health, income and ability to work, as well as their sense of safety and security (Women's Health East 2018).

Online harassment is widely regarded by academics and prevention of violence against women practitioners as a serious threat to women's safety and wellbeing (Fotopoulou 2014; Jane 2014a; Powell and Henry 2017; Vitak et al 2017). Research shows that online abuse of women happens due to backlash to gender equality, and such abuse can be seen as an attempt to silence women's voices (Amnesty International 2018). For women interested in a career in politics, online abuse has shown to deter women from running in local elections (Westminster Foundation for Democracy 2018). This is a worrying human rights issue as it stops women from freely entering political discussions.

A report commissioned by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy reported that a substantial amount of abuse directed towards female politicians is perpetrated over social media (Jewell, 2018). Based on qualitative data provided by female politicians across 39 countries, the Interparliamentary Union reports that social media is the primary location where psychological violence, particularly sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images and threats are published (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016). Moreover, women of colour in politics are disproportionately impacted by online abuse (Jewell, 2018). The Westminster report found that during the 2017 UK election, Diane Abbott, an MP and woman of colour received 10 times more abuse than any other female MP (Jewell, 2018).

Concerningly, research suggests that whilst some of these threats, including death threats, are reported to parliamentary security or police, many are not (Francis, 2019). When asked why this is the case staffers suggested that the sheer volume of online harassment makes reporting difficult (Francis, 2019). There was also evidence that staff have developed a high tolerance for threats made via social media (Francis, 2019).

An investigative journalism piece written by Shannon Molloy and published in 2019 suggests that female MPs in Australia are not immune to online abuse (Molloy, 2019). Molloy noted that female MPs in Australia frequently receive rape threats. During a speech in 2016 former Prime Minister Julia Gillard commented that "... as a woman in public life, the violent threats take on another



sickening dimension. Threats of violent abuse, of rape, are far too common. A woman in public view may expect to receive them almost daily” (Molloy, 2019).

Whilst there is no quantitative data which would indicate the prevalence of online violence directed towards female MPs, many female politicians in Australia have gone on the record reporting that this is a gendered problem which they face (Molloy, 2019). Tanya Plibersek, Member for Sydney has said very little on social media surprised her anymore. *“The worst of it is stuff you wouldn’t see a man cop — there’s still a special nastiness reserved for women at senior levels,”*

Threats of online violence have forced women MP’s to take matters into their own hands. “I offered a social media self-defence for women online workshop just last week with the eSafety Commission,” Susan Templeman told the House of Representatives on the 18 March 2021.

### Sexual violence and Harassment

Sadly, while threats of violence from external sources – such as disgruntled and unwell citizens is real – the truth is that women MP’s and staffers are at far greater risk of gendered violence from people they know. Like so much of gendered violence, the greatest risk of violence to women MP’s and staffers is not from strangers – unknown citizens – but from other MP’s, colleagues and staff.

The past few months have shown us that sexual violence and harassment is prevalent within parliament. We expect that the Jenkins Inquiry will document many incidents of sexual violence and harassment in the Parliamentary Workplace. Many women MP’s have already come forward with their stories.

Parliament is not alone in having a problem with sexual violence and harassment in the workplace. The groundbreaking national inquiry into sexual harassment in Australia, Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report (2020) found sexual harassment prevalent across industries and workplaces.

What separates parliament as a workplace from other workplaces is the lack of appropriate avenues to report abuse, as many women fear reporting abuse as it will impact their job opportunities and political careers and end up in the press.

Currently in the UK they are establishing an independent expert panel for determining bullying or sexual harassment complaints against MPs. This came a year after a survey on sexual harassment and bullying of women in parliament was released and the body being a key recommendation of the report. Similarly in New Zealand, the CWP Association’s review recommended an independent body to investigate allegations of sexual harassment, and violence against women.

Establishing an Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority that consists of external experts to determine outcomes of complaints in relation to sexual harassment, violence against women and sexism in parliament would be essential to a safe and thriving workplace for women, and a thriving democracy. This would mean that MPs would no longer to be involved in dealing with allegations of bullying and sexual harassment against their parliamentary colleagues and abusive behaviour would no longer be swept under the carpet.

## Economic Violence

Krook and Restrepo San'in define economic violence as "property damage, ranging from petty vandalism to attempts to undermine a woman's economic livelihood" and "economic harassment" as involving the "withholding of economic resources to reduce women's capacity to perform their political responsibilities."

In 2021, gross acts of vandalism on an Australian woman MP's desk by male staffers were caught on smart phone cameras and leaked to the press by a whistle-blower.

In October 2020, following widespread evidence of the economic impact of the COVID19 pandemic on women in Australia, the Federal Budget allocated less than 0.01% to addressing women's economic insecurity. The decision was widely condemned by women leaders across Australia. Although some modest headway was made in the May 2021 Federal Budget, historic patterns of budgetary investment indicate a deep gender bias in the allocation of economic resources.

There has never been a woman Treasurer of Australia in the history of Federation (0%). There have only been two women Finance Ministers out of 15 (Margaret Guilfoyle and Penny Wong) (14%) Women's exclusion from key economic policy-making arenas undermines women's capacity to deliver legislative and policy outcomes. (Sawer, 1986)

## Semiotic violence

Semiotic violence is perpetrated through degrading images and sexist language (Krook 2019). Anne Summers, in her best selling book *The Misogyny Factor*, documented extensive evidence of degrading, sexist imagery directed to Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard.

The attacks on Prime Minister Gillard – spectacularly summed up by the image of sitting MP's and then Opposition Leader Tony Abbott standing in front of placards saying *Ditch the Witch* and *Bob Browns Bitch* – heralded an era of increasingly ugly, gendered attacks on Australian women MP's.

While Gillard's Misogyny speech hit back at the behaviour, more than a decade on since calling it out, the culture in Parliament House has not improved. Instead, we have seen an emboldening of degrading and sexist language.

Greens Senator for South Australia Sarah Hanson-Young, in particular, is frequently on the receiving end of semiotic violence.

During Crabb's Ms Represented, Hanson-Young disclosed a particularly harrowing evening of debate in the Senate:



“Cory Bernardi started whispering nursery rhymes and it was creepy. He then started whispering a list of names of men insinuating that they were people I had slept with or been in a relationship with.”

- Sarah Hanson-Young  
Senator for South Australia

Hanson-Young’s testimony is all the more significant because of the video evidence of the Senate Chamber that accompanies it which depicts Bernardi’s unchecked stalking of her while she is speaking on her feet, her discomfort and her appeal for intervention from the Chair, Senator Gavin Marshall. That Hanson-Young, not Bernardi, is ultimately censured by the Chair for calling for breathalysers to be installed on the doors of the Chamber is instructive of the systemic discrimination women MP’s face when they call out behaviour that puts them in fear for their wellbeing and safety.

Bernardi was one of many male MP’s to target Hanson-Young with sexualised innuendo.

*“There’s a bit of Xenophon in her – and I don’t mean that to be a double entendre”* – Senator Barry O’Sullivan to Sarah Hanson-Young

*“You should stop shagging men, Sarah”* - Senator David Lleyonhelm to Sarah Hanson-Young

It says a lot about the status of Senate standing orders, internal dispute resolution, occupational health and safety and gendered violence prevention in the Australian Parliament that Hanson-Young had to initiate external defamation proceedings, finally, against Lleyonhelm to seek justice.

While the Parliamentary Standing Orders prohibit unparliamentary behaviour, frequently it is the victims or active bystanders who are ejected from the Chamber, having risen to the defence of colleagues. Richard Di Natale, then Senator for Victoria, was kicked out of the Senate for 24 hours after yelling at Lleyonhelm across the chamber in support of his colleague.

While gendered attacks were taking place within the Parliament, Hanson-Young was also receiving death threats and abuse in her electorate office, including a sickening threat about her young daughter. An Australian Federal Police investigation discovered that a NSW male police officer was allegedly behind the call to her electorate office. The police officer was charged, convicted and fined \$5,500. He escaped a jail term.

It is no accident when male politicians use gendered language to attack women MP’s. They do it as a dog whistle; to stoke constituencies who hate women, especially women in power, hoping to gain electoral mileage. When male MP’s use sexualised hate speech in parliament and get away with it, it sends the wrong message to other men about the kinds of statements, messages and acts they can perpetrate on women in parliament and get away with, too.

## Recommendation

- All forms of gendered violence within Australian Parliamentary Workplaces should be addressed in this review – physical, psychological, sexual, economic and semiotic. The parameters of the parliamentary workplace must encompass incidents and experience of workplace sexual assault, harassment, bullying, violence and discrimination within Parliament House, as well as while running for election to Parliament and in the execution of roles as Members of Parliament and parliamentary or electoral staff. This review should extend to include an examination of the way in which incidents of online gendered violence and abuse impacts on the Parliamentary Workplace culture as well.
- Independent reviews into parliamentary workplaces should be encouraged for every state and territory to address abuse experienced by women.

## Other settings of Gendered Violence towards MP's

### Gendered Violence within Political Parties

The Commission's terms of reference is currently contained to political staffers and MPs working in federal parliament (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). This scope makes invisible political parties, which also serve as a source of gendered violence and misogyny. In the preceding weeks evidence has emerged which suggests that women working for political parties as volunteers, electorate office staffers and members of youth wings of political parties also face sexual harassment and misogyny. Evidence from research conducted overseas suggests party members do not feel appropriately supported by their parties in the face of harassment and misogyny (Jewell, 2018). Subsequently they are reluctant to report abuse, instead prioritising party loyalty (Jewell, 2018). Volunteering on campaigns or for MPs, and working for political parties is often a young person's first step into public life. Subsequently if volunteers and staff suffer or witness intimidation, violence or harassment there is significant risk they will disengage from the party, prompting a diversity and talent drain (Jewell, 2018).

We will also need strong and timely ethical leadership, not just from the Commonwealth Government but from political parties too. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy states that "political parties are the cornerstone of democratic engagement with the political system, so they must demonstrate leadership in combatting the issue of intimidatory behaviour." Furthermore, this leadership needs to be taken by political parties themselves to combat the bullying, harassment and abuse of women in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces. If we have learnt anything from the alleged abuse of Brittany Higgins, the Australian government can no longer prioritise party loyalty over providing adequate support for women who are abused.

### The Press Gallery as a source of violence towards women MPs

Reports suggest that the press is also a source of violence for female MPs (Francis, 2019). Unlike research conducted on the prevalence and nature of violence perpetrated against female politicians over social media, there is less tangible evidence on the presence of misogyny in the press. However, a New Zealand investigation into bullying and harassment in federal parliament revealed that there was a sentiment amongst female politicians that the press at times crossed a line of disrespect in

pursuit of clickbait (Francis, 2019). In 2015, in Australia, Greens MP Sarah Hanson Young won a defamation case against Zoo Weekly after her face was superimposed over a bikini photo (Bourke, 2015). Similarly, Julia Gillard was the subject of many misogynistic cartoons and commentary during her time as Prime Minister. Female politicians in Australia have also spoken about the gendered abuse they have faced in the press.

## Special Measures to address Gendered Violence in Parliament

### A Gender Safety Audit of Parliament House

Gender Safety Audits – research into how women experience public spaces – have been shedding light on the safety risks of public buildings, parks and towns since the 1980's. Pioneered in Canada, Gender or Women's Safety Audits use women's lived experience of space – their experiences and fears – to understand the impact of space and co-design solutions.

A gender safety audits considers not only the physical aspects of space, but also how space triggers memory and mental images. For instance, the many high-profile cases of women who have been viciously attacked, raped and murdered means many women are on alert every time they leave home. Daily sexual harassment maintains those high levels of fear because it reminds women of their vulnerability to sexual violence. (Kalms, Johnson and Matthewson, 2020). These experiences impact on women when they engage with public space, shaping choices and behaviours.

GENVIC Member, Women's Health East, has published [Creating Safe and Inclusive Public Spaces for Women Report](#), which recommends the use of crowd mapping, participatory walks, expert gender designers like the Monash YXX Lab, universal design and sex and gender disaggregated data collection to improve the safety of public spaces for women. Listening to women is at the core of the report, including taking an intersectional approach to engagement. Research has shown experiences of public space are different for women from diverse racial backgrounds and for women of different ages, sexuality, disabilities and socio-economic class. This means we must also consider how women's differing and intersecting identities shape their individual and collective experiences – and thus perceptions of safety in public space.

### Recommendation

- That a Gender Safety Audit be conducted of the Commonwealth Parliament House, developed in consultation with a multi-party advisory group of women MP's and staffers, to assess the safety of the building and risks of gendered violence.

### Codes of Conduct within Parliament and Political Parties

Currently the Commonwealth has a guide to ministerial conduct but no code of conduct covering senators and members. For too long parliamentary chambers have been grounds that women have been open to the abuse of male parliamentarians. For women in chambers, there is a stronger focus on physical appearance, a stronger focus on private lives, issues around motherhood, slut-shaming, personal attacks, rumours and gossip used to undermine women in a way men do not have to face to the same extent in parliament. The culture of alcohol in chambers is also noted as a key issue which creates unsafe workplaces for women in parliament. Such workplace bullying is best

understood by looking the experiences of MPs featured in Annabelle Crabb's ABC documentary, *Misrepresented* (2021). In the documentary, it discusses the behaviour of Tony Abbot speaking in front of "ditch the witch" protest signs; the verbal harassment of Sarah Hanson-Young by Cory Bernardi in a parliamentary sitting; the sexual harassment of Julia Banks by a senior MP Minister in Parliament House; physical assault of Jeannie Ferris by Andrew Bartlett; and more. It is our recommendation that a code of conduct be introduced into the Commonwealth Parliament for members of parliament to help put an end to sexism and misogyny within parliament and create a culture of professionalism and good behaviour.

We endorse the Australian National University's Australian Political Studies and Global Institute for Women's Leadership submission to the Jenkins Inquiry, *Parliament as a Gendered Workplace: Towards a new code of conduct* and its draft model Code of Conduct.

A code of conduct must also address alcohol abuse within Parliament House. As recorded in Annabel Crabb's *Mis Represented*, Parliament House was constructed to include a bar, instead of childcare facilities. Although MP's, like former Senator Crossin, fought and won their campaign for onsite childcare, the story is an insight into the cultural connection between drinking and political representation in Australia.

In every MP's office in Parliament House, there are two bar fridges – one in the kitchen and one in a credenza or sideboard in the MP's private office. It is clear what the private bar fridge is for – entertaining with alcohol. Drinking before, during and after parliamentary sessions is a poorly kept secret. Only this week, images of the Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce at the despatch box have been widely circulating across social media, with speculation about his level of intoxication.

Drinking in Parliament does not follow party political lines – members of all parties do it – because the culture and rules of the House have enabled it.

No other workplace would tolerate employees being under the influence while in the course of employment. Aside from the risk of gendered violence that can occur in these circumstances, intoxication at work is an occupational health risk for other reasons.

Codes of conduct need to have teeth. There's no point making them if they don't have penalties. One of the most powerful penalties that would drive behavioural change across Parliament would be to see people in breach of the code lose their capacity to sit in the Chamber for a designated number of hours or days without being provided with a "pair" – an opposite number on the other side of the house to balance out their absence. The risk of losing important votes in the House or Senate because of poor behaviour would drive change in conduct by political parties and individual MP's.

Consideration should be given to embedding Codes of Conduct in the Parliamentary Standing Orders so that the Speaker of the House and President of the Senate have authority to also rule on breaches during parliamentary debates.

Current processes to oversee breaches of Ministerial Standards and complaints of unparliamentary behaviour or incidents of gendered violence and harassment are compromised because they are embedded into political party structures. At present complaints are made to Party Leaders, Government and Opposition Whips and Leaders of the House or Senate depending on the circumstances. On each occasion a political party representative is engaged in decision making about what to do and how to respond to a complaint. Instead of victim-survivor voices being paramount and the confidentiality of complainants being protected, decision making is defined by partisan politics – protecting colleagues or attacking the other side. The consequences of such a structure



prevent complaints being made altogether for fear of personal, professional and political reprisal. There is no confidence in such a system.

When former Liberal Senator Lucy Guichi complained about threats, abuse and intimidation during a Leadership ballot, she observed that current parliamentary structures reviewing complaints about poor behaviour were inadequate: *“The way it is now is pure kangaroo court; I think we need a formal structured protected way of dispute resolution.”*

A Code of Conduct must be supported by a fully independent complaints body – one entirely independent of political parties – including presiding officers of the Parliament. Any structure less than this will be ultimately compromised and subject to political interference. This is the flaw of the Foster Review review’s Parliamentary Standards Authority. By reporting to the presiding officers of the Chambers it remains partisan.

## Recommendations

- That a Code of Conduct for Members of the Australian Parliament and their Staff be developed that addresses all forms of gendered violence – including sexual assault, harassment, bullying and gender discrimination within parliamentary workplaces. That the Code of Conduct be based on a model code prepared by the Australian National University’s Australian Political Studies Association and Global Institute for Women’s Leadership and be in addition to any Ministerial Standards.
- That the Code of Conduct encompass rules about the appropriate use of alcohol consumption within the Parliamentary workplace, with consideration being given to making parliamentary offices “dry” environments, zero tolerance and/or limits on blood alcohol levels of Members of Parliament in Chambers and Committees and the responsible service of alcohol at onsite Parliamentary functions.
- That a Code of Conduct contain options for dispute resolution and where appropriate penalties for serious breaches including suspension from Chambers without a pair, fines and other measures.
- The Code of Conduct should be embedded into the Parliamentary Standing Orders.
- That the Code of Conduct establish an Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to confidentially review allegations of all forms of gendered violence in the Australian Parliament. An Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority would oversee an individual complaints mechanism, dispute resolution and where appropriate penalties for breaches of Code of Conduct. The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority must be independent of the Presiding Officers of the House of Representatives and the Senate or risk being compromised by party political interference. For this reason, the Foster Review recommendation of Parliamentary Service Commissioner reporting to the Presiding Officers is unsatisfactory.
- That an Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority provide annual reports on the safety of the Commonwealth Parliament, outlining the number of incidents of sexual harassment, assault, discrimination and abuse within Parliamentary Workplaces.

- That a mandatory Parliamentary Safety Survey of all MP's be conducted by the Parliamentary Standards Authority every three years, aligning to National Election cycles, to investigate the personal safety of Members of Parliament and monitor the impact of strategies and improvements.
- All political parties introduce internal party Codes of Conduct is that addresses all forms of gendered violence including sexual assault, sexual harassment, bullying, gender discrimination within political party workplaces and decision making. That the creation of a Code of Conduct be a mandatory requirement of for registration and renewal of political parties by the Australian Electoral Commission.

### Gender Equality Audits of Parliamentary Workplaces

Workplace gender audits are an important way to understand how parliament is performing in relation to systems, structures, policies and practices that promote workplace gender equality. In Victoria, all defined entities under the *Gender Equality Act (Vic) 2020* are required to complete a gender audit – including the Victorian Parliament. The audit develops essential baseline data on gender equity which can then be used to inform a Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) by addressing critical gaps or areas for improvement. The audit data can then be used to monitor and assess progress made in relation to workplace gender equality including whether strategies and measures are effective.

A workplace gender audit of Parliament should also include dedicated research into strategies to overcome gendered barriers to women in politics, including the use of political quotas. The Quota Project (2020), a global database of quotas for women in politics, reports that half of the countries of the world today use some type of electoral quota system for women, including candidate quotas, reserved seats and voluntary quotas for political parties.

### Recommendations

- That a Gender Equity Audit be conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission of the Australian Parliament every four years, examining its rules, procedures and practices, as well as the configuration of building, human resource management and training and development of staff.
- That the Gender Equity Audit include research into the establishment of a gender quota system in the Australian Parliament.

### National Gender Equality Strategy and Legislation

Currently at a federal level, Australia does not have a national gender equality strategy to guide our actions and progress to address gender equality, despite gender inequality being the underlying context for violence against women to occur. To adequately address violence that occurs in parliament as a workplace, it must be committed to a gender equality strategy that has a clear vision for a gender equal Australia and holds the federal government accountable by setting measurable objectives for progress. The key objectives of a gender equality strategy should include issues such as: ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-

making and in politics. Without a strategy to address gender inequality, violence against women politicians and women more broadly will not stop. We recommend that the Commonwealth Government develops a gender equality strategy. In doing this, we also recommend that the Commonwealth develops gender equality legislation requiring all public sector entities to complete gender audits and gender equality action plans every four years and to hold entities to account.

In the absence of a national gender equality strategy and associated legislation, Australia's performance on a number of global gender indices continues on a downward spiral. GENVIC looks particularly at the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index which has, since 2006, been comparing nation-state performance in four key areas – Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment. Australia's rankings have dropped from a high of 15<sup>th</sup> in the world in 2006 to 50<sup>th</sup> in 2021. A large component of our poor performance is in Political Empowerment, where our low numbers of women in parliament, ministerial positions and years without a female head of state contribute to an overall ranking of 54<sup>th</sup> in the world – below our New Zealand, Nordic and UK counterparts.

We also perform poorly very on Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex, ranking at 70<sup>th</sup> in the world because of poor pay equity, labour force participation and women in leadership (including legislators).

### Recommendations

- That a National Gender Equality Strategy set out strategies and measures to address gender inequality within Australia, including in the Australian Parliament and public sector, setting goals and indicators to improve our performance on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index.
- That as part of the National Gender Equality Strategy, a Gender Equality Act be legislated creating a positive duty on Commonwealth public sector, including parliament, to promote gender equality.

### Implement Respect @ Work

The Australian Human Rights Commission's *Respect @ Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report (2020)* must be implemented within the New National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children currently in development.

GENVIC refers to the following observations made in *Respect@Work*.

“To be effective, primary prevention of sexual harassment will need long-term sustained effort and a high level of leadership and political will.[42]

In Australia, a coordinated national policy approach to addressing violence against women is currently provided by the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (the National Plan), endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).[43]The National Plan is supported by a series of four three-year Action Plans.

Neither the National Plan nor the first three Action Plans directly identify sexual harassment as an area for action. The Fourth Action Plan was endorsed in August 2019 and specifically includes the following actions which address sexual harassment:

- prevent sexual violence and sexual harassment before it happens through national and targeted initiatives that promote informed consent, bodily autonomy and respectful relationships
- deliver client-centred, trauma-informed, specialised and consistent support to victims and survivors of sexual violence
- strengthen the capacity of all sectors to address sexual harassment to ensure women are safe at work, while studying, in public and online.[44]

Recognising that the National Plan and the Fourth Action Plan expire in 2022, the Commission recommends that COAG incorporates sexual harassment as a key area for action and investment under any future national framework to address violence against women.

The Commission also recommends that all Australian governments have gender equality strategies that address sexual harassment and recognise that sexual harassment is driven by gender inequality and is a form of gender-based violence.”

### Moderation and Practice guides for online gendered violence

The health and safety of women MP's is at risk because of online gendered violence and abuse. GENVIC's development of Media Moderation Guidelines to protect women journalists could be a useful template for protecting women from the psychological consequences of online violence.

A digital or other moderation platform that redirects or carbon copies of dangerous and threatening online material to a specialist moderation and law enforcement team focussed on identifying and arresting perpetrators would have a significant deterrent and preventative impact on women MP's.

Likewise, increased training and development, including Practice Guides, for the Australian Federal Police and Parliament House Communications and Security should be developed to ensure swift responses to stalking, rape and death threats made online.

### Recommendations

- Digital or other moderation platforms be adopted to redirect or carbon copy dangerous and threatening online material to a specialist moderation and law enforcement team focussed on keeping MP's safe from harm.

The Australian Federal Police, Parliament House Communications and Security develop Practice Guides containing best practice on how to swiftly respond to stalking, rape and death threats through email and social media.

### International Reporting and accountability

As a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Australia is required to periodically review its performance in gender equality with the United Nations. Commonwealth reports to CEDAW would be improved by

The Commonwealth has other mandatory and voluntary international reporting obligations – including to the OECD, World Economic Forum and other global institutions – and should make use of these external accountability structures to drive improved performance in gender equity.

### Recommendations

- That Commonwealth reporting to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on Australia’s performance under CEDAW include reports on the occupational health and safety of Australian Parliament and public sector.
- That the Commonwealth publish an annual State of Gender Equality in Australia Report measuring progress against World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Indicators.

### Conclusion

Julia Baird, author of *Media Tarts: How the Australian Press Frames Female Politicians* recently observed on the eve of the release of an updated edition that *“The closer women have inched to power, the more visible an undercurrent of sludge has become, exposing an ongoing sexualisation, stereotyping and sidelining, a refusal to accept a woman wielding authority.”*

Violence, bullying and harassment of Australian women MP’s is not likely to diminish anytime soon. As more women occupy seats within the house – taking up opportunities to use political power – there will be an increasing risk of backlash and risk of violence. Preventing violence against women in the Australian Parliamentary workplace will require active intervention by the Commonwealth over a sustained period.

Gendered violence in any workplace is unacceptable. But in the Commonwealth Parliament it is especially important. Because safeguarding women in politics is essential to democracy.

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