



## **Discussion Paper**

### **YSAS Youth Support and Advocacy Service**

Response to National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality  
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#### **Acknowledgement of Country**

The Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS) would like to acknowledge the First Nations people of Victoria for their ongoing connection to Country, custodianship and care for the land and waterways on which we live, work and rely.

YSAS acknowledges the inherent cultural strength, wisdom and guidance of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's and their vast experience in caring for the social, cultural and emotional well being of their Community.

We are committed to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self determination.



## About YSAS

The Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS) is Australia's largest, youth-specific community service organisation. Operating since 1998 as Victoria's flagship Youth Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD), YSAS now employs over 370 skilled staff across 19 sites in metropolitan and regional Victoria. While the prime focus of YSAS remains on effective Youth AOD Treatment and sector leadership, the organisation also has extensive experience in providing young people, their families and communities with services that support improved mental health and improve meaningful community participation.

## YSAS Statement on Gender Equality and Family Violence

YSAS stands alongside and acknowledges the strength, agency and resilience of victim survivors of family violence.

YSAS recognises the gendered nature of family violence and significant impact that this violence has on the lives of victim survivors, including the disproportionate impacts on the lives, safety and well being of women and children. It is recognised by YSAS that addressing the gendered drivers of violence and actively working towards gender equality are key actions necessary for preventing and ending family violence. YSAS acknowledges the decades of advocacy, work and research by academics, advocates, victim survivors and the family violence, sexual assault and other sectors to progress gender equality and end family violence.

YSAS adheres to an intersectional lens in its approach to family violence and acknowledges the unique complexities, strengths and risks experienced by those who hold diverse identities. YSAS recognises that due to structural and systemic issues, marginalisation and other inequities - family violence impacts some communities disproportionately, and that there may be unique barriers and challenges experienced by members of these communities in seeking safety and justice. YSAS is committed to culturally safe, sensitive, self-determined and Community-led approaches to family violence in First Nations Communities and is committed to safe and sensitive responses to all people and all identities.

YSAS holds a vision of *"A community where all young people are valued, included and have every opportunity to thrive"*. Family violence is recognised by YSAS as a direct form of harm experienced by young people, families and communities which jeopardises this vision.

YSAS has publicly committed to undertaking meaningful action across all facets of the agency to enhance gender equality within systems, processes and leadership. This has included a commitment to completing an Intersectional Gender Pay Audit<sup>1</sup> as well as multi-year programs of work to embed of family violence capability across the organisations practice and systems.

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<sup>1</sup> [9th March 2021 - Media Release — YSAS](#)

## **YSAS Recommendations for Response to National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality**

This paper calls upon consideration to be provided to enhancing service and supports available to young people through strategies such as:

1. Further research, understanding and specialisation for the establishment of age and developmentally sensitive approaches to engaging with young people who experience and/or use family and intimate partner violence
2. Further specialisation and resourcing for services, sector capacity-building, training, treatment and programs specific to young people with co-occurring youth substance use and family and intimate partner violence experiences
3. The need for specific resourcing to assist in the integration of family and intimate partner violence awareness, responses and capability across the broader youth and youth AOD sector
4. The need for family violence and gender equality principles to be integrated into youth focused AOD and harm minimisation education
5. Continued dual Youth AOD and family violence responses and programs specific to First Nations young people
6. Resourcing of youth-specific tertiary-level family violence responses including refuge and accommodation for youth victim-survivors and formal justice-system diversion and early intervention for those using violence.

### **YSAS Family Violence Program of Work**

In 2018, YSAS began a program of work to develop deeper understanding about the complexities, support needs and challenges experienced by young people with co-occurring substance use and family violence experiences<sup>2</sup>. Funded by Family Safety Victoria (FSV) this initial work involved qualitative interviews with 130+ Youth and Youth AOD Workers across Victoria combined with a literature review and a State and National Policy Analysis to understand complexities of family violence on the lives of young people with co-occurring youth substance use experiences. Findings from this work identified that a significant number of young people accessing Youth AOD services have past and/or current family and intimate partner violence experiences<sup>3</sup> and that these experiences directly impact young people's AOD treatment and support.

YSAS's work towards embedding family violence practice into the "bones" of Youth AOD work at the agency has evolved to also include the agency's participation in a variety of family violence focused State Government projects as well as independent research and local initiatives. Recently this has included the completion of seed funded research in partnership with The University of Melbourne and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) to explore the family violence prevention needs of justice involved young

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<sup>2</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>3</sup> YSAS (2019) [Downloads — YSAS](#)

women<sup>4</sup>. YSAS has also supported the *Stronger Sisters Women's Healing Camp* led by Bunjilwarra Koorie Youth Alcohol and Drug Healing Service, which is provided to young Aboriginal women aged between 16-26 years old who have experiences as victim survivors and/or users of family and intimate partner violence<sup>5</sup>.

The YSAS Family Violence program of work has included mapping the knowledge, skills and resources required by Youth AOD Practitioners and Youth AOD services necessary to provide effective, capable and developmentally sensitive support to young people with co-occurring substance use and family violence experiences. It has led to the development of training curriculum and resources which have been piloted, successfully evaluated and currently being embedded into the practice approaches used by Youth AOD Workers at YSAS.

### **Family Violence, Young People and Youth AOD**

Family violence has significant impacts on the basic human rights, freedom, dignity and safety of young people, their families, communities and wider society. Young people are recognised as victim survivors of family violence in their own right<sup>6</sup> and may experience multiple complex and overlapping forms of family violence. Examples family violence experienced by young people may include victimisation from parents, caregivers or other adults<sup>7</sup>; they may engage in the use of violence in the home<sup>8</sup> and experiences and/or use of youth and adolescent intimate partner violence<sup>9</sup>. The forms of harm and trauma resulting from family violence are recognised as having serious and significant impacts upon the important developmental processes that occur during adolescence, youth and early adulthood<sup>10</sup>. Although commonalities experience in the forms of family violence power and control experienced by children and adults, there are distinct differences and distinctions in the family and intimate partner violence experiences of young people<sup>11</sup>. These distinctions result from the complex interactions and unique processes of adolescent development<sup>12</sup> combined with vulnerabilities and barriers resulting from the positioning of youth and adolescence in society.

Youth and adolescent experiences of family and intimate partner violence has been linked to a range of issues experienced by young people including disordered eating<sup>13</sup>, bullying<sup>14</sup>, negative educational outcomes<sup>15</sup>, increased mental health concerns and substance use

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<sup>4</sup> Willoughby et. al., (forthcoming) Interventions to Prevent and Respond to Family Violence Against Justice-Involved Young Women: A Scoping Review *Trauma, Violence and Abuse* Sage Publications

<sup>5</sup> Bunjilwarra (2023) [Downloads — YSAS](#)

<sup>6</sup> Royal Commission into Family Violence, (2016)

<sup>7</sup> YSAS, 2019

<sup>8</sup> Campbell et. al (2020)

<sup>9</sup> Johnston et. al (2022)

<sup>10</sup> Harms (2010)

<sup>11</sup> Shorey et al. (2008) Johnston et al., (2022)

<sup>12</sup> Harms (2010), Shorey et al. (2008) Johnston et al., (2022)

<sup>13</sup> Gervais & Davidson (2013)

<sup>14</sup> Connolly & Josephson, (2007)

<sup>15</sup> Banyard & Cross (2008)

issues<sup>16</sup>. The co-occurrence of family violence experiences and youth substance use raises many complex challenges in the lives of young people. Young people may use substances as a way of coping with experiences of trauma and violence victimisation<sup>17</sup>, as a form of resistance to power and control, to establish social connection<sup>18</sup> and conversely substances may be used as a form of control and coercion<sup>19</sup>. Such intersections can create significant challenges and harms in the lives of young people<sup>20</sup>, and particularly in the lives of young women who frequently experience among other identity dimensions – the direct impacts of the intersections of both gender and age<sup>21</sup>. In turn, this creates many complexities for services and practitioners providing support to young people and reinforces the need for youth and youth AOD interventions and support programs to both embody and exhibit family and intimate partner violence capability as a core component of youth practice and service delivery.

### **4.3 Women Experience High Levels of Gendered Violence**

Historically, young women have been overlooked within the broader Australian family violence discourses<sup>22</sup> and although some notable exceptions exist, their experiences of intimate partner violence in heterosexual or LGBTQ+ relationships remain under researched in Australia<sup>23</sup>. Statistically however, young women are over represented in Australian sexual assault rates, with those aged between 15 – 19 years old holding the highest police reported sexual assault victimisation rates of any women’s age group nationally<sup>24</sup> and with violence in youth intimate relationships also being identified as the fastest growing form of family violence in Victoria in a 2020 review of Youth Justice data and Victorian Police Family Violence Intervention Orders<sup>25</sup>. The representation of First Nations young women in Australian family violence research is also limited<sup>26</sup>. Of the reported national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family violence data, young First Nations women aged between 15-24 years old are identified as experiencing high rates of family violence victimisation<sup>27</sup>. Structural, social and health inequities experienced by First Nation young people also identify higher rates of sexually transmitted infections such as chlamydia, syphilis and gonorrhoea than non-Indigenous youth<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor & Sullivan (2021)

<sup>17</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>18</sup> Foster & Spencer, 2012

<sup>19</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>20</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>21</sup> Johnston et al. (2022)

<sup>22</sup> Johnston et al., (2022)

<sup>23</sup> Johnston et al., (2022) Chung (2007) Daff et. al., (2021)

<sup>24</sup> AIHW (2020)

<sup>25</sup> Victorian Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2020)

<sup>26</sup> Bunjilwarra (2023)

<sup>27</sup> AIHW (2006) Bunjilwarra (2023)

<sup>28</sup> Ireland et. al, (2015) Power et. al, (2022)

The 2016 Youth Needs Census<sup>29</sup> into 35 government funded Victorian Youth AOD services did not specifically enquire into young people's experiences of family violence, but highlighted that a significant proportion of young people accessing youth AOD services experience complex family conflict and disconnection issues, with 36% of young people identified as experiencing neglect, 51% emotional abuse, 17% sexual abuse and 39% having experienced physical abuse<sup>30</sup>. This enquiry also noted that young women had greater experiences of psycho-social burden resulting from substance use than young men did, including increased risk of violence and childhood sexual abuse<sup>31</sup>.

#### **4.4 Sex and gender impact our health, and our access to health services, and 4.5 Gendered factors combine and impact us across our lives**

The period of adolescence and youth involves many significant developmental processes including the use and consolidation of areas such as abstract thought and self awareness, awareness of other's perceptions, communication, formative romantic relationship establishment and understandings and explorations of sexual desires, consent and sexual health<sup>32</sup>. Adolescence is a unique and distinct stage of the human life cycle and recognised as a developmental stage of its own accord<sup>33</sup> which involves the consolidating of childhood learnings and making meaning about the past, present and future self<sup>34</sup>.

The impacts of family and intimate partner violence during the developmental process of youth and adolescence can have serious impacts on the lives, trajectories and wellbeing of young women<sup>35</sup>. These experiences can result in disruption to key developmental and life processes such as abrupt 'off time' exits<sup>36</sup> from school and employment, result in pregnancy and early co-habitation (living together) and limitations in exposure to the wide range of social environments that support growth and connection during this time<sup>37</sup>. The experiences of intimate partner and family violence by young women during this time has also been linked to a range of serious impacts on sense of self, identity and wellbeing including feelings of hopelessness, sadness, isolation and fear<sup>38</sup>. How these experiences and risks intersect with youth substance use remains an area of further inquiry. Initial findings from the YSAS Family Violence program of work identified in co-occurring youth family violence and substance use situations – practitioners reported young women experiencing high levels of vulnerability and risk and complex harms resulting from barriers to harm minimisation, sexual exploitation and coercion, sabotage of AOD treatment and significant instability and barriers in accessing housing and accommodation<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Hallam et. al., (2018)

<sup>30</sup> Hallam et. al., (2018)

<sup>31</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>32</sup> Burton et. al., (2010) Tolman (2012) Caspi et. al., (1993)

<sup>33</sup> Taggesson & Gallo (2021)

<sup>34</sup> Lombard (2013)

<sup>35</sup> Johnston et. al., (2022)

<sup>36</sup> Warner et. al., (2017)

<sup>37</sup> Warner et. al., (2017)

<sup>38</sup> Chung (2007) Towns & Scott (2013) Johnston et. al., (2022)

<sup>39</sup> YSAS (2019)

Primary prevention has long been the key approach used in Australia in regards to youth and adolescent intimate partner violence<sup>40</sup>. A key focus of youth-focused primary prevention is the delivery of gender equality and relationship and sexual health education to young people. Approaches to such education must ensure that curriculum is avoidant of moral overtones that position young women in unequal “subject” positions<sup>41</sup> and is LGBTQ+ sensitive and inclusive<sup>42</sup>. For First Nations young people, it is important this material is contextualised to traditional First Nations health models that incorporate spirituality, culture, language and custom<sup>43</sup> and embody strengths based and self determined approaches that centre individual, collective and cultural agency<sup>44</sup>.

The roll out of *Respectful Relationships in Victorian Schools* is a key recommendation of the Royal Commission into Family Violence and recognised as being a continuing endeavour<sup>45</sup>. However, for young people accessing Youth AOD services, there remain many complexities that impact the effectiveness of sole primary prevention approaches. Frequently, young people accessing Youth AOD services may be or have been disengaged from school which has limited their exposure to this curriculum<sup>46</sup>. Furthermore, many young people accessing Youth AOD services may have experienced complex and prolonged family violence trauma within their childhood and adolescence<sup>47</sup> that have created feelings of internalised victim blaming, feelings of shame, beliefs that gender equality and family violence as normalised<sup>48</sup> and may have also experienced misidentification as the predominant user of violence<sup>49</sup>. Young people accessing youth AOD services may also have had limited opportunities in life to establish important behaviour skills and cognitive processes that enable emotional regulation, impulse control, empathy, accountability and secure sense of self<sup>50</sup> that are important for the prevention of aggressive behaviours.

Outside of primary prevention agendas, there are limited youth-focused family violence early intervention and ongoing therapeutic supports available to young people<sup>51</sup>. Currently there are few family violence tertiary supports that are consistently available to young people using and/or experiencing family and intimate partner violence. For example, this includes a lack of youth-focused family violence refuge services<sup>52</sup> and unlike the adult system which involves court-ordered men’s behaviour change programs for users of

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<sup>40</sup> Johnston et. al., (2022)

<sup>41</sup> Grant & Nash (2019) Johnston et. al., (2022)

<sup>42</sup> Grant & Nash (2019)

<sup>43</sup> Ireland et. al., (2015)

<sup>44</sup> Ireland et. al., (2015) Bunjilwarra (2023)

<sup>45</sup> RCFV (2016)

<sup>46</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>47</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>48</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>49</sup> YSAS (2019) Maurer (2019) Campbell et. al., (2020)

<sup>50</sup> Espelage et al., (2018)

<sup>51</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>52</sup> YSAS (2019)



violence, there exists no standardized court ordered programs specifically tailored and sensitive to the developmental needs of young men using intimate partner and family violence. Furthermore, as highlighted during the YSAS Family Violence program of work – young people including young women may also be ineligible for adult family violence services due to issues of age or current substance use<sup>53</sup> and/or that these services may not hold the developmentally sensitive practice lenses required to support young people.

The issues resulting from this service landscape can compound the challenges already experienced by young people who use and/or experience intimate partner and family violence. Recognised barriers to young people accessing support for family and intimate partner violence can include acute awareness of peer perceptions, fears of being stigmatised, labelled or victim-blamed, fear of punishment or retaliation by people using violence, fear of authorities and concerns that their confidentiality will not be maintained or their experiences believed<sup>54</sup>. For young people who engage in AOD use, these barriers can be further compounded by stigma surrounding substance use, fears of criminal justice system involvement, social disconnection and lack of stable ongoing accommodation and housing options<sup>55</sup>. Such barriers to support can significantly enhance the family and intimate partner violence risks experienced by young people and create challenges and complexities for workers and services supporting them.

## **Conclusion**

Family and intimate partner violence presents many impacts on the lives, safety and well being of young people accessing Youth AOD services. These impacts are not only experience by young people in terms of their immediate needs and safety – but can have cumulative and complex impacts across the course of their life trajectories and their transition into adulthood feeling valued, respected, dignified and with opportunities to thrive.

This discussion paper has highlighted the increasing evidence within the Australian family violence landscape on the role and impacts of family and intimate partner violence on the lives, wellbeing and trajectory of young people, and specifically young women<sup>56</sup>. It also draws awareness to the complex intersections between family and intimate partner violence and the areas of the youth sector including Youth AOD, Mental Health, Housing and Homelessness. This paper calls upon consideration to be provided to enhancing service and supports available to young people through strategies such as:

- Further research, understanding and specialisation for the establishment of age and developmentally sensitive approaches to engaging with young people who experience and/or use family and intimate partner violence

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<sup>53</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>54</sup> Johnston et. al., (2022) Whitman (2007)

<sup>55</sup> YSAS (2019)

<sup>56</sup> Johnston et. al., (2022)



- Further specialisation and resourcing for services, sector capacity-building, training, treatment and programs specific to young people with co-occurring youth substance use and family and intimate partner violence experiences
- The need for specific resourcing to assist in the integration of family and intimate partner violence awareness, responses and capability across the broader youth and youth AOD sector
- The need for family violence and gender equality principles to be integrated into youth focused AOD and harm minimisation education
- Continued dual Youth AOD and family violence responses and programs specific to First Nations young people
- Resourcing of youth-specific tertiary-level family violence responses including refuge and accommodation for youth victim-survivors and formal justice-system diversion and early intervention for those using violence.

For young people – the impacts of co-occurring youth substance use and family violence experiences can create additional barriers for young people in accessing age and developmentally sensitive family violence support. Conversely, youth and youth AOD services and treatment must be trauma and family violence informed and responsive. Without the intrinsic and genuine integration of family violence and Youth AOD practice frameworks, services and approaches – young people are at risk of “falling through the gaps” of both systems.

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