

V i c t o r i a n
WOMEN'S TRUST
m a k i n g a d i f f e r e n c e

Victorian Women's Trust
1/387 Little Bourke Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

October 7, 2003

To Whom It May Concern:

We write to you to give our support to Philanthropy Australia's submission to the Board of Taxation on The Draft Charities Bill.

A member of Philanthropy Australia, the Trust exists to improve conditions for women through:

- a funding program to invest in women and effect social change
- strategic alliances to undertake major projects
- advocacy for women on key issues
- showcasing women's talents and fostering networks for the exchange of skills, ideas and information.

In response to the Federal Government's Draft Charities Bill, the Victorian Women's Trust would particularly like to affirm Philanthropy Australia's concerns about Section 8.2 of the draft, which defines a disqualifying purpose of a charity as "(a) the purpose of advocating a political party or cause" and "(c) the purpose of attempting to change the law or government policy".

The mission of the Victorian Women's Trust is to improve conditions for women in practical and lasting ways. This is so, because like it or not, the world is not perfect, particularly for women who face demonstrable injustice, disadvantage and social inequity in their daily lives and work.

In our 18-year history we have funded over 300 projects. Without exception, every one of these projects was carefully assessed for their capacity to make a difference to the lives of women, their children, families and local communities.

As a philanthropic body, we face an ethical choice – we can simply distribute our limited funds and hope they provide some soothing effect for women – OR, we can make grants that impact on a number of levels other than the women themselves can, to try and change conditions for the better.

To illustrate this point, a substantial number of our grants have supported women and community organisations in their work to alleviate domestic, family, sexual and emotional violence. Part of this effort has addressed the "battered woman syndrome" – where women have endured prolonged and systematic violence from their spousal partner.

If, in this context, we observe that existing legislation and judicial processes are not adequately responding to survivors' needs, in our mind, we are obliged to alert, lobby, educate and work for changes and improvements in these areas. In relation to our earlier reference to the "battered woman syndrome", existing law in some states is currently deficient in that it is difficult for women who are responding to prolonged violence to argue provocation successfully.

To simply make grants available, and ignore laws and the obvious need for law reform is ethically unacceptable. Rather, the challenge is to engage in responsible grant making that works towards progressive systemic changes that help alleviate conditions for women.

That is what advocacy is about. It is a critical task in a civil, democratic society. For if bodies like us, and the organisations we fund, do not try and inspire positive change in such a way, how, in the grand schema, does it happen?

It is reasonable to expect government in a democratic culture to fashion responses on issues of societal inequalities, with communities also having a role. Government on its own, and legislation on its own, however, remains a partial public policy response.

Other layers to public policy formation and change are by definition necessary. These are usually productive, constructive and socially and politically beneficial.

As the Reverend Tim Costello wrote in The Australia Institute's most recent newsletter, No 36 September, 2003:

Encouraging charities to engage in robust debates about the policy solutions to the problems that their clients face strengthens civil society, or to use a term that has been prominent in recent public discussion, builds social capital.

We are confident in asserting that our 18 years of effort and hard work, in the context of strengthening civil society, has made significant differences to the lives of women and their families and communities.

Indeed, our grant making, along with its inextricably-linked advocacy, has arguably lessened some of the burden of government in meeting the needs and interests of Victorian women.

Yours sincerely,

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