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Blind Citizens Australia

## Submission of Input for the

## Visit to Australia of the United Nations

## Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women

### Introduction

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the call for submissions to inform the visit to Australia of the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. The submission has been prepared by Blind Citizens Australia, as an initiative of the organisation's National Women's Special Interest Branch.

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is the united voice of Australians who are blind or vision impaired. Our mission is to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes, and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.

Membership of BCA is open to Australian residents who are blind or vision-impaired. Current membership rests at approximately 3000, though the prevalence of blindness and low vision has been estimated at 450,000 (Centre for Eye Health Research Survey, 2015), out of a population of roughly 23.13 million.

The BCA National Women’s Branch (NWB) is made up of a group of Australian women who are blind or vision impaired, whose mission is to improve the lives of blind and vision impaired women in Australia. Men are welcome to join the branch.

We seek to empower our members by:

* Providing positive peer support;
* Holding seminars of interest;
* Encouraging involvement of women in all levels of BCA;
* Being a resource for women on vision impairment; and
* Facilitating communication between our members, and supporting member issues such as isolation.

### Background

In response to the call for submissions to inform the UN Special Rapporteur's visit, the NWB of BCA outreached to its members and other blind and vision impaired women in Australia via electronic mailing lists, inviting their answers to questions based on the Terms of Reference for the Special Rapporteur's visit, or other contributions illustrating their experiences of violence against women.

The contributions from BCA's membership and the committee of the NWB have informed this submission, with the matters addressed being of most pertinence to BCA's membership.

1. **the different manifestations of violence against women**

From information received by the NWB, Blind and vision impaired women experience the same manifestations of violence as others in the community, but are perceived as and believe themselves to be more vulnerable to experiencing such violence, and targeted by potential perpetrators in intimate relationships and in the public sphere. Our members reported feeling targeted for physical attack in public, due to their inability to subsequently identify attackers and present reliable criminal evidence. Our members contend that women who are blind are sometimes perceived as having less power or an inferior role in intimate relationships, and so are targeted by partners seeking to abuse power through different manifestations of violence and abuse.

1. **the State responses and measures to address violence against women (constitutional, legislative, and institutional framework, as well as inter-sectorial responses to violence against women)**

Australia boasts diverse programs and legislative provisions to respond to violence against women through its system of criminal and family law, and through programs for prevention and intervention delivered at a national, state and local level through government and non-government institutions. Theoretically, all such programs are available to women who are blind and vision-impaired, with access enshrined through anti-discrimination legislation. In reality, barriers exist to the accessibility of such programs and legal remedies. Like their non-disabled counterparts, blind and vision impaired women experience disadvantage when seeking to access institutional programs or legal remedies to violence if they are marginalised by low income, language or geographical isolation.

Additional barriers are attributable directly to disability, as described by our members. Programs and services supporting women experiencing violence rarely promote their services in formats apart from standard print, placing women who are blind or vision impaired at a disadvantage if they cannot access this information independently. A vision impaired woman's access to online information is impacted by her access to relevant screen reading or magnifying technology, skill in internet use, and unmonitored and safe internet access. This particularly applies to women in situations of intimate partner or family violence. The compliance or otherwise of online information to universal web accessibility guidelines also affects women's timely access to such information.

In seeking to access the support of institutional services and legislative frameworks to address violence, blind and vision impaired women continue to be subject to the disadvantages in Australian society posed by low income, language and geographical isolation. These barriers, along with access to transport and legal assistance, place blind and vision impaired women at further disadvantage, reducing their likelihood of accessing such services and remedies.

The high rate of unemployment of vision impaired people in Australia increases the likelihood that a vision impaired woman seeking to leave a violent relationship will have minimal access to independent income to cover the expenses precipitated by her departure.

If a woman in Australia, leaving a situation of family violence has no safe informal accommodation options, a specific service sector exists to support her access to refuge accommodation and accompanying social and legal interventions. The access of blind and vision impaired women to such support services may be impeded by their reliance on public transport and taxis, the latter expensive and both of which may be limited or unreliable, particularly in regional areas.

Accommodation, particularly that made available by women's services exposes vision impaired women to unfamiliar living and geographical environments, whose navigation poses difficulties without appropriate orientation assistance or additional support from already overstretched service staff.

Vision impaired women with minimal economic resources are, like their non-disabled counterparts, reliant on tightly targeted and under funded legal aid or community legal support services. Although anti-discrimination provisions for government and private services exist, women may be unable to obtain the required additional assistance to complete documentation necessary for application for legal remedies for their protection. Court processes further expose blind and vision impaired women to unfamiliar courtroom environments whose navigation may be difficult and stressful without support and/or appropriate lighting and other way finding infrastructure.

Members reported that, during legal proceedings, their evidence was subjected to a lack of credibility, and to judicial attitudes of disbelief in the existence or severity of the violence they were attempting to prevent. Consideration of the enormity of such barriers and accompanying emotional and physical stress may increase the likelihood that vision impaired women will delay or altogether rule out leaving a violent relationship or living environment.

1. **implications of discrimination against women and discriminatory gender stereotypes on violence against women**

Vision impaired women experience the prevailing attitudes and barriers imposed by discrimination and inequality against all Australian women, along with further marginalisation due to their disability status. Apart from the aforementioned implications of vision impairment when accessing violence prevention or intervention programs of government and non-government institutions or the protection of legal frameworks, discriminatory community attitudes heighten women's risk of experiencing intimate partner or other forms of violence, and impose barriers towards their safety. The perception of being targeted for acts of violence in public places directly due to disability, as reported by some of BCA's members, has previously been mentioned in this submission. In addition to the aforementioned perceived unreliability of their legal evidence, blind and vision impaired women may also face community or institutional attitudes of disbelief when reporting their experiences of violence, due to misguided public perceptions of immunity from such treatment due to vision impairment, or the greater credence given to the community status or perspective of their abusive partner. It was reported to BCA that this may be particularly true in small rural communities, where the high community status of a perpetrator of family violence may be upheld at the expense of the credibility of his blind or vision impaired family member seeking assistance. The view of vision-impaired women as dependent and passive, may reinforce inequality due to both gender and disability status.

1. **gaps and challenges in fulfilling the State’s obligations to eliminate violence against women (prevention, protection, prosecution)**

The foregoing presentation of the experiences and concerns of some members of BCA paints a disturbing picture of the poor community and institutional response to violence against women who are blind or vision impaired. Although violence against women in Australia has received recent public prominence, and has been the subject of several investigations and policy initiatives of state and Commonwealth government, little discussion or exploration has occurred of the specific experiences and needs faced by women who are blind and vision impaired.

Though by no means an exhaustive list, the invisibility of blind and vision impaired women is evident in various recent explorations of violence against women in Australia, as illustrated by the examples below:

<https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/PVAW/NCAS/NCAS-StakeholderReport_2014.pdf?la=en>

<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/news/stories/report-violence-against-women-australia-wide-issue>

<http://www.women.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/280912/Reporting_Violence_to_the_Police_-_BOCSAR_survey.pdf>

<https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan_accessible.pdf>

http.rcfv.com.au

1. **good practices aimed at promoting gender equality and eliminating violence against women, including data collection initiatives to prevent femicide and all forms of gender based violence**

Though the reports of our members of their fear of or lived experience of violence anecdotally indicates its occurrence, no specific data is collected in Australia regarding the prevalence of violence against blind and vision impaired women, further contributing to the invisibility of their experiences and diminishing attention to their needs.

Similarly, the anecdotal input from BCA's members for this submission did not describe best practice responses to violence against women who are blind or vision impaired. However, headway is being made in the recognition of the need to implement services and responses towards women with disabilities within a human rights framework, reflective of Australia's obligations as a signatory to United Nations Conventions on Ending all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Rights of People with Disabilities. A recent project evaluating Australia's national telephone and online counselling service for women on the basis of its accessibility to women with disabilities (<http://wwda.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/WWDA_1800Project_Final_Report.docx>) has attempted to address these obligations within its recommendations, positioning women with disabilities as rights holders whose lived experience of disability and violence informs service provision. Notably, the recommendations made in this project promote service provision which responds to the specific needs of women with disabilities, rather than expecting their adaptation to existing practices.

### Limitations

In seeking to provide input for this submission, BCA is aware of the following limitations:

* BCA's information was derived from members who responded to our voluntary invitation to share their views and experiences rather than a comprehensive survey of all our members. Such an exercise might have yielded richer and more specific quantitative as well as qualitative data.
* The information presented in this submission does not portray the specific experiences of blind and vision impaired women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, nor of Aboriginal women, whose experience of higher rates of both vision impairment and violence is well recognised. (See, for example <http://www.vision2020australia.org.au/our-work/indigenous-eye-health> and <http://anrows.org.au/sites/default/files/Fast-Facts---Indigenous-family-violence.pdf>).

### Conclusion

Blind Citizens Australia submits the above information in the hope that it will inform the research of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. Blind Citizens Australia would be pleased to supply further information as required by the Special Rapporteur, and values the opportunity for further advocacy on behalf of our members through this mechanism.