MDP.
PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

PHOTOGRAPHERS AS CHANGEMAKERS

2020

BY
MITCH
NIVALIS

SUPPORTED BY:

CREATIVE VICTORIA

REGIONAL ARTS VICTORIA

PHOTOGRAPHERS OF TODAY CREATE THE IMAGES THAT WILL INFLUENCE THE SOCIETAL CONSTRUCTS AND BELIEFS OF TOMORROW

- MITCH NIVALIS

“If more photographers thought (about how their images shape beliefs), we could potentially live in a very different society...
We’re in a world now where we're bombarded by imagery. People take those images, photographers make those images. If they started thinking a little bit more ethically and with a social conscience, you know, there wouldn't be girls that are anorexic cause they're trying to look like the models in the fashion magazines.
You know, this is just one example.
The photography community has so much power and they don't even realise it a lot of the time.”

(Quote from a female photographer during this research project)

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MDP Photography and Video acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land this research project was created on, the Dja Dja Warrung people, along with the custodians of the land of all the photographers interviewed across Victoria. We recognise sovereignty was never ceded and pay respect to elders past, present and emerging. May we walk together, side by side, now and into the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mitch Nivalis is a photographer, film maker, photography educator and public speaker based near Castlemaine in Regional Victoria. They founded their company MDP Photography and Video in 2007 and followed it on with photography education company With Camera in Hand in 2012. Mitch's passion is working on projects around advocacy for diverse groups within the community (Indigenous, LGBTIQ, Multicultural, Disability), education, mental health and the arts.

Mitch currently works with Women's Health Grampians as a lived experience public speaker and consults with organisations, conducting image audits to identify areas of the community that are being left out visually.

Photographers as changemakers is their first research project.

info@mdpphotovideo.com.au | mdpphotovideo.com.au | 0415 090 061

NOTE: This project was born out of a personal curiosity and not intended to be a formal academic research study. While all effort was made to ensure the questions were well considered, the study was conducted professionally and the data analysed with care and an open mind, ultimately this is a small study conducted by one person. Qualitative data is at times difficult to decipher and there were many moments during interviews where a photographer answered one way, then later in the interview added more information that contradicted their earlier statements, or gave more information to suggest their actions were different to their words. In these instances, I've done my best to work out which is the greater truth, particularly in the section on quantitative questions.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

In 2019, I was selected, along with 10 other diverse women across the Wimmera Region in Victoria to train and deliver lived experience public speaking to organisations in Regional Victoria for Women's Health Grampians *"Equality for All"* program.

In my talks, I draw on my lived experience from an LGBTIQ perspective to join the dots on the role photography is playing in helping to lay the foundations for gender inequality and as a result, family violence. The impacts of advertising, film and television on gender inequality have been documented previously both in Australia and abroad [1]. However when I began looking for research, not just on photography in Australia, but also photographers' perspectives on this topic, I found there was a gap.

I've had great responses from organisations I've spoken to and I know there are many companies in Regional Victoria now reflecting on the types of images they commission and show. But for significant change to take place, not only do organisations need to be more aware of the images they are commissioning, selecting for websites, reports and promotional material, equally, so do photographers.

Prior to this project the questions I started asking myself were:

- Do photographers in Regional Victoria believe the images they create can influence social change, particularly in relation to gender inequality?
- Do photographers understand the link between images that are stereotypical, sexualised or that reinforce gender roles with gender inequality and family violence?
- If photographers understood the potential for their images to create social change, would they be thinking, creating and talking differently when working with clients?

It is widely recognised that the key driver of violence against women is gender inequality [2]

Rigid gender stereotypes, gender roles and the sexualisation of women are just some of the ways gender inequality plays out.

Photography plays a large role in shifting the narrative about what men and women look like as well as the roles they play in work and home life and how they are viewed. It is these ideas that have created the foundation for this project.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data was collected from interviews conducted over Zoom during July, August & September in 2020, during the lockdown of Covid-19 when many photographers were out of work. 18 photographers (11 women and 7 men) across Regional Victoria were interviewed. Participants were asked a series of questions exploring their thoughts on the role of photography in general, reflections on the role of their own photography as well as their experiences as a working photographer. The interviews also touched on photographers' understanding of the connection between photography, gender inequality and family violence.

RECRUITMENT FOR INTERVIEWS

An initial call out was put out on social media (various pages and groups on Facebook and Instagram). Some photographers themselves responded, while others were tagged by friends. From social media, only women responded, while even those men who were tagged or contacted specifically didn't respond.

Next a Google search was done for photographers in areas that had not yet been covered in Regional Victoria, with a focus on finding male photographers, as well as photographers from diverse backgrounds (Multicultural, Indigenous, Disability). Of the 24 male photographers contacted, 10 responded (14 did not respond), with 7 agreeing to participate. Of the 17 female photographers contacted, 14 responded (3 did not respond) and only 11 were selected to participate in order to try to achieve more of a gender balance in the responses.

Ultimately the demographic included photographers who identified as migrant (1) Indigenous (1) LGBTIQ (1), living with a disability (1) with the majority of photographers being Caucasian.

Photographers were aged from 30's to 70's and all were currently (apart from Covid interruptions) participating in the industry.

Genres of photography included Weddings, Family, Corporate, Commercial, Art, Industrial, Boudouir, Portrait, Photojournalism, Fashion, Editorial and Lifestyle.

QUESTIONS

The below direct questions were asked during interviews and answers categorised as yes, no or maybe / sometimes

QUESTION	YES	NO	MAYBE / SOMETIMES
DO YOU PROVIDE INPUT ON DIVERSITY BEFORE A SHOOT?	WOMEN - 5 MEN - 0	WOMEN - 3 MEN - 6	WOMEN - 3 MEN - 1
DO YOU BELIEVE PHOTOGRAPHY CAN PLAY A ROLE IN CREATING SOCIAL CHANGE?	WOMEN - 11 MEN - 7	WOMEN - 0 MEN - 0	WOMEN - 0 MEN - 0
DO YOU BELIEVE **YOUR** PHOTOGRAPHY CAN PLAY A ROLE IN CREATING SOCIAL CHANGE?	WOMEN - 10 MEN - 0	WOMEN - 0 MEN - 5	WOMEN - 1* MEN - 4*
DO YOU HAVE A STRONG UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IS CONSIDERED TO BE THE KEY DRIVER OF FAMILY VIOLENCE?	WOMEN - 2 MEN - 1	WOMEN - 5 MEN - 6	WOMEN - 4 MEN - 0
DO YOU FEEL CONNECTED TO THE PHOTOGRAPHIC INDUSTRY (EITHER LOCALLY, STATE WIDE OR NATIONALLY)?	WOMEN - 4 MEN - 2	WOMEN - 6 MEN - 5	WOMEN - 1 MEN - 0
AS A PHOTOGRAPHER HAVE YOU EVER FELT DESCRIMINATED AGAINST, OR MADE TO FEEL LIKE YOU WON'T BE GOOD AT YOUR JOB?	WOMEN - 9 MEN - 0	WOMEN - 2 MEN - 5	WOMEN - 0 MEN - 2**

*The men and women in this category only saw their personal work as having the ability to create social change, but they had a strong personal practice for this outlet
** The men in this category were both photojournalists and were referring to journalists, who see photographers as being less important. So this was about heirarchy in newspapers rather than gender discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

As a young person growing up, I always felt like something was wrong with me. The clothes I wanted to wear were “boys clothes”, the games I liked playing were “too rough for girls” the haircut I wanted wouldn’t make me look "as pretty as long hair does”. I looked to teen magazines, books, newspapers, and posters in shopping centres, but couldn’t find any proof that it was ok to be the type of girl I was. I played soccer and T-ball but at 10 years old I was told I was no longer allowed to play. I was the only girl in both teams and the club rules were that from 11 onwards girls weren’t allowed to play in boys teams. At the time, there was no such thing as a girls soccer team and the next step on from T-Ball meant the boys went on to Baseball, getting to pitch overarm which I loved, while the girls went on to Softball, pitching underarm. So I stopped playing sport, until a few years later our club began the first women’s soccer team and at 13 years old I joined the 17 women’s team.

I was asked recently at a talk I was giving - “when does gender inequality start?” and my answer was, from birth. It starts with gender reveal parties, where blue is popped if it’s a boy and pink if it’s a girl. It continues with the clothes that are bought for girls and boys, with the colours and words on them - “superhero” for boys and “gorgeous” for girls. It’s reinforced when children walk into toy stores and the girls toys are all packaged in pastels and sparkles, while the boys toys are draped in camouflage and tout adventure and action. And it continues in moments like the one I experienced with my sports teams. In that moment, the boys in the team learned (although not consciously) that they get to do whatever they want without limitations and I learned that it’s not my right to play the sport I want to play in the team I’ve been a part of. The boys learned they are strong and fast, while I was told from 11 years on, I am fragile and need protecting - which was strange at the time, considering I was still the same size as all of them, if not bigger than some and I was just as fast, just as rough and just as skilled.

In today’s world, we are saturated with images that influence the way we think about men and women. The ‘rules’ that have been created by parents, sporting clubs, businesses and the education system to name just a few, have been created by people influenced by these same images. These images mostly filter into our brains unconsciously and form, or reinforce our beliefs.[3]

Considering we see thousands of images every day across advertising, news, entertainment and social media, that's a huge amount of information we are processing without even realising it.

And of course it's not just our unconscious bias about men and women that is being influenced. Intersectionality - where gender inequality along with other forms of discrimination or disadvantage overlap - is also impacted by photography. [4]

Our beliefs about people of colour, Australia's First Nations people, people living with a disability, older people and the LGBTIQ community are also shaped by photographs. If you are living in Australia today, how often do you see positive images of Indigenous Australians? How often do you see images of people with a disability advertising something that's not related to their disability? How often do you see images of same sex couples when a mainstream article calls for an image of a family?

The problem is not stereotypical images. The problem occurs when the majority of images we see are stereotypical. It means in our unconscious, we start to form ideas about what is 'normal'. And when we see something that doesn't fit that idea, we think of it as an exception to the rule if we're okay with it, or something to be rallied against - as in the case of the Taylah Harris AFL image - if we're not okay with it.

So if people viewing images are largely unconscious about the way they are being influenced, what are the people creating those images thinking? Are images being **consciously** created by photographers? Are they being **consciously** commissioned by clients?

If few people are being conscious during the commissioning, creation or viewing of images in Australia today, then how will anything ever change?

This research project set out to see what photographers are thinking and if their photography's impact on gender inequality is part of their thought process. Are there discussions being had prior to a shoot with clients to make sure if there's an opportunity to challenge a stereotype, it's taken? While on a shoot, are photographers consciously noticing who they put in which role?

The more we talk about this issue, the more it moves to the front of our minds. A number of photographers mentioned challenging stereotypes feels 'forced', but is that a reason not to do it? Something generally feels forced when it's not common place. So isn't our job to notice what's not normally noticed and use our photographs to draw people's eyes towards what would otherwise go unseen? We can only do this if we start to look in a different way. **Looking and working consciously and with awareness of gender inequality.**

RESEARCH FINDINGS

SOCIAL CHANGE

This is the only question where 100% of the photographers, both men and women had the same perspective overall. Yes, photography has the capacity to create social change.

“I think it's got the ability to grab attention and shock people into learning more... honestly I think social change without imagery, there just wouldn't be the same connection and the same willingness to go, Okay, what is this? And what do I need to know more about it?” (Female Photographer)

"Absolutely. And that's what I used to love about newspaper photography." (Male Photographer)

"Images are so influential and we're surrounded by them, whether it's, you know, dickheads on Instagram showing you how amazingly symmetrical and perfect their eyebrows are, or, you know, showing you what's happening in war zones" (Female Photographer)

When we think about photographs that have had an impact, usually our thoughts turn to those images where seemingly one glance can send ripples of outrage, grief or disbelief around societies causing a seismic shift in our beliefs. Images that came up multiple times with the photographers that I interviewed for this study were ones most of us know. The photo by Nick Ut of Phan Thi Kim Phuc (otherwise known as napalm girl), that ended the Vietnam war was mentioned several times. More recently and closer to home, the image by Michael Wilson of Taylah Harris kicking a football was also mentioned, which is more closely aligned to the impetus of this study. A girl kicking a football on a green field in a safe, easy-going country like Australia. What should have been a very ordinary image. So why did it blow up on social media?

Because it challenged what some people fundamentally believe about the role of women in our society.

"I think we're probably at the forefront of this all changing. So hopefully in the next few years, it'll all calm down and people get more used to seeing those sort of images and it will become 'who cares' because it's just, it's part of sport in general. It doesn't have to be male or female. It's just sport." (Male Photographer)

So it's the ordinary, every day images that challenge gender roles and stereotypes that we need to see more of, until they are less novelty and more common everyday images. This is the tipping point, where social constructs start to change. And every area of photography can play a part. As one photographer noted:

"**I have massive issues with wedding photography...there just seems to be such a male gaze when it comes to the dominant images, which is the woman being handed over to the male, leading the bride...leaving one family to belong to another family"** (Female Photographer)

Some conversations led to the believability of a photograph today. Knowing how much can be manipulated, do we even believe photography on it's own?

"It just depends on how it's used when it comes down to the way that it's portrayed and you know, you can portray one photo in many different ways." (Male Photographer)

"I'm not sure that I can just trust only seeing a photographic image. 'Cause it might've been fiddled with and I wouldn't believe it. So I need, I need the verbal extra stuff for me to believe the integrity of the image. (Female Photographer)

Photographers also brought attention to the fact that it's not just photographers creating images in today's society. Almost everyone in Australia has a phone that has a camera and people post their photos to social media. Whether that's an ordinary person, or the new breed of social media "influencer" these images also have the potential to either challenge or perpetuate gender stereotypes. If we are constantly sensoring ourselves, or orchestrating images to achieve a certain look, we perpetuate those looks and aspirations.

"Instagram, for example, mostly everyone's feed looks the same because they think this is what it has to look like rather than, well, it's not real. It might be pretty to look at, but it's not really being real." (Female Photographer)

"If an influencer was changing the way they look or manipulating, their look to make someone believe something that isn't true and the pressure put on women to appear a certain way. And all of those things, you know, there's a whole belief system that sort of arises through that, you know, the pressure put on young women and young men and all of those things, you know, that's changing someone's opinion through a photo too. (Male Photographer)

SOCIAL CHANGE AND YOUR OWN PHOTOGRAPHY

While every photographer acknowledged the potential for photography to influence social change, it was a very different story when photographers reflected on their own images, particularly photographers who saw their work primarily as a business.

There was some consistency with those photographers who worked more in the art space, where they were more directed by their own interest and in the large part, photographic artists' interests were in creating social change.

"I think that's the whole reason why I did photography in general, to be able to explore those deeper, deeper meanings, to be able to show different points of view, to bring attention to certain issues. Otherwise, why do it?" (Female Photographer)

"A lot of my work personally has been done to create social change or social awareness on issues. So I've done series on homelessness, I've done series on, um, litter. Um, I've done series on depression and mental illness and all of these topics are really close to my heart... but it's also about creating awareness in the community." (Female Photographer)

But while personal work was where some photographers saw their ability to make a statement about issues they care about, not all agreed personal work was possible.

"**Me? I haven't got time for that. I think it's just bullshit, I haven't got time... I'm trying to survive. I've got bills to pay. I've got a mortgage to pay. I've got a family."** (Male Photographer)

For those who work in spaces like corporate, commercial, family, weddings - essentially any area where you are commissioned to create images, there was a gender difference between awareness of a photographers' capacity to still influence the outcome of these images to challenge gender stereotypes.

"**Honestly, I'd have to say no, I don't, I don't see my commercial and corporate work that way."** (Male Photographer)

"I will always photograph to challenge a stereotype if that, you know, if I have even like a half an opportunity, because I'm - one, interested in that and, and two, it's just gonna make it, you know, selfishly it's just gonna make the photo stronger, simple as that." (Female Photographer)

"I've never gone out with... on a mission to change anything. And if I do, I always come back disappointed. If I've ever had that thought, I've always thought, no that's crap. Let someone else do it." (Male Photographer)

"I suppose I do my own little bit towards that in that I'm like, I'm all about capturing you, not making you look like someone else and your relationships are unique. And I think, yeah, so much of what you see on social media and you know, marketing materials and stuff. It's just, it's advertising. It's not actually a capture." (Female Photographer)

The last campaign we did...I was saying, can we get different, you know, instead of just having like the skinny white girls type of thing, look at other ones...But she (the client) was actually saying that there's actually very limited options say with, if you're getting a professional talent that represent that diversity...So I almost think it goes back a bit further. It's almost like those agencies and things need to be giving more options. And if on their books, if they've got like 50% skinny white girls and 50% of more diverse models that will make companies think about how they might want to represent that brand. So it wasn't as simple as I thought. (Female Photographer)

"I don't think there's any harm that can come from the work that I'm doing personally." (Male Photographer)

"That's probably been the big change for me in my personal work. Not so much my 'work' work, because let's be honest, you don't get much creativity in a school photograph or even commercial photography when you're working to a brief but in my personal work that I'm doing now, it's entirely about stories and what I've got to say...There's a lot of environmental stuff that's coming through, which I wouldn't have said 15 years ago that I would have done, that's obviously becoming more important to me." (Male Photographer)

"It can be a little daunting, but you know, it does feel like a big shift when you move the content like that and the language. I think it's important and I can continue to do it." (Female Photographer)

CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

Once the conversations moved on to more general ideas of diversity and challenging stereotypes, more photographers talked about ways they were making their photographs more inclusive, even if some of them hadn't thought about that as being related to social change.

"We wouldn't write back and say it, but I've done it when I get out on the job... and give it as much of a gender balance, for want of another term as, as we can. So I, no I probably don't make a big deal of it." (Male Photographer)

"I think I kind of, it's not so obvious, but subtly I'll do that too. For example, I was photographing at a very small school recently, and it's definitely about mixing in... for example, I'm photographing the kitchens that the kids learned to cook in. No, it's not just the girls. It's just such small things (that you can do)." (Female Photographer)

"There's these social norms, I guess, that are quite frustrating. So whenever I get the opportunity and to be honest, when it comes to client work, I might shoot both which keeps (the client) getting what they had in their mind, but it also allows me the ability to shoot something different that they go, Oh, actually that does work." (Female Photographer)

"I don't stereotype because you just don't know. You don't know when you start talking to people, they've got the stories and they come from different walks of life." (Male Photographer)

"Whether I look at it as a gender equality thing, I go, Is this gonna make a better shot...because it's a bit different. So even though it might fall into those parameters of all, that it's good to show a woman in charge or woman on top or whatever the case may be. It makes a better picture...but it's up to us." (Male Photographer)

"If you receive a brief that has a potential to kind of show things in a certain light and way, why would you not do it?... There's just so many elements to take into consideration and what you can do. I think that the process after you received the brief, that the thinking process should include all of these elements" (Female Photographer)

"I think you have to educate your client into what would work better for them rather than what they can just see as the obvious." (Male Photographer)

It's not a forceful conversation or anything like that. It's more like, Hey, actually, have you thought of maybe trying this, or this idea just to bring us out of what we are used to seeing as well, just to give people a little bit more information because not all your clients are male and not all your clients are female, or in between, so yeah." (Female Photographer)

An important aspect to recognise in the creation of images in a commercial sense, is that photographers are ultimately responding to clients and this has it's own challenges.

"**I think it comes back to how far along in your career you are as well, where if you're just starting out, you probably wouldn't be saying that kind of push back to clients or whatever, but once you're at a certain point where maybe you feel comfortable. Either you feel comfortable to speak out because of the certain type of client, or you don't care if you don't get the job because you don't need the work."** (Female Photographer)

"I think when you're getting paid to do a job and you've got a brief that you've got to meet...you're not going to push those boundaries as much as maybe an artist would... I think the commercial photography industry, it's, it's not without photographers in it that want to make change. It's just more challenging." (Female Photographer)

"First and foremost, I know that I have to get paid...But, if there's an opportunity there to, to take it beyond what the brief is, I'll do it. And I think they want me to do it actually. " (Female Photographer)

Photographers also acknowledged the gendered nature of posing in photography. Some photographers having adapted their posing as time has changed, others still feel the traditional approach is important. While this wasn't a specific question asked it only came up for male photographers, suggesting women are less likely to use traditional gendered notions of posing.

"**I think you unconsciously do it in how you pose men and women sometimes. I was brought up with male and female poses. You had to put a woman in this pose. You had to put a man in that pose. 'Cause that's what you did in 1988. You've thrown all of that out the door, really. Which is, which is really good."** (Male Photographer)

"I guess sometimes, you know, if a woman is perceived to be, I guess, sexy in a way, you know, naturally that makes the photo a little bit better. I guess giving more power to the, to the woman in the photograph, presenting her as proud and strong rather than sexy, is, is probably a way (to challenge gender stereotypes), I would imagine. I don't know, I've never considered this before." (Male Photographer)

"There are basic rules that you must know and you go, you know, that foot is wrong. You know, they shouldn't be sitting like that. You know, girls with legs apart and all, you know, you just, you just know you gotta to give them that ballet look" (Male Photographer)

ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES IN REGIONAL VICTORIA

Some photographers mentioned issues like clients from Melbourne not understanding locations or some having preconceived ideas of what "country" should look like.

Surprisingly many photographers felt Regional audiences are open to viewing images that challenge stereotypes, because people are more progressive than it's assumed. So the notion that Regional areas are more "behind the times" compared to the city is perhaps also an outdated concept which allows for the narrative of images to be shifted even more so.

"Do you know, I, I'm pleasantly surprised, I think 90% of the time the locals around here are really receptive to it. Which kind of surprises me sometimes, that they're willing to kind of push the boundaries a little bit and, and not just go with the flow all the time." (Female Photographer)

"People have changed a lot and especially living in central Victoria where there's a lot of, probably relationships that are different to stereotypical relationships too. So, it tends to be something that is better off here because that's the case. Whereas you go into the suburbs in Melbourne and everybody's exactly, you know, how they were 20 years ago." (Male Photographer)

"It's interesting just as an aside of what - certainly working for newspapers - what they expect a country scene, a rural scene to look like now that you got a job in a farm or something, I mean, everyone's got a laptop...you know, say it's a scientist and you go, let's get an atmospheric shot, show us your workshop. It's a bloody laptop. You know, you want beakers and bubbles and you know, dry ice and atmosphere... So often what I'm confronted with doing rural shots for city wackers is... I mean... to my eternal shame, I've got a beaten up Acubra in the back of the bloody car. Now that's appeared in probably 40 pictures, you know, from prime ministers to whatever, I say, Hey, put this on, at least get rid of that city." (Male Photographer)

This last comment in part at least suggests photographers are responsible for - and play an active role in changing - the perceptions of Regional Victoria.

Being located in Regional Victoria also created barriers for engaging with Industry bodies, as a number made similar comments to the one below:

"Being in a regional city, just one hour out of Melbourne, it was just almost impossible to actually get to the meetings or catch-ups that they had. So I felt really excluded, really excluded, and that's why I left (my membership)." (Female photographer)

UNCONSCIOUS IMAGE CREATION

Following on from some of the previous quotes throughout this report, a number of photographers mentioned hoping that they were just unconsciously doing the right thing in terms of gender stereotypes and diversity and inclusion. Some of those who had thought about it, or care about it, are relying on doing things unconsciously.

“I guess it's always... under the surface and it's unconscious in a way. But talking about it makes you a bit more passionate to learn a little bit more and, and kind of go, okay, next job that comes up...” (Female photographer)

"It's not consciously in my head because I don’t think that's the sort of person I really am, whereas my dad might be different, but, you know, my kids might be a step further, you know, more progressive. So I don't know. I don’t know. It's never something conscious that I think of." (Male Photographer)

"So you get inspiration from places and I think even subconsciously you're taking in and it makes you think when you’re doing your little tiny local country, shoot, how can I kind of broaden the horizons for everyone and welcome everyone from every community" (Female Photographer)

"I think it's been so gradual that it's probably been unconscious that as you deal with more CEOs that are women coming in for corporate headshots. And again, when we first started, corporate headshots was 95% male to do, so that was just what you did. And if you'd looked on our website, it would probably have been... geez, I'm going to look at my website and see what the ratio is of men and women now in head shots. 'Cause I didn't even think about it...So that's really interesting, I'm writing a note now to check my website." (Male Photographer)

"I've always been interested in that kind of like, social responsibility. Yeah, I mean that's important to me personally...But then I just realised, Oh, there's another whole massive thing to this and maybe I'm not working as inclusively as I could be, or I think I am." (Female Photographer)

"I tend to look at things as they are and just try and accept how people feel rather than push any sort of views on people. And I think people will change... So, I suppose, yeah, it wouldn't be a conscious thing." (Male Photographer)

PHOTOGRAPHER OR CLIENT - WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

The truth is, more conscious conversations need to happen between clients and photographers prior to a shoot to ensure the resulting images are shifting the narrative on gender roles and stereotypes. As mentioned previously, this is a challenge for photographers who are afraid that speaking up might lose them a job. But ultimately, photographers are aware they have a sense of responsibility, even if they don't talk to the client about what they are doing.

"I would say it is both. Usually if we're doing stuff on the playground, promotional stuff for schools, you would always make sure that you have a gender balance of male and female. Why would you show all one male sided things...We see it as our responsibility to, to make sure that the job gets done and that it's representative of the community we live in." (Male photographer)

"I think a lot of, a lot of clients that I work with...they often look to the photographer for guidance. So you do have that role where you can lead them to think of something that they might not have thought of before" (Female Photographer)

"If we're being booked by Melbourne firms... they've never been here before, so they don't know what to do. So they just kind of rely on, on us really to do it. We probably have input, but usually I must confess we probably comply with what the client's after." (Male Photographer)

"If somebody wanted a production or a series of photographs about an issue and there were only men who were involved, I think I'd be sort of saying, well...we better have more of a balance there. Yeah, that'd be fairly obvious to, to ask the question, I guess." (Male Photographer)

"They (the clients) don't know. But yes, it's up to us to say this is an option." (Female Photographer)

On top of this, photographers also noted that briefs received directly from clients in Regional Victoria are often unclear, or not as in depth as they would be for photographers who work with agencies that are more likely to be considering social climates along with brand marketing.

"I work with a lot of agencies and places like that where they will really nail the brief...then when there isn't an agency involved, you may need to help the customer evolve their thinking." (Male Photographer)

“Because we're out in the country. Like they send us a paragraph or two of what they want. And honestly, sometimes the biggest problem with briefs is that they don’t tell you what they want half the time. Maybe you wouldn't get that in Melbourne in the bigger commercial or corporate jobs. So maybe, maybe that's a difference that they expect us to, to know what to do.” (Male Photographer)

"If you look at graphic design agencies, who are more orientated, you know, your good branding agencies, the messaging is a lot more considered through those style realisations. And you tend to get better briefs, which are related to building a brand and building, I guess visual language and building, you know, the right tone of voice. They're a lot more considered briefs" (Male Photographer)

"Well certainly with newspapers, as far as I'm concerned, they don't have any idea of what they want, you know, they only know what they don't want. But you sell it, you sell the idea" (Male Photographer)

"Every time I've done something through an agency, I've had a lot more, a lot more direction than with the client, with a direct client job. Because they're sort of on the pulse all the time, whereas a client will just think we need photos for this, you know, so it's always good to be sourced by an agency that has a clear idea of what they want and has a really good brief. But that doesn't happen anymore. There are a couple, a couple of jobs I did last year, but, yeah, but I've just found it's mostly dealing with clients now, straight clients, so it needs to be trying to, you know, talk to them and just do what they want, you know?" (Male Photographer)

"Being in a Regional area, sometimes you've just got clients who have, who've never engaged a photographer before, and got very little idea of the process or what's involved or cost or anything. And so, sometimes you know, even though you do try and have influence over the process, sometimes you’re just too busy to hold their hand too much as well, because you just need to get the job. You can't make a second job out of just helping them for the rest of your life, you know?" (Male photographer)

PHOTOGRAPHERS THOUGHTS ON GENDER EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Most photographers believed gender equality was important, but were also able to reflect on what they'd noticed in their personal lives, careers and in training relating to diversity of race and other intersectional areas.

"I grew up with no black faces on TV. The, the only really multicultural faces were that of Acropolis now. And, you know, very tongue in cheek taking the piss of different cultures. So there was nothing that I could see on TV that made me proud and made me think that I could, I could achieve greatness. I always thought that education was for those people in Toorak, you know, the people on the TV and the people in all the imagery, they were all white fellas. So it wasn't for us. And I think, that hasn't changed a great deal." (Female Photographer)

"Over 50% of photographers now are women. And yet you'd go to something like (a photography event) or something like that. And it might be two women speaking, or you go to a different one and there would be one person speaking or, and the rest of them men, there was several ones I saw...that was just all men. And they just haven't bothered to try and find a woman that could talk on those topics." (Female Photographer)

"There's no need to have any discrimination whatsoever because women can do everything as well as the men given the right training, the right aptitude. So this whole thing that they can't do it. They can't kick a football or cricket ball or whatever it may be in business or whatever they're doing. I think for a long time it probably was, yeah, it was very much categorized into this, that's a man's job. That's a woman's job. I think it's changing a lot, which is great." (Male Photographer)

"In my understanding of my work and my teaching, like I've become a bit more aware of like, yes, I show a lot of female photography work and, you know, a variety of a range of gender, but I'd really didn't know many...photographers of color and so I'm making more of an effort to learn about their work and to include it... because it's so geared towards white men in photographic history a lot of the time. So I'd like to not contribute to that anymore." (Female Photographer)

"There's a lot of stupid people out there who believe what they will see or read in the shitty trashy newspapers instead of, you know, having a thought for themselves ... unfortunately (on the cover) it's normally, you know, pretty girls in bikinis in summer or footballers in winter, that's what they think is a good front page." (Male Photographer)

"I've never really subscribed to the - I know that they look beautiful - but the mother daughter photos that are really over the top fancy with flowers and dresses and all that stuff. And there's people who have a whole photography career just in that. And I cringe 'cause you don't see them doing the same with the boys... I think that gives the impression that a daughter is a toy or a, an object." (Female Photographer)

"I started to kind of write down what my values were that I suppose I live my life by them... I actually made a switch where I was kind of like, all right, I'll put these values on my website. I took off any jobs that didn't fit those kind of values...So I suppose it's like, you, you get hired for what you, people see you as... because you'll be at hired for what you put out into the world. So it kinda makes sense. You know, if you're putting up all these images of diverse people, you'll get the clients you want, I suppose, because they'll see that and want to hire you for it." (Female Photographer)

I'm exploring a lot of, you know, memory and, and dislocation and all this things, you know, living as a migrant in a, in another country who, left the whole family behind. There's certainly, there's never a shortage of, you know, reflections and things that pull you in two directions. It's about discrimination. It's about love. It's about belonging. It's about living in between two places and exploring what it really means." (Female Photographer)

"I do have that opportunity to promote a lot of people just from my relationship with the editors. And so I would say that I can get a lot of women, women led businesses, all of those kinds of things, some press, but I think where it's lacking is the diversity... it's, that's the diversity of either size or race or whatever. I think that's still sorely lacking." (Female Photographer)

"We have a reasonable (sized) Koorie community here. And that's an aspect that we often get directly asked for, but it is something that we often do, as well, that if we know that there's someone Koorie on site, we will often ask for them to be involved in the photo shoot. And that's a great example, I guess it's a similar sort of thing." (Male Photographer)

"It makes me think about the stuff that I do and that it is very easy to do what you think people want you to do rather than what feels like the right thing for yourself to do." (Female Photographer)

PHOTOGRAPHERS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS MORE LIKELY TO BE CONSCIOUS OF DIVERSITY

A trend that emerged throughout interviews was that people who came from diverse backgrounds themselves, or were closely connected to diversity appeared to be more proactive about consciously looking for opportunities to challenge gender inequality or use their photography to make a difference. This is not to say people who fit comfortably in the mainstream never do, just that it was more likely to be those photographers from diverse backgrounds who were *consciously* creating diverse images.

"I think it's because I grew up as a minority, I'm a female Aboriginal queer artist, feminist, you know, I grew up with immigrant grandparents. Like I won the minority lottery. So I think when you grow up hard or working class or in the low socioeconomic area, you tend to see the injustices in the world and you want to change them.... So I think it's something about knowing what it's like, you know, growing up in poverty, growing up a minority, growing up misunderstood, you know, whether I talk about queerness or blackness or, you know, being a female there's challenges in all of those areas that I've had to face. And I think it gives me empathy for others." (Female Photographer).

"I mean, quite often I have featured women who have had quite a significant role, powerful role in whatever the situation was and, yeah, and I mean, my own personal experience is that my wife is very gender - not typical. She's the, she's a better welder she's, she's our family builder. She's the steel worker. So yeah, a lot of the, the work that I've done with, farming groups, I mean, quite often it's, it's the women or a woman." (Male Photographer)

"I was diagnosed as bipolar several years ago...and I've never felt part of the norm. It's just not been that case...And I guess have that empathy for what it feels like to be excluded." (Female Photographer)

"I'm a survivor of family violence. So I know exactly what's, I have a lived experience of that. And I know so many other survivors that's, you know, it's, it's a systemic change....and, that kind of experience has given me a lot of motivation to kind of never forget about where I come from and what I represent myself and what I believe. So this kind of core belief never changes once you've experienced something like this." (Female Photographer)

The question becomes, if you are privileged enough to be a photographer who fits nicely into the mainstream and have no minority, disadvantage or close connection to someone who does, how do you reach the point where your role in creating social change moves to the front of your mind on every shoot?

“I think that you need some sort of defining moment if you've grown up with privilege, you know, there needs to be a defining moment to open your eyes. So you see how the other half actually live... And you know, when you look at our politicians, most of them went to Ivy league schools and they're supposed to understand us. Like, you need a pivotal defining moment to be able to see through the looking glass. And if you're only surrounded by people that grew up like you, you're probably not going to have that moment.” (Female Photographer)

MORE CONVERSATIONS TO CREATE CHANGE

Perhaps it can be as simple as continuing to have conversations. As photographers - many of us working alone - it's easy to get lost in the practicalities of earning money, securing clients and creating great images. Stepping out of the business long enough to consider the cumulative role of our images on gender inequality is rare. So if we continue talking, we may just recognise the significance of opportunities that would have otherwise passed us by.

"The interview chat pulled a few strands together for me. It is something I would like to put more of an emphasis on in my photography and in my teaching. Although it has been always important to me, I feel I could be more direct about discussing it with clients as part of the "best practice" process of things." (Female Photographer)

"It's really interesting talking to you because you understand what I'm saying. You know, there's a lot of people out there who...set themselves up as a photographer and all that... but if I was to have this conversation with them, they really wouldn't have a clue because to them being a photographer is not something that goes beyond photographing somebody outside their shop floor for them to put up on their website. I know that sounds incredibly elitist, but it's not meant to be. It's just the bloody facts, how they are now." (Female Photographer)

"I totally think as photographers, we can have a huge role in this, but that doesn't mean that everyone's going to want to hear what you're saying. I think this even feels like a bit of a responsibility." (Female Photographer)

DISCRIMINATION

"I think that, yeah, gender discrimination is so prevalent everywhere in every kind of way and situation, but you don't really think about it. It's societal. It's... yeah, it's international, doesn't discriminate on, anyone. It happens to most of people."
(Female Photographer)

The most starkly different responses between male and female photographers was around the question of whether photographers had ever felt discriminated against, or made to feel like they wouldn't be good at their job.

Even those who create images aren't immune to the stereotypes that images perpetuate. In the experience of the photographers in this study, most people expect men to know what they are doing with technology, while many women are questioned on their ability.

Women's experiences included how they are spoken to and treated in camera stores, by other male photographers and by other people when they turn up to a shoot.

MALE EXPERIENCES

"Why do you think I would be discriminated against?"

"No, I've never felt discriminated against as such, but there are times I think as a photographer you doubt yourself...but that's a confidence thing, not a discrimination thing."

"No. I think when you've got $40,000 worth of camera gear hanging off your shoulders, they tend to think, uh, okay. You're not a happy snapper. So luckily that hasn't really happened to me. I think it's how you present yourself too, and the confidence that you, when you turn up to something. If I've turned up with an iPhone, I wouldn't feel that (confident) because you think, yeah. Okay. You're a pretender"

"They (a previous employer) treated women very badly and especially women photographers because it was like, they can't, you know, they don't know how to pick up a camera, they can't lift a camera bag and they don't know what they're doing and they don't understand. And it's such a male orientated business that way."

"I mean, sometimes you naturally, you're a bit nervous about a project or something, but discriminated against? I'm not too sure."

"I mean, my answer would be no, because I, I mean, certainly, in newspapers there'd be a thousand times where you're with a reporter who thinks that their shit doesn't stink, you're just the snapper, but you give it as good as you get."

"No, no, not really. 'Cause, um, it wouldn't worry me anyway cause I just do what I do and if it works, it works, if it doesn't, it doesn't so yeah."

FEMALE EXPERIENCES

"I don't like walking into camera shops. Because the men that work in them, they're all the same kind of blokey, you know, know everything. What would a woman know about photography kind of stuff. "

"I've had the surprise sometimes when... I've rocked up at a job and they're like, 'Oh, you're, you're a girl' like, Oh, Oh. It's like, 'it's a female photographer.' They kind of seem put back or surprised."

"Being in those like media scrums, like where you're at a press conference and stuff. Sometimes you, you feel kind of, the guys kind of take over and you get bumped out of the way."

"I know that female and male photographers are related to in a completely different way. And I, most of the time, worked with my male assistant...So having that you know, equal representation of a male and female was actually extremely helpful to kind of feel how it should be, professional, but not really, you know, being subjected to any kind of unwanted comments and things like that, which definitely helped."

"Mums with cameras? We're not professional. There was a real backlash against women getting into the industry. And it was hilarious because... we didn't want to be photographed by some weird with a mustache. We'd rather have someone who was like us come over and photograph us."

"One of my first like, assisting jobs that I went to meet this guy. And he was huge in the fashion, commercial advertising world. I went to his house for like an interview, just not knowing anything. And he had this like harem of young women there and he was swigging vodka from a bottle and, you know, just a really crazy, crazy interaction telling me, you know, would I be willing to do anything and all of this stuff. And I was like, is this a real moment?"

"I had one trade show where I was doing really really well. And I had lots of people over at my stand and the other two (photographers) were just standing around and later the guy came over to me and he goes, 'but you've got a husband' and I went, 'yeah'. And he's going, 'so you don't really need to be doing this.' He goes, 'I've got a wife and kids to support'. I went, 'how old are your kids?' And he goes, 'they're 10 and eight.' And I said, 'well, she can get a job'. He said 'no, I've got to support her. She's my wife'. And I went, 'I'm sorry, man. That's just not how the world works anymore. I actually make an income. You didn't know what my husband works as and how that all works with our family. And I need to make an income for my family to survive. It doesn't work that way. I can't not work'."

FEMALE EXPERIENCES cont'd

"...He (a photography teacher) turns around and goes - Yeah but you don't really need to make an income. You've got a second income in your family, your husband pays for everything doesn't he? And I'm like, no, actually that's not how it works in my house...I just find that really... So presumptuous. And so stereotypical. And condescending. Just really condescending."

"There's been definitely moments of discomfort when I was studying, there are a lot of those like men from the eighties, from the industry that were pretty like, the way they spoke and the preference to the guys in the class was pretty extreme. And women were like, to the point of not encouraged as much like it was pretty clearly a preferential treatment given. Not the whole way through and not by everyone, but it was definitely there."

"I was exhibiting...and some male photographer who also had images... was very sort of disparaging about my work...And he was just going, oh they're crap photos and crap paper. Why would you do that? He just sort of wiped me off and didn't even ask me any questions about what I was doing or why, or it was just...He more or less said, no, I don't think stuff like that should be in the (exhibition)."

"Definitely. I know when I was starting out, I was this teeny tiny blonde from the country and yeah, it, it was amazing. It's interesting people assume, they make the assumption that being female I'll be really good at the creative side, but not good at the technical or the computer side of things... I try and reassure them that I know the ins and outs as well as a male counterpart in this sort of area."

"I started in 1976 and in Melbourne, there were two photographers who were female... and I did corporate industrial, and it was really, really tough breaking into that. I can remember distinctly having a marketing manager at some corporation saying to me that he would never employ a female on industrial sites because there's never a toilet"

"The biggest time, I feel uncomfortable in the industry is walking into a photography store in the city. I feel like I'm talked to like I'm an idiot and it's, I think it's just because I'm female and they assume I'm not big or that I run a business or that I have money... It's such a boys club, in those stores. Just that sensation of, you don't know anything that you're talking about, you can't possibly know anything technical that always frustrates me."

FEMALE EXPERIENCES cont'd

Where two women stated they've never felt discriminated against, it appeared they are in unique situations in terms of their photographic career. Either working mostly with women as their clients or working more in line with the arts industry, rather than the photography industry and so don't tend to have clients in the same way.

"I always feel like people are excited to have you come and work with them. And it's like a really positive thing. So yeah, never really encountered that kind of thing. And maybe because it's not such a male dominated space that I work in, I don't know. It's always been pretty good."

"I never really fit the photography industry's idea of what a photographer is. And I didn't want to, you know, I wouldn't be pigeonholed, you know, particularly because women artists and women photographers and Aboriginal artists are already pigeonholed enough and I refuse to subscribe to that bullshit, really. Yeah. So, if I was discriminated against, I wasn't really aware of it."

It was also acknowledged that sometimes being a woman can work in your favour in terms of the type of work you are hired for:

"Other times sometimes it's, it's a good thing that you're a woman and people feel like if we're doing something like domestic violence or something like that, sometimes the subject is more comfortable with a female photographer or someone might be more comfortable so they'll come out of their shell a bit more. Or I might say, Oh, you've got lipstick on your teeth. Cause I looked for those extra details that maybe the guys don't... There is two sides of it."

Much the way women talk about their safety and exit plans, talking on the phone while walking home, or walking with keys in their hands where men rarely think about their safety at night, one female photographer also highlighted the importance of having contracts with every client for every job, which was one of the ways she tried to avoid issues of discrimination while she was working.

"A contract was - I would recommend it to everyone. There is no place for discrimination anywhere...So, yeah, that's the kind of fundamental protection you can give yourself. And safety and that reassurance that this is, you know, you need to have some kind of, you know, you can build something on that basis, that you won't be discriminated or taken advantage of."

GENDER DIFFERENCES WORKING WITH / FOR MEN OR WOMEN

Just as the experience of being a photographer is gendered, as highlighted in the previous question on discrimination, a number of female photographers also spoke about the gender differences when working with men compared to women, which is not something that tended to come up for the men in the interviews.

"**I'll go in and I'll probably explain more on the technical side if I have to, especially to males who are hiring me, they like to hear the technical side of things, which is absolutely fine compared to say the females. They'll have researched my work a little bit more when they do hire me. So they're a bit more comfortable. But yes, I definitely kind of go into it with a different mindset and explanations I change to who I'm working with. Definitely."** (Female Photographer)

"There's a few blokes in town who've got businesses and they're like, Oh yeah, I've got to talk to you. You're like, okay, do you want to set up a time? And they're like, Oh yeah, I'll get back to you. And you know, you drop them a message and they're like, Oh yeah, well I was talking to Dazza and Dazza reckons, he can do it, you know?" (Female Photographer)

And getting women to be seen in images is also a challenge that female photographers spoke about.

"**I was going around regional Victoria and finding people that have contributed greatly to the (redacted) industry, but I found it so shocking that even like, you know, a matriarch in the industry, she would sort of de value or talk down her own contributions...all the men are in the photographs being lauded for their (contribution) and your story is not there at all...Like one woman fucking invented this...Like why, why is that not important?"** (Female Photographer)

"I'd say it depends on the age of the women, right? If it's little kids... they usually are quite willing... Then you get to kind of like your 16 to 21 year old females are usually pretty keen. A lot of them are pretty keen actually... When then it's kinda like your forties, fifties, women are usually "no's." I get, I get more "no's" from them. And then when they get like more higher up (older), they're more likely to say yes again. I don't know what it is, but there seems to be gaps where just, they're against it. Whereas guys, I find most guys are pretty willing. I don't think there's really an age with guys that they're more likely to say no, I usually have like, if a guy does say no, he usually has like a specific reason of why he doesn't want to be in a photo." (Female Photographer)

"I do notice it too, like where, when they have like a soccer section, sometimes they'll have like the guy's photo and the story will be really, really big. And then this little tiny one for the women and that bugs me sometimes, especially when the women's shot is actually a better shot. But they want to write a bigger amount about the guys' comp because in the scheme of some of the community, the guys' comp is higher up than the womens'." (Female Photographer)

"I suppose, in a way our management team is more male dominated. So they do probably sometimes have more of the spin on things. But yeah, so sometimes it is hard to approach some of those conversations with them without getting completely and utterly shut down. Even in meetings I find sometimes the, like the women will come up with some ideas and stuff for stories and they kind of get glazed over. But, yeah where as they'll kind of joke and chat along more when the guys pitched (ideas)" (Female Photographer)

CONCLUSION

This project highlighted two significant issues in relation to photography and gender inequality:

1. Female photographers have a very different experience within the industry compared to male peers.
2. Few photographers *consciously* recognise opportunities to use their images to challenge gender inequality, unless it's in relation to an art practice or personal work.

The first issue highlights the fact that female photographers face the same challenges as most women in traditionally male workplaces - coming up against stereotypes that suggest women aren't technically minded, their role as income earners isn't as important as men's, they are sexualised while studying or working as photographers or opportunities are withheld because of their gender. These are all issues that are, in part, created by images that perpetuate gender stereotypes and roles. And these issues can all be addressed and the narrative can be shifted, in part by photographers creating images that challenge these ideas.

From the male photographers' responses, most would not have considered that being a photographer would involve gender discrimination, because that is not their lived experience. In this way, the photography industry as a whole needs to have more conversations and more training about gender inequality within the industry.

We also need more male photographers being active bystanders - calling out behaviour that demeans, sexualises or makes fun of female photographers or women starting out in the industry, as well as more clients and agencies seeking out women to work on larger and more high profile shoots.

The second issue relies on being able to reach photographers and educate them on joining the dots between the accumulation of stereotypical and sexualised images, gender inequality and family violence. There are many avenues that would allow this message to reach a broad cross section of photographers including:

- Embedding gender equality training into photography industry memberships
- Gender equality speakers included at industry events
- Embedding gender equality and social responsibility training into the curriculum at photography schools across Australia
- Messaging on social media platforms
- Photography competitions including categories that highlight social change in relation to gender
- Gender balances on boards and in leadership roles in photography industry organisations

If this study is indicative of the majority of photographers in Australia, the images being created in our country are reliant on photographers' unconscious minds. The danger in this is the well known idea of unconscious bias [5] and so if we are working and creating unconsciously, our images may be a result of our unconscious bias. If we unconsciously believe women are sexy, we'll be more likely to pose women in a way that highlights their bodies even if that's not relevant to the message of the image. If we unconsciously believe men are better leaders, we won't think to talk to our clients about including women in our images when only presented with men during a corporate shoot.

In general throughout this project, conversations were open and photographers seemed in the most part, interested in the discussions.

My personal interest is not in one off "hero shots" that go viral. Although they are important, they tend to happen at a tipping point. In order for us to get to that tipping point as a society, it's the thousands of other images that we are not talking about, that seep into our subconscious and form our beliefs. It's these images that, as photographers, have more impact that we realise. Almost every image we create, has the potential to either perpetuate a stereotype or challenge it. From the clothes people are wearing, to the roles they are playing, to whether or not we happen to even include certain people in our images.

My aim in this project was to start by seeing what was at the front of people's minds when talking about photography and social change, then what would come up once the dots were joined on the relationship between photography, gender inequality and family violence.

A number of photographers had "ah-ha" moments, from reflecting on whether or not their websites were showing images that challenged stereotypes, or even showed a gender balance; to thinking about consciously including women in personal projects that were about male dominated industries; to recognising opportunities to share these conversations further with clients, in photography schools or in talks at photography industry events.

Overwhelmingly, where many photographers started the conversation not seeing a connection between their commercial work and social change, most identified the idea of having gender balances on shoots, or challenging gender stereotypes as something that you just do without thinking much about it.

On the whole, female photographers were much more likely to believe their photography had the capacity to create social change (10 women compared to 0 men). Experiences of discrimination, particularly relating to gender, were disproportionately effecting female photographers, with 9 out of 11 women experiencing discrimination compared to 0 men.

So there appears to be a correlation between being discriminated against and wanting to use your skills as a photographer to create social change.

Female photographers also had much more to say about gender inequality than male photographers, perhaps because they are more aware of how gender inequality effects them negatively in their daily lives. In this way, it is so important for women to be sharing their experiences for a greater understanding of these issues across the industry.

After all, how can anyone make a change or become an ally if they are unaware there is an issue?

Ultimately, by coming together as photographers, clients, agencies, industry bodies and educational institutions and sharing lived experiences as well as constructive ideas, the photographic industry has the potential to be leading the way towards gender equality in Australia.

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PHOTOGRAPHERS AS CHANGEMAKERS
Researched and written by Mitch Nivalis | MDP Photography and Video

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A copy of this paper can be found at www.michelledunn.com.au

0415 090 061
info@mdpphotovideo.com.au
www.mdpphotovideo.com.au

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