Domestic violence is one of the most widespread human rights abuses in Australia and globally. Whatever form the violence takes, it has serious and often devastating consequences for victims, their extended families, and the community. Domestic violence puts more women aged 18–44 at risk of ill-health and premature death than any other risk factor (A preventable burden: measuring and addressing the prevalence and health impacts of intimate partner violence in Australian women). Domestic violence has been cited as the most common reason for homelessness among women and children (NSW Women’s Refuge Movement Inc. Response to the ‘Future directions of specialist homelessness services: consultation paper’).

Sources

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Personal safety survey

A preventable burden: measuring and addressing the prevalence and health impacts of intimate partner violence in Australian women, ANROWS, 2016

The cost of violence against women and their children in Australia, 2016

NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team report 2015-17

Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018

Reporting violence to police: a survey of victims attending domestic violence services, 2013

NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR)

It also comes at an enormous economic cost. Each year violence against women costs the nation approximately $22 billion (The cost of violence against women and their children in Australia).

For a very long time domestic violence was seen as a private matter. The feminist movement in the 1970s supported women to speak out strongly against domestic violence and agitate for services such as women’s refuges.

Progress in eliminating violence against women has been slow and the legal and public policy environment has struggled to keep pace with the need for change.

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is about power and control. Research shows that the vast majority of domestic violence is perpetrated by men against women and children (Personal safety survey). In a small number of cases, domestic violence is perpetrated by women against men and children. Domestic violence also occurs in same-sex relationships. Domestic violence is also termed ‘family violence’ or ‘intimate partner violence/abuse’.

Domestic violence encompasses a range of behaviours and can include, but is not limited to, some of the following behaviours:

- **intimidation** — including threats to injure or kill a victim and/or their children and relatives, injuring or killing pets, damaging personal property, throwing objects, making repeated telephone calls and misuse of social media
- **harassment** — including making repeated telephone calls, repeated hang-ups, or sending repeated SMS text messages, emails, letters or gifts
• emotional and psychological abuse — including name-calling, swearing, put-downs and threats of suicide or self-harm
• financial abuse — including controlling access to finances and depriving a victim of access to funds for basic needs for themselves and the family, such as food, clothes, school items and transport; can also include questioning the victim on money spent, asking for receipts, making allegations that the victim is incapable of managing money, or accusing the victim of spending on unnecessary items
• stalking — including following a victim to their home or place of work, or places they often attend, for example shopping centres, clubs, fitness centres, childcare centres, or schools the victim’s children attend
• technology-facilitated stalking and abuse — including keeping a person under surveillance or listening to or recording private conversations without consent (may be facilitated by spyware apps or software), tracking a person’s location though GPS without consent, taking, sharing or threatening to record or share intimate images or recordings without consent, checking call logs, messages or accounts without permission, making false online accounts, or impersonating the victim
• social and geographical isolation — including preventing a victim from seeing or contacting family and friends, or restricting their ability to leave the home, use public transport or a car, or use the telephone or the internet; isolation may be geographical, where the perpetrator coerces the victim to move somewhere they are unable to leave easily without the perpetrator’s help and consent
• physical assaults — including punching, hitting, slapping, kicking, shoving and strangling or attempts to do any of these acts
• sexual assault — including sexual intercourse or other sexual acts without a victim’s consent
• forced marriage — includes coercing, threatening or deceiving a person to marry without their consent
• reproductive coercion — including the use of control or pressure regarding contraceptive and pregnancy outcomes.

The cycle of violence

The theory that domestic violence occurs in a cycle was developed in 1979 by Lenore Walker as a result of a study conducted in the United States, and published in her book *The battered woman* (Harper and Row). The ‘cycle of violence’ depicts how violent events occur within a context of power and control. Many women who have experienced violence recognise this pattern, which can happen hundreds of times in an abusive relationship. Each stage lasts a different amount of time in a relationship. The total cycle can take anywhere from a few hours to a year or more to complete. Over time the cycle may become quicker or even start to skip the ‘honeymoon phase’.

It is important to remember though that not all domestic violence relationships fit the cycle.

In 1984, the Domestic Violence Intervention project developed the Power and Control Wheel [10]. Commonly known as the ‘Duluth model’, it illustrates the pattern of actions and behaviours used by a violent man to control his female partner. Power and control are at the centre of the wheel and extending from the centre (like spokes) are the range of techniques used to instil fear — threats, intimidation, coercion, emotional abuse, economic abuse, isolation, minimising, denying and blaming, using children, and using male privilege. All of this occurs within the context of physical and sexual violence — the rim of the wheel.

How prevalent is domestic violence?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics *Personal safety survey* provides information about the nature and extent of violence experienced by men and women since the age of 15. There has been no significant change in the proportion of men or women who experienced partner violence since the last *Personal safety survey* in 2012. The statistics continue to demonstrate that family violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women.

According to the 2016 *Personal safety survey*:

* 23% of women had experienced at least one incident of violence by an intimate partner (a current or previous partner with whom the respondent lived or had lived, or a current or former boyfriend, girlfriend or date with who the respondent had not lived with)
* 17% of women and 6% of men had experienced violence by a current and/or previous partner
* 23% of women and 16% of men had experienced emotional abuse by a partner
* 30.5% of women had experienced physical violence
• 18% of women had experienced sexual violence
• 17% of women had experienced an episode of stalking
• 53% of women had experienced sexual harassment.

The health impacts of family violence are also well-documented. In 2016, Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) reported that family violence ‘has serious impacts for women’s health - contributing to a range of negative health outcomes, including poor mental health, problems during pregnancy and birth, alcohol and illicit drug use, suicide, injuries and homicide’ (A preventable burden: measuring and addressing the prevalence and health impacts of intimate partner violence in Australian women).

**Domestic homicide**

Data findings for all homicides in NSW between 1 July 2000 and 20 June 2014 showed that approximately 30% of all homicides were domestic violence related, while 61% of homicides with a female victim were domestic violence related. 37% of women in this dataset were killed by a former intimate partner, and almost two-thirds of these women had ended the intimate relationship with the domestic abuser within three months of being killed (NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team report 2015-17).

In NSW in the 12 months before September 2018, 84.2% of female homicide victims (16 out of 19) were killed by someone with whom they had a domestic relationship. The majority of victims were women and young children (unpublished BOCSAR data).

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women**

Aboriginal women are at significantly higher risk of family and domestic violence than the general population. A recent report conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that Indigenous women were 32 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence than non-Indigenous women (Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia).

While the report claims that ‘social disadvantage and intergenerational trauma’ are largely responsible for causing higher rates of family violence among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, experts continue to highlight that ongoing racism and injustices faced by Indigenous peoples are equally to blame.

**Children and young people**

Children and young people are affected by being exposed to domestic violence. Exposure to domestic violence includes seeing or hearing the violence, helping to clean up property damage or being present when police and/or ambulance attend. An estimated 50% of women (60,300) who had children in their care when they experienced violence by a current partner reported that the children had seen or heard the violence. Approximately 68% of women (418,200) who had children in their care when they experienced violence by a previous partner reported that the children had seen or heard the violence (Personal safety survey). A national survey of 5000 young people aged 12–20 years found that 23% of participants had witnessed physical domestic violence against their mothers (ADFV Fast Facts No.4: The impact of domestic violence on children and infants R Campbell, 2011).

**Older people**

Older people are at risk of domestic violence from family members, partners and carers. Older women are particularly at risk of financial abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse (Preventing the abuse of older people by their family members [11]) and 26% of women aged 55 years and over have experienced violence from their current partner (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Personal safety survey, 2006).

While there is little evidence available about the prevalence of elder abuse, what the evidence does indicate is that the vast majority of perpetrators of violence against elders have been identified as close family members who live with the victim, often an adult child, with sons being perpetrators to a greater extent than daughters (Elder abuse: understanding issues, frameworks and responses [12]).
The evidence also suggests that psychological and financial abuse are the most common types of abuse reported. The current Federal Government recently announced a Royal Commission into aged care and promises to reveal the full extent of neglect and abuse throughout the aged care sector.

**Reporting to police**

NSW Police Assistant Commissioner Mark Murdoch stated in March 2014 that approximately 40% of police work involves responding to domestic violence. In the 12 months before September 2018, there were almost 30,000 domestic violence related assaults reported to police in NSW, representing approximately 46% of all assaults reported to police. In the 12 months before September 2018, women and girls make up 68% of victims of domestic violence related assaults. In the 12 months to June 2018, 30,147 Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders (ADVO) were granted in NSW (NSW Crime Mapping Tool, BOCSAR).

However, research shows that less than half of all victims of domestic violence report incidents to the police (*Reporting violence to police: a survey of victims attending domestic violence services, 2013*).

Reasons for not reporting include:

- holding fears for the future safety of themselves/their children
- threats by the perpetrator
- embarrassment and shame
- isolation
- the hope that the violence will stop
- a view that the incident was not serious enough; and
- a view that the police would/could not do anything about the violence.

(*Against the odds: how women survive domestic violence* (Office of Status of Women, Canberra, 1998); Australian component of the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS); Australian Bureau of Statistics, Crime and Safety, Australia 2005.)

Research has also shown that a woman is much less likely to report to police if she is pregnant at the time of the incident or if there have been more than five previous incidents of abuse by the same person (*Reporting violence to police: a survey of victims attending domestic violence services, 2013*).

An estimated 82% of women (225,700) who experienced current partner violence never contacted the police. Of the estimated 47,900 women who did contact the police, approximately half (55% or 26,200) reported that their partner was not charged (*Personal safety survey*).

**Previous partners**

An estimated 65% of women (888,100) who experienced previous partner violence never contacted the police. Of the estimated 485,800 women who did contact the police, approximately half (56% or 271,900) reported that their partner was not charged (*Personal safety survey*).

The 2016 *Personal safety survey* showed that 51.1% of women who had a restraining order issued against a previous partner reported further incidents of violence occurred after the issuing of that order. This tells us that if a woman experiences violence from her partner it is likely to happen more than one time in that relationship, including after separation.

*The Domestic Violence Hot Topic is intended as an introductory guide only and should not be interpreted as legal advice.*
Related content

LawAccess NSW - Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs) [15]
Information about the two different types of AVOs - Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (ADVO) and Apprehended Personal

Getting help [16]
Need legal advice, support or guidance? Check out these helpful resources and services.

Legal Aid NSW domestic violence resources [17]
Find Legal Aid NSW factsheets and other resources on domestic violence.

Women’s Legal Service NSW [18]
Women’s Legal Service NSW provides free confidential legal advice and referrals to women in NSW, with a focus on family


Links