



The Benevolent Society Social Issues Paper 3

Community safety and domestic violence

All people have the right to live safely, free from violence. This right is breached daily – violence against women is the most common abuse of human rights in Australia and around the world. One in three Australian women experience domestic violence during their lives while one in five are sexually abused. Governments, business and non-profit organisations, communities and individuals, all have an obligation to work together to prevent and respond to violence against women.

Why this is important

Domestic violence

Domestic violence is violent, abusive or intimidating behaviour carried out by an adult against a partner or former partner to control and dominate that person¹. The most commonly acknowledged forms of domestic violence are physical and sexual violence; threats and intimidation; emotional and social abuse; and financial deprivation².

Australian statistics support international findings that victims of domestic violence are overwhelmingly female. In 2002–03 it was estimated that 87% of victims of domestic violence in Australia were women while 98% of perpetrators were men³. Domestic violence-related assaults make up 30% of all assaults reported to police⁴ and 21% of all homicides⁵.

Australia is a party to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In 2006, the CEDAW Committee expressed its concern about the continuing prevalence of violence against women and the low rates of reporting, prosecutions and convictions in sexual assault cases⁶. The CEDAW Committee also called on Australia to address the high levels of family violence against Indigenous women, who are 40 times more likely to be victims of violence than non-Indigenous women⁷.

Domestic violence can happen to women from all backgrounds, socio-economic circumstances and ages. The Australian component of the International Violence Against Women Survey found that women's experience of violence did not vary by educational attainment, labour force status or household income⁸.

Women with children are three times more likely to be subjected to domestic violence than women without children⁹. Police attending a domestic violence incident where children are usually present are required to make a child protection report in NSW. There were 61,894 such reports in 2007/ 2008¹⁰.

Domestic violence adversely impacts on the ability of mother and child to form a secure attachment. Witnessing domestic violence impacts on children's mental health, self-esteem and social competence¹¹. Children living in a household where domestic violence is present may also be the victims of violence themselves. Domestic violence was identified as present in almost half of all child deaths in NSW in 2006¹².

For many women, the experience of abuse does not stop once they have left the violent relationship¹³. In 2005, 25% of women who had temporarily separated from a violent partner reported experiencing violence during the separation¹⁴. The Benevolent Society's own research with women who had left an abusive relationship many years before, found that the emotional and psychological damage can continue long after the violence has ended¹⁵.

Services responding to domestic violence

Domestic violence is endemic in our society, inflicting trauma and long-term damage on women and their children. Government and non-government organisations provide an array of services to support women and their children who are victims of domestic violence. Many of these services provide life-saving assistance. However, they operate in a largely uncoordinated, underfunded context which means that many women do not get the support they need to recover and rebuild their lives.

Mainstream services such as police, health, housing and the court system are often the first point of contact for women who have experienced domestic violence. The lack of integration, coordination and consistency in the responses of these services has been acknowledged by government¹⁶. This fragmented system can potentially undermine positive initiatives if collaboration depends on the capacity of individuals rather than a whole-of-government commitment.

Services specifically for women who have experienced domestic violence are often underfunded, and can be inaccessible due to cost, location, hours of operation and women's concerns about confidentiality and cultural appropriateness¹⁷.

There are also a lack of services and resources for women coping with the long term effects of domestic violence as they rebuild their life. Women report feeling forgotten once the crisis stage of actual separation is over and are clear about their need for continuing support¹⁸.

What should be done?

Any response to domestic violence must prioritise preventing domestic violence from happening in the first place. This must begin with the elimination of the structural constraints which continue to reinforce gender inequality in our society, evident in inequitable pay, poorer access to superannuation, the lack of a national paid parental leave scheme, and the lack of affordable, quality childcare, all of which particularly disadvantage women.

Evidence from Australia and abroad indicates that national coordination is needed in order to reduce violence against women¹⁹. The Australian Government must lead the nation in asserting the human rights of women to live free from violence and fear. This will require a national plan which establishes a common, integrated framework across states and territories, to ensure that all women, no matter where they live, can enjoy the protection of the law and the support of the community.

All levels of our community must unite to condemn violence against women and raise future generations knowing that violence against women and children is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. This process is aided by government support for national and international awareness raising days, community wide social marketing campaigns and education programs in schools. However, all individuals and communities can play a part in preventing domestic violence.

We know that many women do not report domestic violence or access services due to fear, shame and lack of community support. Once women do take the step of seeking help, it is essential that they are believed and supported to make informed choices.

Adequate resourcing, well trained staff and smooth integrated referral pathways can assist women in accessing resources and services to ensure their safety and protection. No matter where a woman lives, whether she seeks help through her doctor, her child's school or the courts, the service response should be respectful, supportive and effective in ensuring her safety.

It is also vital that child protection and domestic violence services work together to ensure that the safety and protection of women and children is the paramount priority. Perpetrators must be held accountable for their use of violence and abuse against women and their children.

Services to address violence against women must operate on a continuum, from prevention to recovery. Crisis services are essential, as is the collaborative involvement of key agencies and services in the areas of health, law, housing, financial counselling, aged care, relationship services and family violence.

Also essential are services which assist women's long-term healing. The Benevolent Society's own research has reinforced the need for free, anonymous and flexible services for women who have experienced domestic violence²⁰. This includes therapeutic services which work with women to heal from the trauma of domestic violence.

Violent men must be held accountable for their use of violence and abuse against women and children, and must take responsibility for adopting non-violent and respectful attitudes and behaviours towards women in their intimate relationships and in society generally. Perpetrator programs which assist violent men to face their past actions and their consequences and deal with the reasons for this violence may prevent future domestic and family violence.

The Benevolent Society is encouraged by the Federal Government's recent establishment of a National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, and the development of an upcoming National Plan. We also welcome the proposed Queensland Government Domestic and Family Violence Strategy and the New South Wales Government's Domestic and Family Violence Strategic Framework and hope these will go some way towards a coordinated approach to preventing and responding to domestic violence.

The role of non-government organisations

Non-government organisations (NGOs) play a vital role in responding to domestic violence. Many NGOs have an on-the-ground presence in communities and understand local needs and strengths. Where NGOs have developed trust and networks, they can be especially effective in preventing and responding to domestic violence, by working with individuals, families and the whole community.

For instance, The Benevolent Society's child protection and early intervention services work with vulnerable families and can address domestic violence if it is present. At the same time, our community development work increases community connectedness and resilience, and promotes an environment where violence is addressed and not hidden.

The Benevolent Society's Centre for Women's Health provides a range of specialist services for women experiencing domestic violence, Aboriginal women and women in their mid to older years. The Centre offers crisis and longer term counselling, complementary therapies, groups and advocacy. Women choose which services they need and when they need them. They can access counselling and information over the telephone or in person, without an appointment and with anonymity, or ongoing counselling and support to gain the confidence, skills and resources they need to create positive futures for themselves and their children.

NGOs are well placed to engage women who use services to actively participate in the planning and delivery of services. Services which take a holistic view of women and adopt a rights-based approach can assist them to develop their skills and participate in decisions which affect their lives and in society more broadly.

Domestic violence snapshot

The total annual cost of domestic violence to the Australian economy in 2002–03 was \$8.1 billion²¹.

In 2005, only 36% of women who experienced physical assault, and 19% who experienced sexual assault, reported it to the police²².

In 2003-04 33% of the clients accessing the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), the Commonwealth government's homelessness response, were women escaping domestic violence. 66% of the accompanying children were with a female parent or guardian escaping domestic violence²³.

A 2006 report showed that that domestic violence rates were highest in very remote Australia, followed by remote and outer regional localities²⁴.

Indigenous youth were significantly more likely to have witnessed physical domestic violence amongst their parents or parents' partners. The rate of family violence victimisation for Indigenous women may be 40 times the rate for non-Indigenous women²⁵.

Endnotes

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Social Issues Papers

The Benevolent Society works with vulnerable individuals, families and communities who face a wide range of difficult issues which affect their wellbeing and their social and economic participation. Our Social Issues Agenda identifies 12 broad issues that are related to social and economic inclusion, and our series of issues papers explores these challenges and some potential solutions. To read the full series of social issues papers go to www.bensoc.org.au

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