Submission

to the

Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence

to the

House Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs

PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Telephone: (02) 6277 4581
Email: family.violence.reps@aph.gov.au
Website: https://www.aph.gov.au/familyviolence

by

FamilyVoice Australia

4th floor, 68 Grenfell St, Adelaide SA 5000
Telephone: 1300 365 965
Email: office@familyvoice.org.au
Website: www.familyvoice.org.au

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1. Introduction

On 4 June 2020, the House Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs adopted an inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence. The inquiry was referred by the Minister for Women, Senator the Hon Marise Payne, and the Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston.

Submissions close: **Friday, 24 July 2020**

FamilyVoice Australia is a national Christian voice – promoting true family values for the benefit of all Australians. Our vision is to see strong families at the heart of a healthy society: where marriage is honoured, human life is respected, families can flourish, Australia's Christian heritage is valued, and fundamental freedoms are enjoyed.

FamilyVoice has had a longstanding interest in advocating policies which support the family.

2. Terms of Reference

The Inquiry's terms of reference are as follows:

> *That the Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs inquire into and report on family, domestic and sexual violence, including with a view to informing the next National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, the following:*
>
> *a) Immediate and long-term measures to prevent violence against women and their children, and improve gender equality.*
>
> *b) Best practice and lessons learnt from international experience, ranging from prevention to early intervention and response, that could be considered in an Australian context.*
>
> *c) The level and impact of coordination, accountability for, and access to services and policy responses across the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, local governments, non government and community organisations, and business.*
>
> *d) The way that health, housing, access to services, including legal services, and women's economic independence impact on the ability of women to escape domestic violence.*
>
> *e) All forms of violence against women, including, but not limited to, coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse.*
>
> *f) The adequacy of the qualitative and quantitative evidence base around the prevalence of domestic and family violence and how to overcome limitations in the collection of nationally consistent and timely qualitative and quantitative data including, but not limited to, court, police, hospitalisation and housing.*
>
> *g) The efficacy of perpetrator intervention programs and support services for men to help them change their behaviour.*

h) The experiences of all women, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, rural women, culturally and linguistically diverse women, LGBTQI women, women with a disability, and women on temporary visas.

i) The impact of natural disasters and other significant events such as COVID-19, including health requirements such as staying at home, on the prevalence of domestic violence and provision of support services.

j) The views and experiences of frontline services, advocacy groups and others throughout this unprecedented time.

k) An audit of previous parliamentary reviews focussed on domestic and family violence.

l) Any other related matters.

3. Domestic violence

3.1. Prevalence of domestic violence

Before considering the role of gender in domestic violence, it is important to review available evidence on the prevalence of domestic violence.

The Committee should recognise that domestic violence occurs in a wide variety of situations and involves men, women and children as perpetrators and men, women and children as victims.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 2016 Personal Safety Survey (PSS) reports:

> *More than one in three Australians experienced violence by a male perpetrator since the age of 15 (36% or 6.7 million), compared to one in ten by a female perpetrator (11% or 2 million).*
>
> *Approximately one in four women (23% or 2.2 million) experienced violence by an intimate partner, compared to one in thirteen men (7.8% or 703,700).*[1]

The PSS reports that while women were nearly three times more likely to have experienced partner violence than men, with approximately one in six women (17% or 1.6 million), one in sixteen men (6.1% or 547,600) have experienced partner violence since the age of 15, not an insignificant figure.

The PSS also revealed that:

> *One in six women (16% or 1.5 million) and one in seventeen men (5.9% or 528,800) experienced physical violence by a partner.*
>
> *Women were eight times more likely to experience sexual violence by a partner than men (5.1% or 480,200 women compared to 0.6% or *53,000 men).*[2]

The PSS statistics challenge the narrative that there is currently an epidemic of domestic violence against women:

> *The proportion of women who experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months has remained relatively stable over the last decade. In 2005, approximately 1.5% of women aged 18 years and over experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months, whilst in 2016 the figure was 1.7%.*

> *The proportion of men who experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months increased between 2005 and 2016. In 2005, approximately 0.4% of men aged 18 years and over experienced partner violence in the previous 12 months, whilst in 2016 the figure was 0.8%. However since the survey was last conducted in 2012, there was no significant change in the proportion of men who experienced partner violence (0.6%).*[3]

Overall, while domestic violence commonly involves a female victim and a male perpetrator, there is still a significant level of domestic violence committed by women towards men. This should not be glossed over.

David Fergusson and his colleagues have reported on an in-depth analysis of women's and men's experience of domestic violence at age 25 as part of the Christchurch longitudinal study.[4]

Their findings include:

- 37.4% of women reported that they perpetrated acts of domestic violence compared to 30.9% of men;
- 3.9% of women were injured as a result of domestic violence compared to 3.3% of men;
- 2.5% of women reported being fearful as a result of partner violence compared to 0.3% of men;
- Women were more likely than men to initiate physical assault;
- Overall adverse mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation) are as frequent for men as for women, although women are more likely than men to suffer depression and anxiety;

In many cases there was mutual violence leading Fergusson and his colleagues to observe that "commonly occurring domestic violence may be better conceptualized as an issue relating to violent partnerships rather than violent individuals".

In considering the policy implications of this study the authors note:

> *The present study has a number of implications for policies relating to domestic violence. First and foremost, the results provide a further challenge to the dominant view that domestic violence is a "women's issue" and arises predominantly from assaults by male perpetrators on female victims.*
>
> *What the findings suggest is that among young adult populations, men and women are equally violent to intimate partners on the basis of reports of both victimization and perpetration for the range of domestic violence examined within this study. Furthermore, the spectrum of violence committed by men and women seems to be similar and there is evidence suggesting that both men and women engage in serious acts of physical violence against their partners. Finally, the consequences of domestic violence in terms of injury and psychological effects were similar for both men and women.*

In 2007-08, of a national total of 78 intimate-partner homicides, 18 victims were male (23%).[5] In 2006-08 one in three (32.3%) victims of intimate partner homicide was male.[6]

The high profile case of Alex Skeel in the UK highlights that men are victims of domestic violence, too.

> *When police were called to the home Alex Skeel shared with his girlfriend Jordan Worth, they found him so badly abused he was days away from death.*
>
> *He had been starved, stabbed with a bread knife, blackened by hammer-inflicted bruising, burnt with a kettle full of boiling water — all at the hands of his girlfriend.*
>
> *Alex, 22, from Leeds in Yorkshire, England, tells his shocking story in full for the first time as part of a new BBC documentary Abused By My Girlfriend, The Sun reports.*
>
> *In it he reveals how on one occasion his girlfriend beat him so badly with a hairbrush he was forced to rip out his own tooth because she wouldn't let him seek help.*
>
> *Another time, controlling Jordan forced him to overdose on sleeping pills during a trip to Winter Wonderland.*
>
> *Alex is one of a growing number of men speaking out about domestic violence behind closed doors.*[7]

Jordan Worth was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison.[8]

Another form of domestic violence receiving increasing recognition and attention is adolescent violence towards parents. The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse published a report on this subject in 2004, which said:

> *There are few overseas and no Australian statistics on the prevalence of adolescent violence against parents. Shame and guilt are singled out as the main reasons for parents' unwillingness to report their children's violence...*[9]

The Women's and Children's Health Network make a similar observation:

> *Violence towards parents or other family members by young people is more common than many people think. It's not often talked about because parents can feel embarrassed, scared or alone.*[10]

In the light of this data, it is inappropriate to focus solely on domestic violence committed by men. This runs the risk of obscuring the reality of domestic violence perpetrated by women and making male victims of domestic violence invisible or more likely to be overlooked. Both men and women are victims of domestic violence. Both men and women are perpetrators of domestic violence. Perpetuating and entrenching a one-sided, gendered, discriminatory account of domestic violence will not help reduce domestic violence or assist government agencies to respond adequately to all victims of domestic violence regardless of the sex of the victim or of the perpetrator.

> ***Recommendation 1:***
>
> ***In conducting this inquiry, the Committee should recognise that men, women and children are victims of domestic violence, that men, women and children are perpetrators of domestic violence.***

3.2. Factors contributing to domestic violence

It is not only women who suffer from domestic violence. Some Australian men are assaulted by female partners or by other males in a homosexual relationship. Women in lesbian relationships may also suffer. Children can be victims too – like Luke Batty, who was murdered in 2014 by his father, Rosie Batty's former partner.[11]

Nevertheless, most victims of domestic violence are women who are emotionally, physically or sexually abused by their male sexual partner or former partner.

At least three factors appear to contribute to the incidence of domestic violence:

- fewer couples are getting married and more couples are cohabiting, even though domestic violence rates are significantly higher in de facto relationships;[12]
- more men are becoming addicted to freely available online hardcore pornography, which promotes the abuse and exploitation of women;[13]
- drug addiction – particularly drugs like crystal methamphetamine ("ice") – is growing in a "soft on drugs" political environment.[14]

Since these factors may be more important than gender, they should not be neglected by the Committee.

Recommendation 2:

Strategies to address domestic violence should include the following:

- ***schools to teach the many advantages of committed marriage over de facto relationships, including reduced risk of domestic violence;***
- ***internet cleanfeed options to block harmful websites including those demeaning women;***
- ***a return to the previous "tough on drugs" policies, which saw a drop in drug abuse in Australia – compared with later years when drug abuse rates have risen.***

3.3. Incidence of domestic violence in homosexual relationships

In considering "gender stereotypes", it is worth considering instances of domestic violence within relationships involving less "traditional" gender roles.

The incidence of domestic violence in same-sex relationships is greater than that within heterosexual relationships. This undermines the assertion that traditional gender roles and "stereotypes" are responsible for domestic violence.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* has reported on levels of domestic violence within same-sex relationships:

> *Domestic violence has become a "silent epidemic" in the gay and lesbian community despite being the subject of increasing scrutiny in heterosexual relationships, according to the AIDS Council of NSW.*
>
> *Roughly one in three lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) couples experience domestic violence.*[15]

Studies have documented that the prevalence of homosexual domestic violence is actually a much greater problem than heterosexual domestic violence.

Colleen Stiles-Shields and Richard A. Carroll conducted a review of studies on same-sex domestic violence in their paper "Same-Sex Domestic Violence: Prevalence, Unique Aspects, and Clinical

Implications."[16] Of those reviewed, the Messinger (2011) study had the largest sample[17] and Stiles-Shields and Carroll summarise that study's findings:

> *Regardless of sex, SSDV [Same-sex Domestic Violence] is twice as prevalent than [sic] OSDV [Opposite-sex Domestic Violence][18]*

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey" found that homosexuals disproportionately suffer and inflict domestic violence. It reported:

> *• Forty-four percent of lesbian women, 61% of bisexual women, and 35% of heterosexual women experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime.*
>
> *• Twenty-six percent of gay men, 37% of bisexual men, and 29% of heterosexual men experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime.*
>
> *•Approximately 1 in 5 bisexual women (22%) and nearly 1 in 10 heterosexual women (9%) have been raped by an intimate partner in their lifetime.[19]*

According to the survey, "nearly 1 in 3 bisexual women (37%) and 1 in 7 heterosexual women (16%) were injured as a result of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner."[20] And "four in 10 gay men (40%), nearly half of bisexual men (47%), and 1 in 5 heterosexual men (21%) have experienced SV [sexual violence] other than rape in their lifetime."[21]

And figures for homosexual domestic violence may be higher than actually reported:

> *"There can be a fear of making the community look bad," said [mental health counselor with the Violence Recovery Program in Boston, Jessica] Newman. "Some people might have a real and legitimate fear of being looked down on, or not finding services through the police, judicial system, or a shelter. People don't want that negative image of the community out there."[22]*

For this reason "[t]ypical framing of partner abuse as a heterosexual issue – with men abusing women – does a disservice to victims in abusive homosexual relationships."[23]

3.4. Incidence of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships

The incidence of domestic violence within heterosexual relationships depends on whether the couple is married or not. Rates of domestic violence are much greater in non-married heterosexual couples than married heterosexual couples.

The Heritage Foundation analysed 10 years of findings from the National Crime Victimization Survey and discovered that:

> *Married women with children suffer far less abuse than single mothers. In fact, the rate of spousal, boyfriend, or domestic partner abuse is twice as high among mothers who have never been married as it is among mothers who have ever married (including those separated or divorced).[24]*

Psychologist and survey researcher Nicholas Zill analysed recent US national data and found that "children of divorced and never-married parents are far more likely to have been exposed to domestic violence than children in married two-parent families."[25]

A US Department of Justice Intimate Partner Violence report which looked at data from 1993-2010 found that married women suffered the lowest amount of domestic violence.[26] The report noted that

in "2010, the rate of intimate partner violence for married females (2.0 victimizations per 1,000 females age 12 or older) was about four times less than the rates for never married females."[27]

Research conducted by the sociologist Linda Waite at the University of Chicago on the link between intimate partner violence and relationship status found that:

> *after controlling for education, race, age, and gender, people who live together are still three times more likely to report violent arguments than married people.*[28]

3.5. Government initiatives in addressing the underlying causes of domestic violence

The terms of reference refer specifically to the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*, which is a government program funded by the federal Department of Social Services.[29]

The evidence is that domestic violence is not confined to male aggression against women. In many cases the violence is mutual, which led researcher David Fergusson and his colleagues in the Christchurch longitudinal study to conclude that "*commonly occurring domestic violence may be better conceptualized as an issue relating to violent partnerships rather than violent individuals*".[30]

The National Plan is unhelpfully dismissive of violence against men perpetrated by women:

> *While a small proportion of men are victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, the majority of people who experience this kind of violence are women in a home, at the hands of men they know.*[31]

This dismissal of a significant level of domestic violence committed by women towards men as "a small proportion" is offensive to men. The recent report of the murder of David Edwards by his wife highlighted the difficulties faced by men:

> ***Male domestic violence victims can't get help even when their lives are at risk, says brother of lawyer killed by his wife***
>
> - *Sharon Edwards, 42, jailed for life this week for killing husband David, 51*
> - *Mr Edwards' brother, Peter, 50, said double standards made him vulnerable*
> - *Men often struggle to stand up for themselves and are ashamed of abuse*
> - *Nineteen men are murdered by their partners or ex-partners each year*[32]

The National Plan asserts that:

> *Evidence shows that key predictors of violence against women relate to how individuals, communities and society as a whole view the roles of men and women. Some of the strongest predictors for holding violence-supportive attitudes at the individual level are low levels of support for gender equality and following traditional gender stereotypes.*[33]

However, the basis for this assertion is far from clear. The reference in the National Plan is to the 2009 VicHealth, *National survey on community attitudes to violence against women 2009*.[34] Yet the VicHealth survey provided little evidence of a correlation between traditional gender roles and violent attitudes. Rather, the assertion relies heavily on feminist ideology, which is intrinsically hostile to men.

Columnist Bettina Arndt observed that:

> *More than 1700 articles in peer-reviewed journals conclude domestic violence is not a gender issue; both women and men are actively involved in most violence in the home; women often initiate violence, and it isn't simply self-defence.*[35]

Martin Fiebert of the Department of Psychology, California State University has assembled a bibliography of 286 scholarly investigations demonstrating that women are as physically aggressive, or more aggressive, than men in their relationships with their spouses or male partners.[36] The aggregate sample size in the reviewed studies exceeds 371,600.

Recommendation 3:

The* National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children *should be renamed the* National Plan to Reduce Domestic Violence *and re-written to encompass all forms of domestic violence and recognise that men, women and children can be both perpetrators and victims.

4. Conclusion

Cultural conditions contribute to the incidence of domestic violence. However, claims that domestic violence is caused by "gender stereotypes" or "gender inequality" are driven more by feminist ideology than evidence.

More likely factors contributing to domestic violence are:

- fewer couples marrying and more living in de facto relationships, which are more likely to be violent;
- more men becoming addicted to online pornography, which promotes the abuse and exploitation of women;
- growing abuse of drugs such as "ice" that are associated with violent behaviour.

The government-funded *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children* inappropriately omits consideration of male victims of violence perpetrated by women. It should be renamed the *National Plan to Reduce Domestic Violence* and re-written to encompass all forms of domestic violence and recognise that men, women and children can be both perpetrators and victims.

5. Endnotes

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