



St Vincent de Paul Society
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Submission to the Inquiry into the Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

The St Vincent de Paul Society (the Society) is a respected lay Catholic charitable organisation operating in 149 countries around the world. Our work in Australia covers every state and territory, and is carried out by more than 60,000 members, volunteers, and employees. Our people are deeply committed to social assistance and social justice, and our mission is to provide help for those who are marginalised by structures of exclusion and injustice. Our programs assist millions of Australians each year, including people living with mental illness, people who are homeless and insecurely housed, migrants and refugees, and people experiencing poverty.

On 30 April 2015, the Human Rights Commission invited the Society to make a submission to its examination of children affected by family and domestic violence. The Society has consulted nationally and we welcome the opportunity to make this contribution.

1. Children and Domestic Violence

In 2006, nearly 100,000 Australians, from all backgrounds and walks of life, experienced domestic violence in some form.¹ This included assault and homicide, and also sexual, psychological, and social abuse from an intimate partner.

We estimate that, of the families we support through our family and youth homelessness programs (all of which have children) we estimate 75% have had an incidence of family/domestic violence in their life. In every case, the children are in some way impacted or directly involved in that violence. Our view is borne out by the statistics: between 85-90% of incidents of domestic violence occur with children present.² This is often also in an environment where there is child abuse and substantiated child protection issues.³ It is estimated this domestic violence impacts over one million Australian children a year.⁴

The trauma that this causes is severe. This trauma can take many forms, but has a lifelong detrimental impact on the affected child's life in the social, vocational and relationship spheres of daily life. Examples raised by our members include increased chance of homelessness as children and as adults; greatly impacted schooling, including relocations, anti-social behaviour, limited help at home; resulting in poor employment outcomes; greatly increased chances of anxiety and depression, both as children and ongoing; the possibility of physical

¹ ABS *Personal Safety Survey*, 2006.

² Queensland Taskforce on Domestic Violence, *Not Now Not Ever* (2015) <https://www.qld.gov.au/community/documents/getting-support-health-social-issue/dfv-report-vol-one.pdf>, 142.

³ See, for example, Queensland Department of Child Safety *Characteristics of Parents Involved in the Queensland Child Protection System Report 6* (2009).

⁴ Chris Angus, *Domestic Violence Briefing Paper – NSW Parliamentary Briefing Paper* (May 2015) http://apo.org.au/files/Resource/domestic_and_family_violence_briefing_paper_0.pdf.

injury and disability resulting from the violence; and a normalisation of violence, leading to the child being involved in violent relationships themselves in the future.

2. Gender and domestic violence

If we are to address the terrible impact of domestic violence on children, we must identify and tackle the root underlying causes of domestic violence. What is most notable when considering the crime of domestic violence is its gendered nature. This is borne out by what our members tell us, and by national statistics.⁵ For example, while 15% of women have experienced intimate partner violence, only 4.9% of men have.⁶ Moreover, when the details of the crimes are broken down by gender, other patterns emerge. For example, women are far more likely to have been using violence in self-defence: 75% of women who have used violence against intimate male partners say they only ever did so in self-defence, and more than half of their partners agreed with this. This compares to only 8% of males who used violence against their female partners claiming it was in self-defence.⁷

Men are also far more likely to use sexual and economic violence against women than women are against men: research suggests that women are six times more likely to experience sexual violence from an opposite-sex partner than men are, and more than three times more likely to experience economic violence.⁸ While it seems that women are more likely to use weapons when they use violence against their male intimate partners, men's acts of violence against their female partners are nevertheless more serious or severe, as judged by the perpetrators and survivors themselves, and by others.⁹ Also on the severity of violence, of all murders committed by an intimate partner, 78% were perpetrated against women.¹⁰ Men are also more likely to use domestic violence against women repeatedly, over a long period, than women are to use violence repeatedly against male partners.¹¹

The trauma of domestic violence also show a gendered pattern: while very few men fear their female partner or feel controlled by their partners after an instance of domestic violence, most

⁵ See, for example, St Vincent de Paul, *Submission to Domestic Violence Inquiry* (February 2015) at https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/National/Submissions/Miscellaneous_Submission_s/Submission_to_Domestic_Violence_Inquiry/.

⁶ ABS above n 1.

⁷ Rochelle Braaf and Isobelle Meyering, 'The Gender Debate in Domestic Violence: the Role of Data', *Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearing House, Issues Paper 25* (May 2013) 9, at http://www.adfvc.unsw.edu.au/PDF%20files/IssuesPaper_25.pdf.

⁸ For example, Dal Grande, Hickling, Taylor and Woollacott, 'Domestic violence in South Australia: a population survey of males and females', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* (2003) 27(5) 543, cited in Braaf and Meyering, *Ibid.*

⁹ Dobash and Dobash, 'Women's violence to men in intimate relationships: working on a puzzle', *British Journal of Criminology* (2004) 44(3) 324, cited in Braaf and Meyering, above n 7.

¹⁰ Rosa Campbell, 'General Intimate Partner Violence Statistics', *Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearing House, Fast Facts 1* (May 2011).

¹¹ Braaf and Meyering, above n 6, Tables 5.1, 5.2, 5.3.

women do feel ongoing fear after having violence used against them, and a sense of being controlled.¹² Shockingly, 96% of those who end up homeless as a result of domestic violence are women.¹³

3. The causes of domestic violence

Given these broad and pervasive patterns of men's violence against their female intimate partners, it is clear that the causes of domestic violence are not a "few bad apples". Instead, the causes lie in deep, entrenched, and pervasive beliefs and stereotypes about gender and the acceptability of violence.

For example, men are more likely to engage in domestic violence if they hold negative attitudes towards women, hold traditional gender role attitudes that legitimise violence as a method of resolving conflict or as a private matter, or have low levels of support for gender equality.¹⁴ Domestic violence committed by men against women is also greater in communities with more traditional ('macho') ideals of masculinity, and strictly defined gender roles around paid work (for men) and unpaid work (for women).¹⁵ Negative attitudes to women are stronger in particularly masculine contexts, such as sporting subcultures, and are influenced by the media we consume, including pornography, television, music and film.¹⁶

4. What can we do?

The Society supports strong investment in addressing the *symptoms* of domestic violence, which include support for women and children leaving violence; education for men and boys about violence; and helping women identify when they have been subjected to the crime of domestic violence.

The Society runs a range of support programs for children who have experienced the crime of domestic violence, all of which have a hugely beneficial impact. These include: counselling; engagement in parenting groups; referral to child/family centres; heavy engagement with

¹² Dobash and Dobash, above n 8.

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Government Funded Specialist Homelessness Services: SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 2009-10: Australia* (2004) HOU 246, 253, cited in Braaf and Meyering, above n 7.

¹⁴ Michael Flood and Bob Pease, 'The Factors Influencing Community Attitudes In Relation to Violence Against Women: A Critical Review of the Literature', *Violence Against Women Community Attitudes Project* (2006) at http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~media/ProgramsandProjects/DiscriminationandViolence/ViolenceAgainstWomen/CAS_Paper3_CriticalLiterature.ashx; Australian Institute of Criminology, The Social Research Centre, and VicHealth, *National Survey on Community Attitudes on Violence Against Women* (2009), at http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/PVAW/NCAS_CommunityAttitudes_report_2010.ashx.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Flood and Pease, above n 13.

schools; education support including tutoring and mentoring; emotional supports to reduce the impact of stress; and housing support.

Case study from the Canberra Goulburn region

Alex and Sam and their three young children were referred to our housing service in January 2014. At the time, they were staying with friends, and in urgent need of stable housing, having only recently returned to the ACT from Sydney.

The family had a turbulent background, with two of the eldest children having spent time in foster care after members of their extended family threatened to kill the children. The family had also been in unstable housing, as many of their public tenancies had been ended due to domestic violence. The children were exhibiting behavioural and emotional problems as a result of this.

When we first met them, the Society's housing service offered transitional housing to the family. We then organised a discussion with Care and Protection and our Homelessness team, where it was decided that the family would receive supported accommodation for at least 12 months before moving into public housing. This gave us time to assist with a range of complex issues, and put supports in place.

The family is now doing better, though some issues remain. The parents are attending a parenting program, and are both hands-on in the care of their children. The two older children have received counselling, and other wrap-around support including attending some St Vincent de Paul children's programs. They are doing better in school, and demonstrated more socially appropriate behaviours.

While these programs do help, the continuing high rates of domestic violence tell us that we must all do much more in this area, including more housing and legal assistance for people dealing with domestic violence. The government's National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children is a step in this direction,¹⁷ as is the National Domestic Violence Order Scheme.

However, while dealing with the aftermath is important, we believe that we will not see real change until we as a society address the *cause* of domestic violence: stereotypes and attitudes about gender, which value women differently and subordinate to men,¹⁸ and which deeply permeate our society. We call on government to commit to a **national plan on gender equality**, building on the weight of evidence, and previous work by various government and

¹⁷ <http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/the-national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children-2010-2022>.

¹⁸ See, for example, Flood and Pease, above n 13.

non-government bodies. It is high time that we, as a nation, developed concrete steps to achieve true equality between women and men.¹⁹

¹⁹ This sits well within PM&C's Office for Women, as it must encompass economic empowerment, safety, and leadership. It would also build on the Department of Social Service's 'Gender Equality for Women' program.