



NEW RESPONSES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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Introduction

For more than 26 years now the Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women has been working in partnership with governments, organisations, communities and individuals to improve the position, participation and circumstances of Australian women. A major focus for much of the Office's work in recent years has been the prevalence of violence in the lives of women - and particularly violence within families - usually known as domestic violence.

1996 ABS Women's Safety Australia Survey

The 1996 ABS Safety Australia Survey¹ found that 23 per cent of women who had ever been married or in a de facto relationship, had at some time, experienced violence or abuse by a partner. Seven per cent of the 6,300 women surveyed had experienced physical or sexual violence in the previous 12 months.

Costs Associated with Domestic Violence

It is estimated that Australian governments spend over \$200 million annually in direct response to the effects of domestic violence via services such as crisis accommodation and police and court services. However, a 1991 report commissioned by the New South Wales Women's Coordination Unit estimated that the direct and indirect costs in that State amounted to \$1.6 billion a year. When the inter-generational impacts are taken into account – as well as criminal and anti-social behaviours arising from seriously dysfunctional families – the costs are clearly likely to be immense, and, needless to say, the physical and emotional pain suffered by domestic violence victims and their families is incalculable.

Partnerships Against Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a matter of major concern to all Australian governments. Through the \$50 million *Partnerships Against Domestic Violence* initiative managed by the Office of the Status of Women, the Commonwealth is working with States and Territories and the community to develop a coordinated and effective national response. The *Partnerships* funded projects in phase one have focussed on:

- identifying the many issues embedded in domestic violence;
- testing service and community responses to domestic violence,
- documentation of best practice;
- development of education and early intervention programmes; and,
- development of training programmes and competency standards.

The *Partnerships* initiative has now begun its second phase in which the government will be pursuing action on a number of fronts, all with a major focus on prevention. \$5 million has been allocated to projects relating to children at risk.

Domestic Violence and Children

There is now a considerable body of research available on the adverse psychological and behavioural effects of domestic violence on children.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996, Women's Safety Australia: Cat. 4128.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

These can include long term effects such as:

- fear and trauma akin to post traumatic stress disorder;
- health problems, cognitive deficits and adolescent aggression;
- difficulty in forming adult intimate relationships; and
- increased homelessness among adolescents.

The intergenerational transmission of domestic violence is a major concern - even though there is a tendency to over simplify the “cycle of violence” as a causal model. The co-occurrence of exposure to domestic violence with other forms of abuse such as child sexual abuse, child physical abuse and other stressors such as poverty and substance abuse, presents considerable challenges for identifying the unique effects of witnessing domestic violence both in the short or longer term. It is also important to keep in mind that the majority of children exposed to domestic violence do not become either perpetrators or victims of domestic violence in their adult relationships. Protective factors such as the support of peers and relatives outside the family can build a child’s resilience and limit the long term impact of their violent home lives.²

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that children who grow up in an environment where violence and abuse occurs are more likely to become victims or perpetrators of abuse in adult life than those who do not. By intervening early, we can reduce adult victimisation, cut juvenile crime and help prevent the abuse of the next generation.

Working with children and young people was one of the key themes of the first stage of the *Partnerships* initiative. Many of the projects have now published their results, providing a range of resources including practice standards for those working with children and young people who have experienced domestic violence. However, at this stage, there are no consistent broad intervention strategies available to ensure children receive early help. During the first phase of *Partnerships*, the role of the police, courts, family counselling and contact services have not been considered in terms of the way they support children involved in domestic violence. This will be addressed in *Partnerships*’ second phase.

Research has shown that in many families where there is domestic violence there is also child abuse in the form of physical, emotional and sexual abuse as well as neglect. It is currently estimated that child abuse and domestic violence co-exist in between 30 and 60 per cent of cases³. Nevertheless, domestic violence and child protection have tended to be treated separately within the system and responsibility usually lies with different State government departments.

A key issue in considering domestic violence and its impact on families is the assumption (primarily within the child protection system) that mothers have a responsibility to provide good parenting at a time when they may be powerless to act because of their own victimisation. A major reason why women find it difficult to seek help and disclose their experience of domestic violence to police, is their fear, particularly in Indigenous communities, that their children will be removed.⁴ At the same time, it should not be assumed that the parenting capacities of abused women are necessarily compromised. In many cases, the most helpful response will be to intervene in ways which support the actions the women are already taking rather than acting from a presumption about their level of ignorance or incompetence.

² L. Laing 2000, ‘Children, Young People and Domestic Violence’, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse Issues Paper No. 2.

³ Edleson J.L. 1999, ‘The Overlap between Child Maltreatment and Women Battering’, *Violence Against Women*, 5, 2, 134-154.

⁴ Parkinson P. 1996, ‘Children, Domestic Violence and Child Protection’, Office of Women’s Policy, NT Government. Stanley N. 1997, ‘Domestic Violence and Child Abuse: Developing Social Work Practice’, *Child and Family Social Work*, 2, 135-145.

The goal of assisting the child protection system to integrate knowledge about domestic violence into practice has been described by Mills et al. in the following way:

“The goal is to respond to families where women and children are abused in ways that protect the child, empower the mother, and do not unnecessarily separate children from a non-abusive parent, the person who intimately understands the trauma they face.”⁵

Partnerships is currently funding a Queensland project which will trial and evaluate a model for bringing together the domestic violence and child abuse sectors to share their knowledge and develop collaborative good practice in their responses.

There is a wealth of creative, school based prevention programmes being implemented across the country. School based programs both assist students to acquire skills in developing respectful relationships and let children and young people living with the secret of violent homes know that help is available. Insofar as intervention is concerned, there have been mixed messages from *Partnerships* projects about the appropriateness and willingness of schools to become involved. At a minimum, teachers and school welfare workers need to be equipped to feel confident about dealing with signs or disclosures of domestic violence.

New ways of supporting women’s and children’s safety also need to be explored. Currently, many women and children are forced to leave their home and become officially “homeless” because their home is regarded as dangerous. Each year, more than 20,000 Australian women seek shelter in women’s refuges. These women and children are not “homeless”. There is a strong argument, both in terms of social justice and economically, for enabling the woman and her children to remain at home and for forcing the violent man to move out. This would require a major policy and attitudinal shift, within services and the law, underpinned by a clear acknowledgment that women who are victims of domestic violence are not at fault and that the legal and moral responsibility rests with the perpetrator. It is also a matter of protecting women and children in ways that do not cause further damage. The removal of the perpetrator by police does happen in some places, but it is the exception rather than the rule.

While there will always be a need for safe and secure places for women such as in women’s refuges, the role of these services could also be broadened to provide more outreach services for women who, for a range of reasons, do not want to, or feel they cannot, leave home. These women are not passive victims accepting of, or colluding in, the violence inflicted upon them. The 1998 report “*Against the Odds*”⁶ found that women experiencing domestic violence do try to manage or control or prevent the violence, or to cope with it, in a variety of ways.

Perpetrators of Domestic Violence

Another key area of *Partnerships* activity relates to male violence and men’s relationships. \$3 million has been allocated to work with perpetrators in this second phase of *Partnerships* and an expert group drawn from the Commonwealth, State and Territory police and justice areas, service providers and academic experts is advising this work.

Domestic violence will continue to damage the lives of countless Australian women and children unless we can find effective ways to influence the attitudes and behaviour of violent men. Programmes directed towards men to stop and prevent domestic violence are relatively new in Australia. They have included legal sanctions, criminalisation of domestic violence, group programmes for perpetrators and more recent initiatives around preventing domestic violence among young men.

⁵Mills L.G. et al 2000, ‘Child Protection and Domestic Violence: Training, Practice and Policy Issues’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 22, 5, 315-332.

⁶ Keys Young 1998, *Against the Odds, How Women Survive Domestic Violence*.

A number of principles have emerged from the knowledge gained through *Partnerships* projects involving perpetrators:

- the safety of women and children is paramount to any service response;
- work with perpetrators and survivors should be within a framework that acknowledges power and gender and criminal issues in regard to domestic violence; and
- work with perpetrators should focus on men taking responsibility for their behaviour, with accountability underpinning all aspects of the program.

It is obvious that some men cannot or will not change. But others do cease or reduce their violent behaviour because of costs to themselves, fear of external constraints or an increase in internal controls.

Mandatory attendance at perpetrator programs is relatively new in Australia and there is much debate about its effectiveness. *Relationships Australia* runs a mandatory programme in the ACT as part of a *Partnerships* project. They have found that, for many of the men, fathering is a very important issue. The impact of the violence on their children can motivate men to change. Linking their own experience as children to their behaviour as adults enables men to experience themselves as the abuser and start to take responsibility for their actions. Hearing other men's stories and engaging with their experience has also proved effective.

There are still many issues to be addressed in this area. For example, perpetrator programmes rely on rational-talking therapies which are located within a Western cultural context. This makes the majority of programmes inaccessible to those who do not speak English and culturally insensitive for men from non-Western and Indigenous backgrounds. The lead of the Northern Territory in developing an Indigenous programme needs to be followed around Australia with the local development of culturally appropriate programs for a diverse population of male perpetrators. And because programmes for perpetrators in rural and remote areas are often not viable for a range of reasons, specific types of interventions need to be developed for those locations.

Young People's Attitudes to Domestic Violence

A key to reducing domestic violence in future generations is to understand young people's understanding of, and attitudes about, domestic violence.

In a 1999 national survey of 5,000 young people aged 12 to 20 years⁷, 92 per cent believed domestic violence to be either a very serious or quite serious form of violence. Nevertheless, one in twenty young people (mostly younger adolescents) considered forcing the partner to have sex, throwing things like plates at each other and regular slapping or punching were part of "normal" conflict. The critical challenge is to translate young people's awareness of domestic violence into changes that result in them living in violence free relationships. Four *Partnerships* projects have specifically targeted young men. It has been encouraging to find that young men are interested in exploring ways to stop relationship violence when it is presented in ways that are accessible to their own peer culture.

⁷ Young People and Domestic Violence, Fact Sheet 2000. National research on young people's attitudes and experiences of domestic violence commissioned by National Crime Prevention, Attorney General's Department and Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Indigenous Family Violence

Another of the four key areas in the second phase of *Partnerships* is Indigenous family violence. Levels of family violence in Indigenous communities are a matter of great concern – most particularly, of course, to the communities themselves. In April, *Partnerships* hosted a highly successful National Forum on Indigenous Family Violence attended by hundreds of Indigenous community leaders and service providers to share knowledge and good practice, promote new linkages and identify ways forward.

The \$6 million National Indigenous Family Violence Grants Programme is funding a large number of grass roots projects in Indigenous communities to trial new approaches. The Programme is based on the premise that effective solutions must be locally based, have a high degree of community ownership, be culturally appropriate and help communities to rekindle family relationships.

Community Awareness Initiatives

Community awareness is a vital element in preventing domestic violence, informing victims of their rights and available support, and enabling friends and families (to whom victims most often disclose) to respond appropriately and supportively. A national community awareness campaign on Indigenous family violence is currently being run combining advertising and local forums to provide support and inspiration for Indigenous communities. Other national campaigns – directed at young people and people from non English speaking backgrounds – are currently in the development stage.

Later this year *Partnerships* will host a national conference in Perth on “*Violence Across the Lifecycle*” which will focus on how different people at different stages of life experience domestic violence and which interventions are most effective at which ages.

Domestic Violence and Older Women

Partnerships has recently funded one of the first Australian studies of older women’s experience of domestic violence. The report, *Two Lives – Two Worlds: Older People and Domestic Violence*⁸ was published late last year. As a result of a secondary analysis of data from the 1996 ABS Women’s Safety Australia survey, the researchers estimated that, of all Australian women who are abused today, one in three is likely to be over 45 years. One in six is likely to be over 55 years. This is a very significant finding. It is obvious that many older women are not receiving the level of support they need and deserve.

Of the 140 women over 50 years of age who contributed to the study, half were over age 60. They had spent much of their lives in a world where domestic abuse was rarely acknowledged and attitudes to marriage were very different. By this age, most were financially dependent. In some cases, the frequency of abuse increased when their husbands retired and, for some, this life stage included the onset of illness or increasing frailty - either their own or their husband’s.

For older women, the consequences of leaving are more profound. They stand to lose their financial security, their home, their friends, even – in many cases - their relationship with their adult children. These difficulties are compounded for older women from non-English speaking backgrounds and in rural and remote communities. And, as Pamela Kinnear and Adam Graycar have pointed out, for frail older women, one, or perhaps the only, alternative – moving to an institution – is often the very thing they fear most⁹.

⁸ Morgan Disney and Associates with Leigh Cupitt and Associates and the Council of the Ageing 1999, *Two Lives – Two Worlds: Older People and Domestic Violence*.

⁹ Kinnear P. and Graycar A. 1999, ‘Abuse of Older People: Crime or Family Dynamics?’, *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No 113, Australian Institute of Criminology.

Almost all of the existing research relating to older women and domestic violence to date has been in the field of “elder abuse”. It is important to recognise that “elder abuse” does not constitute a unique or exclusive category of behaviour. Rather, it is a convenient way of talking about situations that are usually categorised under other headings. We need to recognise that abuse between spouses can also occur when spouses are elderly. Indeed, it is likely that an abusive marital relationship will remain abusive as the parties age. It will not be helpful to redefine the problem as “elder abuse” if by this we mean that it is no longer to be regarded as domestic violence – to necessarily be dealt with within the privacy of the family and service system. In situations where the victim is frail and disabled, the most appropriate response will often be the same as if it was a child at risk, ie to treat the violence as neither a crime nor a private matter but to offer assistance by way of increased support services with removal from the family home regarded as a last resort.

However, many older victims of domestic violence are not frail and disabled. Most of these women are neither identified nor assisted in any way but continue to suffer in silence.

The vulnerability and lack of choices for older victims of domestic violence presents challenges for which there are no easy answers. More account of their special needs must obviously be taken in the development of domestic violence policies, services and community awareness programs. One of the challenges is to work in partnership with aged care and domestic violence professionals to develop effective and appropriate means of support for these older women while respecting their choice to remain in their marriage, home or family.

Conclusion

As you can see, through its research and projects, *Partnerships* is proving its value in informing the ways in which we can more effectively address domestic violence using a wide range of strategies. The challenge now is to capitalise on what we are learning by building this knowledge into the design of better policies and services. The focus must be less about picking up the pieces when the worst occurs and more about preventing problems before they arise. Where violence has already occurred, the interventions and support need to be prompt and effective.

We **are** making progress, but much more is required. It is only through working in this difficult area collaboratively across all of Government and through the breadth of community, health, legal and policing services, that real changes will be made.