



St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL *good works*

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Submission to the Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia

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 26 June 2014, the Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia was referred to the Finance and Public Administration Committee. The Society has consulted nationally and we welcome the opportunity to make this contribution.

1. Gender 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.

The Society abhors violence against anyone, in any situation, and sees any violence in the home, against an intimate partner, as a crime. However, it is notable that violence against an intimate partner does not affect everyone equally. Instead, the crime of domestic violence is strongly gendered. While 15% of women have experienced intimate partner violence, only 4.9% of men have.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵ Also on the severity of violence, of all murders committed by an intimate partner, 78% were perpetrated against women.⁶ 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.⁷

¹ ABS *Personal Safety Survey*, 2006.

² Ibid.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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 3.

⁶ Rosa Campbell, 'General Intimate Partner Violence Statistics', *Australian Domestic and Family Violence*

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 women do feel ongoing fear after having violence used against them, and a sense of being controlled.⁸ Shockingly, 96% of those who end up homeless as a result of domestic violence are women.⁹

2. The causes of domestic violence

There are marked gender differences in the way that violence is used. When females perpetrate the crime of domestic violence, it is more often in self-defence, a one-off incident, and is less severe in the impact it has. On the other hand, when males commit domestic violence, it is more likely to be systemic, more severe, and lead to fear, coercion, and homelessness for the survivors.

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 against their female partners 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.¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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.¹²

3. What can we do?

The Society supports strong investment in addressing the *symptoms* of domestic violence, which include support for women leaving violence, such as women's refuges and shelters; education for men and boys about violence against women; and helping women identify when they have been subjected to the crime of domestic violence. The Society runs a range of services for women escaping domestic violence around the country, but we believe much more investment must be made in this area. The

Clearing House, Fast Facts 1 (May 2011).

⁷ Braaf and Meyering, above n 3, Tables 5.1, 5.2, 5.3.

⁸ Dobash and Dobash, above n 5.

⁹ 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 3.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Flood and Pease, above n 10.

National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children is a step in this direction,¹³ as is the National Domestic Violence Order Scheme.

However, 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,¹⁴ 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 non-government bodies. It is high time that we, as a nation, developed concrete steps to achieve true equality between women and men.¹⁵

¹³<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>.

¹⁴ See, for example, Flood and Pease, above n 10.

¹⁵ 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.