

## Family violence

### Policy position paper

#### Key Facts

- On average, one Australian woman is killed each week by a current or former partner.<sup>1</sup>
- On average, one Australian child is killed every two weeks as a result of family violence.<sup>2</sup>
- One in three Australian women has experienced physical violence since the age of 15.<sup>3</sup>
- Family violence results in a police call-out on average once every two minutes across Australia.<sup>4</sup>
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience far higher rates and more severe forms of violence than other women.<sup>5</sup>
- Women with disabilities<sup>6</sup>, women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, younger women and lesbian women<sup>7</sup> often face increased risk of family violence.
- Family violence is a leading cause of homelessness - 38 per cent of all clients seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services in 2015-16 were escaping family violence.<sup>8</sup>

Family violence is a violation of nationally and globally protected human rights, and is the most pervasive form of violence perpetrated against women.\* Its eradication demands multi-dimensional interventions that tackle gender inequalities in key social, economic, political and cultural domains.

#### What is family violence?

Family violence is 'the repeated use of violent, threatening, coercive or controlling behaviour by an individual against a family member(s), or someone with whom they have, or have had an intimate relationship, including carers'.<sup>9</sup>

Forms of family violence include emotional, verbal, social, economic, psychological, spiritual, physical and sexual abuse. A perpetrator, through one or more of these methods, will engage in a deliberate course of conduct designed to dominate his intimate partner and/or family member. This exercise of power and control is a critical element in all manifestations of family violence and contributes to its insidious nature.

We purposefully adopt the term 'family' rather than 'domestic' violence as it more adequately encompasses the structures within certain communities, including Aboriginal kinship networks, in which this type of violence can occur. The broader term 'family violence' also includes lateral violence which is used within Indigenous Australian communities to describe 'a product of a complex mix of historical, cultural and social dynamics that result in a spectrum of behaviours'.<sup>10,11</sup>

#### The gendered nature of family violence

It is widely accepted that family violence is gendered violence. Perpetrators are far more likely to be men, and women comprise the vast majority of victims.<sup>12</sup>

Current societal structures and norms fundamentally and uniquely disadvantage women. Some men are victims of family violence. However, the factors that drive abuse of men are generally distinct from those that impel men to abuse women. Men's use of violence against women is predominantly predicated on power, control and male privilege - the assignment of power to masculinity as a consequence of patriarchy. This is reinforced and, to some extent, condoned by community attitudes. Women, conversely, do not victimise men from the same position of structural power or privilege. Thus, gender norms and stereotypes, male privilege, patriarchy and a society that does not challenge these notions all contribute to a devaluing of women and their experiences of violence.

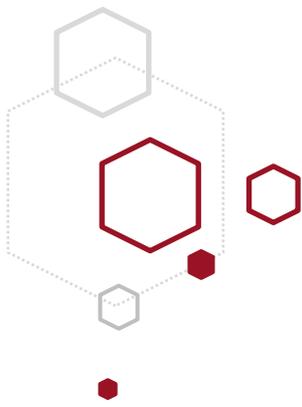
#### The impacts of family violence

It is unsurprising family violence is a major cause of homelessness, financial hardship and poor mental and physical health for women: the health, social and economic impacts of family violence on women, children, families and communities are devastating, and in some cases, lethal. The negative psychological and material consequences often endure to create intergenerational disadvantage, which further perpetuates women's inequality.

Family violence tends to be repetitive and persistent, impacting adversely upon:

- emotional health, including increased feelings of shame and guilt; confusion; loss of self-confidence and esteem; feelings of hopelessness; loss of dreams and passion; increased feelings of rage and powerlessness
- physical health, such as increased risk of injury, and/or death
- mental health, including depression, anxiety disorders, psychosis, post-traumatic stress disorder and stress-related disorders

\* Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand recognises that women and children are the overwhelming victims of family violence. However, for the purpose of this position paper, we have intentionally focused on women



- behaviour, including self-harm, eating disorders, substance abuse, addictive behaviours, obsessive compulsive disorders, withdrawal from friends/family, disengagement from work and/or study.

These effects can be short and long term, and do not necessarily cease once a violent relationship is ended. Women who determine to leave situations of family violence can face many impediments including lack of financial resources and absence of alternative housing options and, quite legitimately, fear of reprisal. Moreover, separation heightens the risk of abuse and potential for serious assault and homicide.<sup>13</sup> Most women attempt to leave multiple times before exiting the relationship permanently.<sup>14</sup> Even post-separation, women may experience ongoing fear for their personal and family safety and can continue to be vulnerable to economic abuse.<sup>15</sup>

Other significant, lifelong impacts result from family violence: financial hardship and poverty, and limited employment and educational opportunities, entrench disadvantage, contributing to housing insecurity and poor health outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

## Eliminating Family Violence

The causes of all forms of violence against women are embedded in a complex web of social, cultural and economic factors, a key determinant of which is imbalance in the distribution of power and resources between men and women.<sup>17</sup> If family violence is to be eradicated, the empowerment of women is critical. Multi-dimensional interventions are required to ensure inequalities in basic capabilities, legal rights and participation in key social, economic, political and cultural domains are remedied. To achieve this, a gendered analysis of violence against women is critical, and must occur at every level.

Responses need to be comprehensive. They need to be informed by an understanding of the gendered nature of family violence, by evidence and by experience. More broadly, to prevent all forms of violence against women, we need to transform gender-power imbalances across all cultures, including within workplaces, schools, government and communities.

## References

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