

## Gender inequality and family violence

### Policy Position Paper

#### Key Facts

1. Gender inequality - the unequal value afforded to men and women, and the unequal distribution of power, opportunities and resources between them - is what drives violence against women.<sup>i</sup>
2. Australian women are most likely to experience physical and sexual violence in the home and/or at the hands of a current or former male partner.<sup>ii</sup> Men, on the other hand, are most at risk of violence from *other* men, whom they do not know, and more often in public spaces.
3. Violence against women is not the result of random, individual acts of misconduct, but rather is deeply rooted in structural relationships of inequality between women and men.<sup>iii</sup>

Violence against women is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Family violence is the most pervasive form of violence against women,<sup>1</sup> and is a violation of nationally and globally protected human rights.

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand defines family violence as: *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 or dependent relationship with, including carers.*<sup>iv</sup>

### Gender and the privileging of masculinity

Gender is not biologically determined, but rather a social construct. The lived experience of many would indicate that an individual's gender is an innate, deeply felt psychological identification of sense of self, which may or may not be man/masculine or woman/feminine.

Social constructs of gender creates a 'gender hierarchy' which limits men and women. The acceptance and enforcement of the gender binary also limits people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse and intersex (LGBTI). These social constructs define norms and roles for men and women, as well as the relationship between women and men.<sup>v</sup> This affects everyone's capacity to fully participate in society. As a consequence, gender norms, roles and relations influence people's susceptibility to different health conditions and diseases, impacting their enjoyment of good mental, physical health and wellbeing.<sup>vi</sup>

From a very young age, children are taught to behave in 'appropriate' ways that adhere to social expectations for their gender, as well as how to interact with members of the opposite gender. Young girls quickly learn that instituted societal barriers reinforce their inferiority to young boys. This is a message that is also communicated commonly through stereotypes, gendered toys, the media, and marketing more broadly. As such, we have created a world where power is assigned to masculinity at the expense of femininity.<sup>vii</sup> Those who are perceived to possess feminine characteristics are subsequently subordinated and undervalued.

### The link between gender and violence

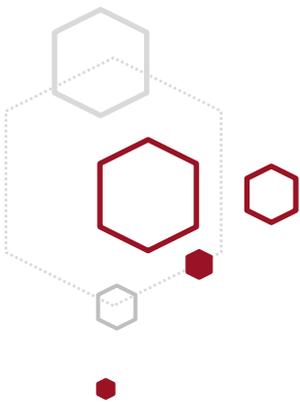
The root cause of any form of violence against women, including family violence, is gender inequality. Statistics tells us that women are overwhelmingly the victims/survivors of family violence, and men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators.<sup>viii</sup> Gender inequality also has additional consequences for women outside of the family violence context. This includes the pay disparity between men and women in similar job roles and lower numbers of women in leadership positions.<sup>ix</sup> Gender inequality impacts and persists in almost every aspect of a woman's life, from childhood, through adolescence, in the workplace, in the family setting, and in retirement.

Compounding women's experiences of violence are its long-term consequences that further entrench the social disadvantage of women through poverty and financial hardship, and limiting employment and educational opportunities. This can lead to housing insecurity and/or homelessness and contributes to poorer health outcomes.<sup>x</sup>

While some men are victims of family violence<sup>xi</sup>, the factors that drive abuse against men are generally distinct from those that impel men to abuse women. Men's use of violence

<sup>1</sup> Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand recognises that women and children are the overwhelming victims of family violence. For the purpose of this paper, we have intentionally focused on women. A separate paper has been developed on family violence impacts on children.

See Policy Position Paper 5 *Family violence and its impacts on children*.



against women is predominately predicated on power, control and male privilege - the assignment of power and authority to masculinity as a consequence of patriarchy.<sup>xii</sup> This is reinforced and, to some extent, condoned and supported by community attitudes.<sup>xiii</sup> Women on the other hand do not victimise men from the same position of structural power or privilege. For example, in 2015 the NSW coroner reported that of all the intimate partner homicides reviewed over the last decade, no incidents involved a woman who killed a man because she was a domestic violence offender - rather, when women did kill their partner, or ex-partner, it was in self-defence.<sup>xiv</sup>

## Gender inequality affects all women, but it does not affect all women equally

Women are not a homogenous group, and not all women experience gender inequality the same way. Gender inequality can often intersect with other forms of inequality to affect the nature and prevalence of family violence experienced by women. Women from refugee and/or immigrant backgrounds; older women; younger women; Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women; lesbian, bisexual and trans women; women living in rural or remote areas; women with disabilities; and women from lower socio-economic backgrounds face and experience unique yet multiple and reinforcing forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Shaped and influenced by these intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination, we acknowledge that experiences of family violence may be compounded for some women.<sup>xv</sup>

## Achieving gender equality

Gender equality is not merely about an equal ratio of men and women in positions of power, nor is it only about equal pay. While these are important quantifiable outcomes and will go some way in facilitating equality, there is a need to transform societal norms, practices and structures that perpetuate and enable harmful gender stereotypes. By advancing gender equality, we increase women's safety, security, health and wellbeing by encouraging a society based on respect and equality. Achieving gender equality benefits everybody - it will deliver social and economic benefits that will result in a 'safe and equal society where every individual has access to equal power, resources and opportunities, and be treated with dignity, respect and fairness'.<sup>xvi</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Our Watch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) and VicHealth, 2015, *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, Our Watch, Melbourne Australia.

<sup>ii</sup> ANROWS, 2014, *Violence against women key statistics*, Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, Melbourne, <http://www.anrows.org.au/sites/default/files/Violence-Against-Australian-Women-Key-Statistics.pdf>.

<sup>iii</sup> Secretary-General, 2006, *In-depth study on all forms of violence against women*, UN Doc. A/61/122/Add. 1, p. 13.

<sup>iv</sup> Macdonald, F., 2012, *Spotlight on economic abuse: A literature and police review*, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Collingwood.

<sup>v</sup> World Health Organisation, 2017, *Gender, equity and human rights: Gender*, [www.who.int/gender](http://www.who.int/gender).

<sup>vi</sup> World Health Organization, 2015, *Gender*. Retrieved August 11, 2015 from World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/gender-equity-rights/understanding/gender-definition/en/>.

<sup>vii</sup> Connell R.W. and Pearse, R. 2014. *Gender: In World Perspective*, John Wiley and Sons.

<sup>viii</sup> Australian Government, Department of Social Services, <https://www.dss.gov.au/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/the-national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children-2010-2022>.

<sup>ix</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2017, *Australia's gender equality scorecard: Key findings from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's 2016 - 17 reporting data*, Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Sydney.

<sup>x</sup> Braaf, R. & Barrett Meyering, I. 2011 *Seeking economic security: Promoting women's economic well-being following domestic violence* Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse The University of New South Wales, Sydney; Braaf, R. 2012 *Health impacts of domestic and family violence: Fast facts 5* Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse The University of New South Wales, Sydney.

<sup>xi</sup> Domestic violence data in Australia show that one in six women and one in 20 men have experienced at least one incidence of violence from a current or former partner since the age of 15 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-06/fact-file-domestic-violence-statistics/7147938>

<sup>xii</sup> Connell, R.W., and Messerschmidt, J., 2005, Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept, *Gender & Society*, 19(6), pp. 829 - 859.

<sup>xiii</sup> VicHealth, 2014, *Australian's attitudes to violence against women. Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS)*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia.

<sup>xiv</sup> Government of New South Wales, 2015, *A report of the Domestic Violence Death Review Team: Annual report 2013 - 2015*, Domestic Violence Death Review Team, Sydney.

<sup>xv</sup> Blumer, C., 2015 cited in State Government of Victoria, 2017, *Free from violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women*, Melbourne.

<sup>xvi</sup> State Government of Victoria, 2017, *Gender equality*, <https://www.vic.gov.au/women/gender-equality.html>

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