

Fact Sheet 1 - What is Family Violence?

Domestic and family violence is the repeated use of violent, threatening, coercive or controlling behaviour against a family member or someone the perpetrator has or previously had an intimate relationship with, which may include carers.

This definition, from the Victorian code of practice for specialist family violence services for women and children, has been endorsed by the Australian Association of Social Workers.

Family violence happens to women, and less often to men, from all cultures and walks of life. Most often it involves men abusing their current or former female partners, girlfriends or wives.

Abuse can also occur in gay and lesbian relationships, or between parents and older children, siblings or any other family members. People with disabilities can be abused by carers, who may or may not be family members.

In Aboriginal and some other communities, the definition of 'family' may include kinship groups and other community members.

The Family Violence Protection Act (Victoria) 2008 defines family violence as behaviour towards a family member which is: physically or sexually abusive; emotionally or psychologically abusive; economically abusive; threatening; coercive; or in any other way controls or dominates a family member and causes them to feel fear for the safety or well-being of themselves or another person.

The Act says a child is also a victim of the violence if it hears, witnesses or is otherwise exposed to such behaviour or its effects (e.g. a distressed adult, an injured person, damage to property).

What does family and domestic violence look like? People who inflict domestic and family violence assume they have the right to be in charge and

dominate people close to them. Their behaviour causes people to fear for their own safety and sometimes for the safety of other family members, or pets.

It includes not only physical assault, but also other behaviour that can be just as harmful. It may include:

- > Monitoring and limiting a person's movements and access to others.
- > Controlling a person's access to money.
- > Verbal insults and abuse.
- > Damage to property.
- > Threatening someone, or their children, pets, other family members or friends.
- > Preventing someone from practising their religious beliefs or cultural practices.

Because the violence is ongoing, it gradually undermines the confidence of the person experiencing it and their ability to leave the violent person. The severity and frequency of violence often escalates over time.

Any behaviour or action that constitutes family violence is unacceptable, even if it is not of a type which is currently a criminal offence.

Breaching human rights

Family violence directly contravenes Australia's commitment to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Rights of the Child.

As a signatory to CEDAW, all Australian governments must continue to implement policies and programs to eradicate discrimination in all its forms, against all women.

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Your place for family violence information

Gender-based data

The vast majority of perpetrators of all violence are men. About 80% of all violent assaults (including sexual) are carried out by men against other men and women.

Women are most likely to be assaulted by a partner or former partner. Men are most likely to be assaulted by men they don't know (74%) and most assaults are single incidents in public places, such as a pub or street.

These findings are from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey (2006). Of all the violence men experience, very little is domestic or family violence. A third of all women, but only 4% of men, are assaulted by a partner during their lifetime. (Measuring the Extent of Domestic Violence, Ferrante, A., et al, 1996)

The homicide figures are particularly stark. One-fifth of all homicides in Australia are committed by intimate partners, and four out of five of these involve a man killing his female partner. Typically, women are killed in the context of a history of domestic and family violence. (Family Homicide in Australia, Mouzos and Rushforth, 2003)

The Personal Safety Survey (a national survey of 16,400 Australians aged 18 and over) found that:

- > 40% of women have experienced violence since reaching the age of 15.
- > 29% have experienced physical assault.
- > 16% have experienced violence by a current or previous partner in their lifetime.

The Australian component of the International Violence Against Women Survey (a national survey of 6,677 women aged 18-69, conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology in 2004) found that:

- > 57% of Australian women report experiencing at least one incident of physical or sexual violence by a man over their lifetime.
- > 48% have experienced physical violence and 34% have experienced sexual violence.

Most vulnerable

Women from particular groups in the Australian community are at higher risk from family violence and its effects, and can face barriers in accessing support and legal protection.

They include:

- > Aboriginal women
- > The culturally and linguistically diverse
- > Women with disabilities
- > Rural women
- > Older women
- > Women with mental health issues
- > Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex

Women who are isolated geographically, or because of limited English language skills, their age or other factors, are less likely to seek and receive help and information. Women who have experienced discrimination or a poor response from services in the past may be reluctant to seek help or may receive inappropriate responses.

In the Australian component of the International Violence Against Women Survey, 20% of Aboriginal women had experienced physical violence in the previous 12 months compared to 7% of non-Aboriginal women.

Just over 2% of the Australian population is Aboriginal, but Aboriginal women accounted for 15% of homicide victims in Australia in 2002-03. (National Homicide Monitoring Program annual report, 2004)

Women with disabilities are twice as likely to experience violence at the hands of a family member or carer.

Effects of the violence

Domestic and family violence affects not only the victims themselves, but the children who witness it, extended families, friends, workplaces and ultimately the whole Australian community.

Intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15-44 (The Health Costs of Violence: Measuring the Burden of Disease Caused by Intimate Partner Violence, Vic Health, 2004).

All children and young people who experience family violence are affected in some way. Such exposure has long-term psychological, emotional and behavioural consequences. (Department of Human Services, 2006)

Violence against women is economically costly. It puts pressure on state budgets in terms of health, criminal justice interventions and loss of productivity. The total cost to Australia in 2009 was estimated at \$13.6 billion. Without appropriate action, an estimated 750,000 women will experience violence in 2021-22, costing \$15.6 billion. (Economic Cost of Violence Against Women and Their Children, National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children, 2009)