

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA

Submission to the Senate's Finance and Public Administration References Committee

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established as an initiative under Australia's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022* (the National Plan). ANROWS is jointly funded by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia. Its mission is to deliver relevant and translatable research evidence which drives policy and practice leading to a reduction in the incidence and impacts of violence against women and their children by 2022.

ANROWS was officially launched on 16 May 2014 and is currently developing its first program of research, which will incorporate 1) large-scale multi-jurisdictional projects commissioned by ANROWS; 2) projects funded through an ANROWS opens grants application process; and 3) small-scale projects commissioned by ANROWS. The program of research will comprise projects within priority topic areas directly related to jurisdictions' needs for evidence to support their implementation of the National Plan. It is expected that the program of research will be announced by November 2014.

ANROWS is very pleased to have the opportunity to assist the Senate inquiry on domestic violence in Australia by providing the following information.

- a. **The prevalence and impact of domestic violence in Australia as it affects all Australians and in particular as it affects i) women living with a disability and ii) women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds**

ANROWS has not yet collected its own data on the incidence, prevalence and impacts of domestic violence, but a summary of existing data is provided below.

Prevalence

The most recent comprehensive data on the prevalence of domestic violence in Australia is provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2012 Personal Safety Survey (ABS 2013). It shows that approximately 1 in 6 Australia women, since the age of 15 years, has been subjected to physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner, compared to 1 in 19 men. Also, a greater number of women (1 in 4) than men (1 in 7) has been subjected to emotional abuse by a current or former partner, since the age of 15. The Personal Safety Survey demonstrates a qualitative difference between the violence women and men experience. It shows women are most likely to experience violence in their home by a current or former partner; that is, domestic violence. In contrast, while men report high levels of violence this is

unlikely to be domestic violence. Men are most likely to experience violence in a place of recreation or entertainment by a male stranger and the most common type of known perpetrator against a man is an acquaintance or neighbour.

Nationally and internationally, there is debate about whether or not men and women are subjected to domestic violence (i.e. intimate partner violence) in equal numbers, which is often referred to as the ‘gender symmetry debate’. Those that argue gender symmetry (e.g. Archer, 2000; Dutton, 2006; Straus, 2010) refer to studies based on the use of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), developed by Straus and colleagues in the late 1970s to measure the use of physical violence (shoves, slaps, kicks, punches etc) as strategies to resolve conflict within families. Those arguing gender asymmetry (e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012; Feder & Henning, 2005; Stark, 2007) contend that when the context of the violent action (e.g. defensive action versus coercive, controlling action) is considered, it is nearly always men perpetrating domestic violence. The ABS data provided above, however, illustrates that domestic violence is gender-based violence. Further, and importantly, those on both sides of the gender symmetry debate in the peer-reviewed literature agree that, regardless of the context or motivation for the violence, it is women who are more often harmed and suffer greater harm, than men (Douglas & Nancarrow, Forthcoming).

i. Women living with a disability

The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children reported that data on the prevalence of violence against women with disability in Australia is limited, although a Victorian study found that 25 per cent of women reporting sexual assault had a disability. The National Council also reported in its background paper that a Canadian study had found that the odds of experiencing domestic violence were 40 per cent greater for women with disability (2009a, p. 18). Although evidence on the prevalence of domestic violence against women with disability in Australia is limited, there is substantial evidence that this is a significant issue for which there are unique policy and service provision challenges. A recent report “Stop the Violence: Report of the Outcomes – National Symposium on Violence against Women and Girls” (Stop the Violence Project, 2014) examined many aspects of the experiences of women with disability subjected to domestic violence.

ii. Women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

The term ‘family violence’ is typically used instead of ‘domestic violence’ in Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities to better capture the complexities of relationships where violence is involved. ANROWS has adopted the practice of using both “domestic and family violence”.

Indigenous women are more often victimised and suffer more serious violence than non-Indigenous women, including homicide committed by their intimate male partner (Dearden & Jones, 2008; Virueda & Payne, 2010). Based on the results of the Australian component of the 2002 International Violence against Women Survey, Mouzos and Makkai (2004) report that 20 per cent of Indigenous women, compared to 7 per cent of non-Indigenous women, had experienced physical violence in the previous year; 12 per cent of Indigenous women, compared to 4 per cent of non-Indigenous women had experienced sexual violence in the previous year; and 25 per cent of Indigenous women, compared to 10 per cent of non-Indigenous women, experienced some kind of violence in the

previous year. Although the results are consistent with other research findings, the authors advise these figures be used with caution due to the small sample sizes.

The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Services (2009) reported Indigenous females were 35 times as likely to be hospitalised due to family violence related assaults, and Indigenous males 21.4 times as likely, as non-Indigenous females and males. Indigenous females are five times more likely to be victims of homicide than non-Indigenous females; 55 per cent (n=33) of the 60 Indigenous homicide victims were killed in a domestic homicide, which includes 42 per cent (n=25) that were intimate partner homicides (Willis, 2011).

Impacts

The impacts of domestic violence are many and varied and include negative consequences for psychological and physical health, homelessness and poverty and significant disruption to children's education. A detailed consideration of the impacts of domestic violence can be found in the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children Background Paper (2009a) and the Australian Women's Health Network Position Paper (2014), provided to the Senate inquiry (submission 4).

Women with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience the same kinds of impacts as other women. The impacts may have additional consequences, however, due to circumstances related to health, dependency, geographic and physical isolation, indirect discrimination in service provision and other issues concerning issues of access to support and intervention.

b. The factors contributing to the present levels of domestic violence

There is no single cause of domestic violence. It is best understood as a result of the interaction of factors at the individual, family, community and societal levels encompassing, for example, attitudes to women and gender roles within relationships, family and peer support for these attitudes, and social and economic gender inequality in the broader societal context. Alcohol and economic stress can be triggers, or contributing factors, which may exacerbate domestic violence but they are not causes. Causal and contributing factors are discussed in detail by the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (2009a, pp. 26-36) and the Australian Women's Health Network Position Paper (2014).

Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, high levels of violence occur in the social context that include inter-generational trauma associated with dispossession of land, forced removal of children, interrupted cultural practices that mitigate against interpersonal violence, removal of children and economic exclusion.

c. The adequacy of policy and community responses to domestic violence

Despite decades of public interventions, the current prevalence of domestic violence in Australia suggests more needs to be done, and done differently, to halt it. The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (2009b) identified the need to build the evidence across a number of key areas to guide future policy and program decision-making. To this end, the National Council recommended the

establishment of a national centre of excellence to reduce violence against women and their children. This recommendation was accepted by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia, which negotiated the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 that included the establishment of a national centre of excellence. The centre was officially launched as Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) in May 2014 and is discussed in more detail, below. In addition, the Commonwealth and Victorian governments jointly established the Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children to drive change in community attitudes and behaviours that overtly or covertly support violence against women.

d. The effects of policy decisions regarding housing, legal services, and women's economic independence on the ability of women to escape domestic violence

Economic security has been shown to be a significant factor in women's decisions to stay in an abusive relationship; and in decisions to leave (Braaf & Barrett Meyering, 2011). This research identifies that domestic violence "significantly contributes to poverty, financial risk and financial insecurity, sometimes long after they have left the relationship" (p. 3). Indeed, domestic violence has been identified elsewhere as the biggest single cause of homelessness among women and children (Australian Government, 2008), which can have devastating effects on the immediate and long-term opportunities for women and their children to achieve physical, social and economic security. The impacts of domestic violence extend beyond the need for secure housing, to the need to access health, legal and employment services. A Victorian study (VicHealth, 2004) found that intimate partner violence "has a greater impact on the health of Victorian women under the age of 45 than any other risk factor" (p. 25). Access to health and legal services is critical to recovery from trauma and the ability to establish safety and autonomy. Attending to health and legal issues may obstruct, or limit, the ability of victims of domestic violence to secure and retain ongoing employment.

e. How the Federal Government can best support, contribute to and drive the social, cultural and behavioural shifts required to eliminate violence against women and their children

States and territories have primary responsibility for policy, legislation and programs directed to addressing the prevalence and effects of domestic violence. Nevertheless, the Federal Government has a critical national leadership role in driving social, cultural and behavioural change in addition to providing an adequate safety net for women and their children through access to affordable housing, legal and support services and economic independence.

ANROWS commends the establishment of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2012-2022, and the Second Action Plan 2013-2016 of the National Plan, launched by the Prime Minister in June 2014. In addition to providing a nationally consistent framework for efforts to significantly reduce violence against women and their children by 2022, the National Plan has delivered two key initiatives, with a significant proportion of funding from the Australian Government. The first of these is ANROWS, established to build the evidence to support decision-making for policy, program and practice development. The second is the Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children, created to drive the broad-based attitudinal and behavioural change required to achieve a future free from violence against women and their children.

The Senate Committee should be aware that ANROWS's funding (\$3M per annum, shared across the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia on a per capita basis) commenced on 1 July 2013 for a three-year period until 30 June 2016. That is, the current commitment of funding for ANROWS expires six years before the end of the National Plan. A longer-term funding commitment, at least to the end of the National Plan in 2022, is necessary to enable ANROWS to fulfil its potential including support for longer term research projects, which are crucial in understanding, for example, the effects of perpetrator intervention programs. To illustrate this point, the recent open grants applications process conducted by ANROWS, resulted in 50 applications for research projects to address current gaps in the evidence base with a total value of approximately \$15 million.

The need for, and capability to deliver an evidence base for effective activities to reduce and prevent violence is far greater than the current commitment of resources for this purpose. The need for evidence to support policy and practice in work towards eliminating domestic violence will continue well beyond the term of the current National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children.

We appreciate this opportunity to contribute to the Senate's deliberations and would be very pleased to assist further if required.

Yours sincerely



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