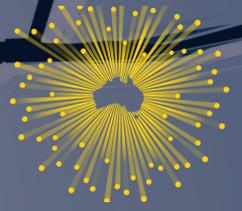


YOUNG AUSTRALIANS in
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



ADDRESSING AUSTRALIA'S STRATEGIES ON DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

POLICY BRIEF - MEG FITZGERALD & ZUBERI SALIM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) refers to 'violence between family members, typically where the perpetrator exercises power and control over another person.' [1] While DFV impacts many vulnerable groups including children, the elderly, people with disabilities and people from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, this brief will focus on the impact that DVF has on women. The most pervasive form of DFV is found within current and former intimate partner relationships. [2] This issue has become increasingly prevalent since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A report from the Australian Institute of Criminology has found that one in ten women in a relationship experience DFV, with two-thirds of these victims reporting the violence started or escalated during lockdowns. [3] These statistics are chilling considering the Australian Government spent \$1.1 billion addressing DFV in 2021 alone. [4] With the current national DVF response plan ending soon, it is unclear whether Australia's current strategies to reduce DFV are effective. The consensus of Australian experts is clear: to reduce DFV, Australia needs to implement stronger primary prevention strategies, including educational and gender-based approaches. [5]

In order to reduce both the intensity and prevalence of DFV, it is recommended that the Australian Government:

- 1 Implement nationwide education programs teaching young people about DFV.
- 2 Legislate uniform Australian domestic and family violence laws.
- 3 Develop nationwide standards and consistent data reporting.

BACKGROUND

Through national initiatives, the federal government sponsors state and territory governments to cooperate on the development and implementation of strategies to address and prevent DFV. In 2011 The Commonwealth, endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), designed a central initiative to address DFV—the ‘National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children’. This National Plan committed state and territory governments to improve the wellbeing of individuals and families in Australian communities, ensuring that women and their children are safe from violence.

From 2010 to 2022, COAG committed \$723 million [6] to implementing secondary and tertiary prevention strategies, such as organisations (e.g. ANROWS, Our Watch), monetary support services (e.g. Women’s Safety Package), and information campaigns (e.g. Family Safety Pack, Stop It at the Start, and DV-Alert). [7]

However, the effectiveness of this National Plan has been brought into question. The most recent Australian DFV statistics are either lacking in some areas or finding increases in DFV rates. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are still finding that one in three Australian women will experience DFV in her life. As of 2020, there was still one Australian woman per week killed at the hands of her partner or ex-partner. [8] The 1996 Women's Safety Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found similar statistics. [9]

Many experts recommend the Australian Government shift their focus to a primary prevention-based approach. [10] Primary prevention strategies work across communities, organisations and society to address the deep, underlying drivers of DFV. Such strategies have been supported by Australian health and crime prevention experts, the WHO and UN Women. [11]

Primary prevention strategies have been successfully implemented in countries like the USA (Safe Date), Canada (Feeling Yes Feeling No) and Thailand (My Body Belongs to Me). Through long-term curricula-based approaches, children build their knowledge about DFV and their capacity to protect themselves. The results across these countries show signs of reduction in victimisation and prevented perpetration by both sexes. [12] Studies have found that girls who had participated in a child sexual abuse prevention program were twice as likely to report sexual abuses than children who had not participated in the program. [13]

THE PROBLEM

Root causes of domestic and family violence include low levels of education, history of exposure to child maltreatment and/or violence, witnessing family violence, alcohol abuse, harmful masculine behaviours, community norms, low levels of women's access to paid employment and gender inequality. [14] Many of these causes can be directly addressed through education, a primary prevention strategy. [15]

The costs of DFV for Australia are far greater than the cost of effective prevention. The social and economic costs of DFV are enormous and have ripple effects throughout society. Women may suffer isolation, inability to work, loss of wages, lack of participation in regular activities and limited ability to care for themselves and their children. [16] Based on 2015 research, violence against women in Australia costs the country \$21.7 billion each year. [17]

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 IMPLEMENT NATIONWIDE EDUCATION PROGRAMS TEACHING YOUTH ABOUT DFV

Successful intervention strategies start early in life when behaviours and attitudes are being developed. [18] Early education and awareness-raising are critical to reducing the prevalence of violence toward women in society. [19] By implementing a national policy framework in line with the current Australian Curriculum, the Government should instate yearly, compulsory modules teaching youth about:

- (1) safe social norms and practices in the prevention of violence against women; and
- (2) respectful learning and working environments.

The objective of this type of strategy is to create safe environments including schools, workplaces and public spaces, where women are free from harassment and other forms of violence. [20] Educational programs oriented around DFV prevention develop greater parity in education levels between women and men and teach children to recognise and prevent DFV. [21]

This strategy tackles multiple root issues. In addition to low level DFV-prevention education, it addresses the issues of gender equality and community norms. Through peer-based curricula that challenge gender stereotypes and promotes relationships based on equality and consent, children learn positive behaviours they can apply later in their family and work environments. [22]

2 LEGISLATE UNIFORM AUSTRALIAN DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE LAWS

As a federation, passing national legislation without constitutional power in Australia can be challenging for the Government. Sadly, domestic and family violence is not a federal government constitutional power, resulting in the lack of uniform DFV laws throughout Australia. Further, there is no national standard definition of DFV across all states and territories. [23]

A uniform definition of DFV would remove any confusion about the meaning of DFV across all jurisdictions. This definition would need to be comprehensive, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence, to ensure a common understanding of the conduct constituting DFV. [24] By legislating uniform DFV laws, including a national definition of DFV, Australia would ensure that perpetrators of DFV are held to account at the same standard across Australia.

Such a recommendation would be difficult but not impossible to implement. To illustrate, in 2006, uniform legislation came into force for Australian defamation law. This reform led to a uniform definition of defamation and consistent provisions between the different states and territories, making it easier to take action throughout Australia. [25]

3

DEVELOP NATIONWIDE STANDARDS AND CONSISTENCY FOR REPORTING DATA

Domestic and family violence is a complex issue. Measuring the rate of DFV is incredibly difficult, notably due to its 'dark figure' —the undetected, unreported, and unrecorded incidents not counted in the statistics. Australia has no national standards for recording domestic and family violence incidents, nor is there nationwide consistency for recording police call-outs to deal with these situations. [26]

Accordingly, responses are not accurately recorded because police have to manually update the incident code to reflect it was DFV. It was recently estimated that police deal with 5,000 DFV matters on average every week. That is one every two minutes. [27] From these numbers, it is easy to understand why data recordings are so inconsistent. This consequently means that Australia has no comparable data across states and territories. In the AIHW's 2019 DFV report, figures, graphs and tables were shown with data either missing or incomplete.

Developing and allocating funding to nationwide research, based on consistent standards, would increase the Australian Government's knowledge of DFV. This knowledge would help the Government understand the issue better and assist in modifying existing DFV policies to ensure they are relevant to the current circumstances.

CONCLUSION

DFV is a serious social issue with multiple long-term implications for those directly impacted. It is one of the major causes of poverty and homelessness for women and their children. [28] Australia must start reconsidering its approach to DFV as we continue to see a rise in victim and death rates.

By implementing stronger primary preventions strategies, the Australian Government could prevent violence from occurring by addressing the root causes of DFV. In addition, it would reduce the strain on secondary and tertiary services. Adopting these strategies would be a more effective way of tackling the prevalence on DFV in Australian society, positively changing the health and welfare of millions of women and children.

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