

## When home is hell

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It is difficult to obtain good measures of the extent of domestic violence. Violence between intimate partners and other family members was (and sometimes still is) regarded in many countries and cultures as a normal and acceptable part of life that should not be disclosed outside the family. Although domestic violence is a criminal offence in Australia, many young Australians still evince attitudes that essentially condone it. Many also still believe that it is a private and personal matter, rather than a crime. [Julie People]

As many around the world stop to celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March, it seems timely to look at an issue that affects women everywhere, and transcends all social barriers: domestic violence. A major *Amnesty International* campaign aims to 'Stop Violence Against Women,' which is a worldwide problem of staggering proportions. (As we shall see, there are also many male victims.)

Our focus in this briefing will be on domestic and family violence with particular reference to New South Wales. We will also ponder what it might have to do with churches and Christians. Of course a single briefing will be quite inadequate; but we want to talk about it in order to help those women (and men) for whom it is a very private nightmare.

### What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence occurs when a family member, partner or ex-partner attempts to physically, or psychologically dominate or harm the other. According to the Commonwealth's Office for Women, domestic violence can be exhibited in many forms, including physical violence, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, intimidation, economic deprivation or threats of violence. (Carrington and Phillips)

Workers in the field want us to understand that people are hurt by more than being hit. For *Relationships Australia*, 'domestic violence' includes not only physical and sexual assault, but other forms of threat, intimidation and coercion that cause fear (such as hindering access to children, money, or even the world outside the home).

**How big is the problem?** Most of the available data about domestic violence comes from crime statistics and therefore tells only part of the story. The figures we have are for *recorded domestic assaults*, probably a small subset of the unreported forms of assault, intimidation and coercion that people experience. In short, it is difficult to measure.

NSW Police record about 26,000 cases of domestic assaults annually, which represent about one third of all recorded assaults. An average of about 3-5 domestic assaults occur per thousand population, but this rate is much higher (10-12 per thousand) in some areas than others.

More assaults are recorded on weekends and early evening; and more are recorded in rural areas and less-affluent areas of the city. More assaults are recorded in spring and summer, and in January, and on January 1<sup>st</sup>. Police flag about 35% as being alcohol-related. Over seven out of ten of these assaults occur inside residential homes.

Most victims, whether male or female, are aged between 20 and 39, and most in that age-range are female. However 30% of victims are male, and for age groups under 15 and over 40, the proportion of male victims is substantially higher than the proportion of female victims.

But according to researcher Julie People, domestic violence often goes unreported, because the victim does not consider the incident serious enough. Or, she wants to deal with it herself, keeping it private because she is ashamed or embarrassed. Victims also fear the offender, and often think that police cannot or will not act in any case.

**Domestic violence and Christians.** In the late-90s, Anna Cameron conducted an in-depth interview survey of a small sample of evangelical Anglican rectors, each of whose experience of ministry averaged over 20 years. She found that most of them thought that domestic violence is limited to physical assault. Although none condoned it and actively taught against it, they had difficulty helping victims to access counselling services. The number of cases that ministers reported dealing with may also be a little lower than expected, raising the suggestion that ministers could be more alert to identify it. However this judgment may be harsh, since domestic violence occurs in secret and can be well hidden by all involved. Indeed the responsibility to notice and care for those affected needs alert and aware church communities, not just their ministers.

When humanity deserts God the result, says God to the woman, is that 'he will dominate you' (Genesis 3:16). This statement is *not* a licence to intimidate, but predicts life in a world going mad while on the run from God. Sure enough, we catch a glimpse of life in such a world when in Genesis 4:23, Lamech brags: 'Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; wives of Lamech, pay attention to my words. For I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me.' Imagine living with such a man.

The New Testament includes famous passages that speak of the 'submission' of a woman to her husband (Eph. 5:24; Col. 3:18). These passages envisage a woman working willingly alongside a man, who in turn loves the woman with at least as much affection as he gives his own body, and better, in the way that Christ loves his people. This is an extension of Jesus' teaching that we have to nurture, build and grow people, not dominate them (Mk 10:43-44).

But sadly, some men take Genesis 3:16 as a licence to intimidate, knitting it together with the other texts to construct a ramshackle justification for their violence. The ministers surveyed were very good at seeing through this manoeuvre. The response of our churches needs to begin here: that Jesus Christ and the Bible are the last place for a violent man to hide.

Beyond this starting point, perhaps ministers and church members need consider how they will better respond when domestic violence appears.

- Advice from experts consistently says that when someone discloses that they are in a violent relationship, we need to believe them. It always exceedingly difficult for such a person to come forward. Failure to act can leave suffering people in despair.
- In the worst cases, if someone needs to be made safe, the sad necessity of referring the matter to the police may be the *first* and best emergency response. (Gentle-hearted Christians do have a tendency to hold back from involving police; but again, that may be disastrous.) We have included information below on how an Apprehended Domestic Violence Order can be initiated.
- Victims may need other support. We at least need to get to know what emergency housing exists in our area, how to apply for Priority Housing with the Department of Housing, and what emergency Centrelink assistance is available.
- Ministers in particular may need to be aware that far from being a failing, it is very good for them to consider this a matter beyond the competence of their counselling skills. A range of expert helpers are well-placed to work with offenders, victims and families. (Of course Christians can be supportive during that process.)

In a future briefing, we will try to consider some further implications of domestic violence (such as the problems of child protection and elder abuse; why women often stay with violent men; what 'forgiveness' looks like; and how government and community can address the problem). So again, this briefing is just a start. None of us have become experts just by reading it (or writing it).

*Andrew Cameron & Lisa Watts,  
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## Where to get help:

- For emergency help call 000
- For confidential advice and information 24 hours a day, 7 days a week call the Domestic Violence helpline: 1800 656 463
- Anglicare Community Care and Outreach Division information and counselling: 9895 8000
- For legal information and advice for clergy or lay people, appointments can be made through the Legal Counselling and Referral Centre (*funded by the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney's Community Care and Development Program*):  
Claymore NSW: Tuesday and Thursday mornings - 4628 2901  
Macquarie Fields: Tuesday afternoons - 96180677
- Mensline: 1300 78 99 78 or [www.menslineaus.org.au](http://www.menslineaus.org.au)
- Women's Domestic Violence Court Assistance Program:  
<http://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=597>
- Relationships Australia (counselling, Family Violence Prevention services and online help):  
<http://www.relationships.com.au/advice/building-better-relationships/violence-and-abuse-in-relationships>  
or 1300 364 277
- LifeCare Baptist Community Services Family Intervention Programs:  
<http://www.bcs.org.au/pages/content.asp?plid=83>
- **If you use violence**, see "Abusive/Violent Behaviour and You," [http://www.ntv.net.au/ntv\\_three.htm](http://www.ntv.net.au/ntv_three.htm)
- **What is an ADVO and how do you get one?** An Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (ADVO) is an order made by the court telling the person who has been violent what they must not do. It aims to protect people from further violence; it is not a criminal conviction, although a violent person may also be charged with a criminal offence. Sometimes police apply for an ADVO, or an individual can apply themselves to a Chamber Magistrate at a Local Court. More information is available online in the [Apprehended Violence Orders \(Applicants\)](#) brochure or about the [Women's Domestic Violence Court Assistance Scheme](#) in your area.

## Sources/Further Reading:

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