



# Women's Rights Fact Sheet

5 minutes is all it takes

## To learn more about Women, Violence and Health

### What are human rights?

Human rights are commonly understood as being rights that are essential to all human beings. The concept of human rights acknowledges that each individual is entitled to enjoy her or his rights without distinction as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. They protect individuals and groups against actions that interfere with their fundamental freedom and human dignity. Rights include: access to education, paid employment, health care, food and housing; the right to participate in culture and security of person.

### Why do we need to talk about rights for women?

It is recognised by the United Nations and the broader international community that due to some social structures, traditions, stereotypes and attitudes about women and their role in society, that women experience disproportionate levels of discrimination and violence and do not always have the opportunity and ability to access and enforce their rights on the same basis as men.

### What is a human rights treaty?

A human rights treaty can loosely be compared to a contract. It is an agreement which establishes international standards for the protection and promotion of human rights under international law and is entered into by countries. When a country signs up to a treaty they assume obligations to introduce those standards into domestic laws, policies and programs. The United Nations monitors the implementation of treaties and encourages governments to comply fully with treaty obligations. If a country fails to live up to their obligations they can be held liable under international law. A treaty may also be known as an international agreement, protocol, covenant or convention.

### What is CEDAW?

CEDAW stands for *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* and is a human rights treaty which was adopted by the United Nations in 1979 and came into force 3 September 1981. There are now 187 countries across the international community who are signatories to this treaty. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women is responsible for monitoring the implementation of this treaty. 187 countries agree violence against women is preventable and is a global priority.

CEDAW specifically addresses the rights of women and girls including the right to vote and stand for election, equal rights to education and training, **equal access to health care**, equal rights around the rituals of marriage, reproductive rights, protection from discrimination in the workplace and equality before the law.

What CEDAW does not contain is an explicit reference to violence against women; however the CEDAW committee has issued a general recommendation which states that violence directed against a woman because, she is a woman, or violence that affects women disproportionately is recognised and addressed as discrimination under CEDAW. It is recognised that when women experience violence, a range of their rights are violated.

The main purpose of CEDAW is to address the historical inaction of governments on issues important to women and establishes an agenda for action to end discrimination. Australia has signed *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) which means Australia is legally bound to put the provisions of this treaty into practice and incorporate it into Australian law.



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# Violence Against Women

Violence against women is also referred to as gender-based violence and is a worldwide pandemic of devastating proportions. One out of every three women will experience some form of violence in their lifetime and one in five women will experience some form of sexual assault. Violence against women crosses all social, economic, cultural, religious, and political borders. Violence against women knows no geographical bounds; it is a problem in every country in the world.

It is one of the least visible but most common forms of violence, and one of the most insidious violations of human rights. It has serious impacts on the health and wellbeing of those affected, and exacts significant economic costs on communities and nations.

Violence against women is defined by the United Nations (UN) in its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women as:

*“ any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (UN 1993).*

Violence against women is recognised by the UN as a violation of women’s rights and a violation of their entitlement to freedom as a human being, with particular concern for equality, security, liberty, integrity and dignity in political, economic, social, cultural and civil life (UN 1993).

If we look to domestic laws in the State of Queensland the Preamble of the Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012 clearly states:

*“Living free from violence is a human right and fundamental social value” and that “domestic violence is a violation of human rights that is not acceptable in any community or culture and traditional or cultural practices can not be relied upon to minimise or excuse domestic violence.”*

## Specific forms of violence against women include but are not limited to:

- **physical abuse:** slapping, hitting, kicking, strangling, hair pulling, pushing and beating
- **sexual abuse:** rape and other forms of sexual coercion, unwanted sexual advances or harassment, forced prostitution and trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation
- **emotional abuse:** name calling, playing mind games, intimidation, belittling, humiliation and put downs
- **economic abuse:** preventing a woman from getting and or keeping a job, controlling family finances, not providing her with enough money to pay for essentials such as food, clothing, medications and utilities bills
- **controlling behaviours:** isolating a woman from her family and friends, monitoring movements, or restricting access to information, assistance and other resources
- **intimidation:** smashing things, destroying property, abusing pets and displaying weapons.

There can be significant health impacts for women who have experienced domestic and family violence and they can continue to affect women for a considerable period of time.

Research and statistics tell us that the perpetrators of violence against women are mostly men. However, most men are not violent towards women and most men actually find violence against women; against their daughters, against their mothers, against their sisters abhorrent. But one of the most significant barriers that we have is that too often violent behaviour against women is met by silence by other men meaning every single man has an active role to play in stopping violence against women.

*“Gender based violence both reflects and reinforces inequities between men and women and compromises the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims. It encompasses a wide range of human rights violations ... Any one of these abuses can leave deep psychological scars, damage the health of women and girls in general, including their reproductive and sexual health, and in some instances, results in death.” The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 2007*



# The health impacts of violence against women

## Fatal consequences

Studies from countries around the world (including Australia) show that when women are killed by their male intimate partners it is frequently in the context of an ongoing abusive relationship (WHO 2002).

55 per cent of female homicide victims in Australia were killed by their male intimate partners compared to 11 per cent of male homicide victims (Virueda & Payne 2010).

A study of intimate partner homicides over a 13-year period (1989–2002) finds an average of 77 occur each year in Australia. The majority of these (75 per cent) involves males killing female intimate partners (Mouzos & Rushforth 2003). Recent figures confirm this pattern. For 2007–08, 80 people were killed as a result of intimate partner violence. Of these, the majority (78 per cent) were females (Virueda & Payne 2010).

A recent longitudinal study found that women affected by intimate partner violence faced higher health costs than women with no history of intimate partner violence, not only during the period of abuse but for three years after the violence ended (Fishman et al. 2010, p. 923).

## Non-fatal consequences – physical and mental health

The non-fatal consequences of violence against women are far-reaching due to the length of time that women endure such experiences before they seek help (if ever). The **health consequences of violence** can persist long after violent episodes have occurred (WHO 2002).

**Violence against women is a significant public health problem.** Women affected by violence experience more ill health than women without a history of violence in their lives (WHO 2002).

Violence can cause immediate physical injuries like bruises, welts, fractures and eye damage. Other health consequences that can be attributed to a woman who has experienced violence are chronic pain syndromes, permanent disabilities, gastrointestinal disorders, gynaecological disorders, sexually transmitted infections and HIV, and unwanted pregnancies (WHO 2002).

Women experiencing violence are at an increased risk of experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, phobias, eating disorders, sleep disorders, panic disorders, suicidal behaviour, poor self-esteem, traumatic and post-traumatic stress disorders, and self-harming behaviours (WHO 2002).

Women's exposure to violence is strongly associated with the adoption of risk behaviours that can further affect health, such as problematic substance use, alcohol abuse, physical inactivity and cigarette smoking (WHO 2002).

The more severe the violence, the greater the impact on women's physical and mental health. In addition, the different types of violence inflicted upon women and the frequency of their occurrence appear to have cumulative effects over time (Evans 2007; Taft 2003; WHO 2002).

Women affected by violence need more operative surgeries and spend more time visiting doctors and staying in hospitals than women without a history of intimate partner violence (WHO 2002). They are also more likely than other women to use medication for depression (VicHealth 2004).

Violence during pregnancy is associated with miscarriage, late entry to prenatal care, stillbirth, premature labour and birth, foetal injury, and low birth weight (WHO 2002). Young women exposed to violence are more likely to have a miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth or abortion than young women who are not (Taft et al. 2004).

Children are impacted by violence too. The effects on children are both direct and indirect. Children can find themselves living with the damaging impacts of violence on their mothers or female caregivers. They can also directly experience the physical and mental health consequences of their exposure to violence.



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## Act or Do Nothing? What can you do? A lot actually.

- To end the silence about violence start conversations by learning three facts and then coming up with an opening question such as ... “Did you know that 1 in 3 women experience violence in their lifetime?” “Did you know there are significant health costs and consequences to women and children who have experienced violence?”
- Donate money to The Women’s Centre to enable important programs such as Playgroup to continue. \$20 pays for a fruit platter while \$100 covers the cost of our Early Childhood Worker for three hours. Donations can also support the costs of therapeutic group work for women who have experienced domestic and family violence.
- Put together care packs in bags for women and children and drop them off at The Women’s Centre. Include good quality items such as bottles of shampoo and conditioner, soap, body wash, deodorant, face wipes, moisturiser, toothbrush and toothpaste, underwear, non-perishable food items, baby wipes, nappies and cuddly toys and activities for children.
- Donate boxes of nappies in all sizes.
- Donate gift vouchers and movie tickets to support our Christmas hamper and gift giving efforts this year.
- Talk about violence against women at work and find out if your work place has a Domestic Violence Policy? See Everyone’s business: *A guide to developing workplace programs for the primary prevention of violence against women* for a policy template [http://whv.org.au/static/files/assets/e58154fe/Everyones\\_Business\\_guide.pdf](http://whv.org.au/static/files/assets/e58154fe/Everyones_Business_guide.pdf)
- Contact The Women’s Centre and ask for our one page Fact Sheet on **Thursdays in Black** a day where people around the world are invited to wear black as a symbol of strength and courage, representing our solidarity with victims of violence, and demanding a world without rape and violence. Thursdays in Black T-Shirts are available for sale.

### Ending violence against women is part of the struggle to ensure safety and justice for all

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