

Women's Rights Fact Sheet

» 5 minutes is all it takes

To learn more about women, violence and health

The biggest risk factor for becoming a victim of sexual assault and or domestic and family violence is being a womanⁱ.

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Violence Against Women

Violence against women can also be 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 assaultⁱⁱ. 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.

"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."ⁱⁱⁱ

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"^{iv}.

ⁱ National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children. (2009). *The cost of violence against women and their children*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

ⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2006). *Personal Safety Survey Australia*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

ⁱⁱⁱ UNFPA (2007). *Ending Widespread Violence Against Women*. <http://unfpa.org/gender/violence.htm>

^{iv} United Nations. (1993). *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*. New York: United Nations.

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^v.

Domestic and Family Violence is a crime and *The Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* provides legal protection from violent relationships. The preamble 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 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, the majority of men are not violent towards women and find

^v United Nations 1993 ibid

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 endedⁱ.

ⁱ Fishman, P.A., Bonomi A.E., Anderson M.L., Reid R.J. & Rivara F.P. (2010). Changes in health care costs over time following the cessation of intimate partner violence. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, vol. 25 n.9, pp 920-925.



violence against women; against their daughters, against their mothers, against their sisters abhorrent. But one of the most significant barriers we have is that too often violent behaviour against women is met with silence by other men. This means every single man has an active role to play in stopping violence against women.

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^{vi}.

Fifty five per cent of female homicide victims in Australia were killed by their male intimate partners compared to eleven per cent of male homicide victims^{vii}.

A study of intimate partner homicides over a thirteen year period (1989–2002) finds an average of seventy seven homicides occur each year in Australia. The majority of these (75 per cent) involve males killing female intimate partners^{viii}. Recent figures confirm this pattern. For 2007–08, eighty people were killed as a result of intimate partner violence. Of these, the majority (78 per cent) were females^{ix}. While recent statistics for

^{vi} WHO. (2002) *World Health Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

^{vii} Virueda, M. & Payne, J. (2010). *Homicide in Australia: 2007–08 National Homicide Monitoring Program Annual Report, AIC Monitoring Report no. 13*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

^{viii} Mouzos, J. and Rushforth, C. (2003) *Family homicide in Australia*. Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice, no. 255, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

^{ix} Virueda, M. & Payne, J. 2010, op cit.

Queensland show one in four murders can be attributed to domestic violence^x.

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^{xi}.

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^{xii}.

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^{xiii}.

Women who have experienced violence are at an increased risk of experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, phobias, sexual dysfunction, flashbacks, nightmares, eating disorders, sleep disorders, panic disorders, suicidal behaviour, low self-esteem, traumatic and post-traumatic stress disorders and self-harming behaviours^{xiv}. Women are also at risk of seeing themselves as worthless and as a devalued person and viewing the world as an unsafe and dangerous place.

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^{xv}.

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^{xvi xvii}.

Women affected by violence need more operative surgeries and spend more time visiting doctors and staying in hospitals than women without a history of

^x Passmore, D. and Weston, P. (2011). *New investigative unit will reopen cases after coroner fears hidden domestic violence death toll*. Brisbane: The Sunday Mail, at <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/new-investigative-unit-will-reopen-cases-after-coroner-fears-hidden-domestic-violence-death-toll/story-e6freoof-1226060294225>

^{xi} WHO. (2002). *World Health Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

^{xii} WHO. (2002) *ibid*

^{xiii} WHO. (2002) *ibid*

^{xiv} WHO. (2002) *ibid*

^{xv} WHO. (2002) *ibid*

^{xvi} Evans, I. (2007). *Battle-scars: Long-term effects of prior domestic violence*. Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research, Melbourne: Monash University.

^{xvii} Taft, A. (2003). *Promoting women's mental health: the challenge of intimate partner/domestic violence. Issues Paper no. 8*. Sydney: Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearing House.

intimate partner violence^{xviii}. They are also more likely than other women to use medication for depression^{xix}.

Violence during pregnancy is associated with miscarriage, late entry to prenatal care, stillbirth, premature labour and birth, foetal injury, and low birth weight^{xx}. Young women exposed to violence are more likely to have a miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth or abortion than young women who are not^{xxi}.

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.

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

Financial Consequences

It is difficult to place a monetary value on the harm caused by violence against women but it is important to recognise that there are financial costs to the woman and the wider community such as: loss of earnings; loss of future earning capacity and productivity; medical expenses; intangible costs (loss of quality of life, pain and suffering) and counselling expenses. Some of the costs to the community can be an increased demand and use of government services such as the justice system, health services, policing and corrections, victim compensation, and provision of specialised services such as women's domestic violence shelters. The impacts of violence against women go beyond the individual, to have a collective impact on the social wellbeing of our communities^{xxii} ^{xxiii}.

This fact sheet has been adapted from: Vic Health. (2011). Preventing Violence Against Women in Australia, Research Summary. Carlton: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

^{xviii} WHO. (2002). op cit.

^{xix} VicHealth. (2011). *Preventing Violence Against Women in Australia, Research summary*. Carlton: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

^{xx} WHO. (2002). op cit.

^{xxi} Taft, A. (2003). *Promoting women's mental health: the challenge of intimate partner/domestic violence. Issues Paper no. 8*. Sydney: Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearing House.

^{xxii} Office for the Status of Women (2004). *The Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy: Part 1. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia*.

^{xxiii} Boyd, C. (2011). The impacts of sexual assault on women, Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, ACSSA Resource Sheet. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.