



# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A NATIONAL PANDEMIC

*Estimated to have the potential to cost Australian business \$609 million a year by 2021, domestic and family violence is a national pandemic that every person, family and company needs to acknowledge, and take steps to address.*

As a key national association, employer and influencer, Master Builders recognises the contagion and its devastating impact, and will be using this platform for a series of three informative articles to raise the issue for further discussion.

Domestic violence (also referred to as domestic abuse) is the power, control and intimidation of one person over another within a domestic setting.

As a pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship, domestic violence is how a person gains or maintains power and control over their intimate partner. Domestic abuse is not however, confined to violence in an intimate relationship, it can occur between any members of a family or domestic group, such as father or son or even between siblings.

A critical family and societal issue, domestic violence manifests in various forms including:

**Physical** – Hitting, kicking, punching, strangling, stabbing and murdering a person;

**Financial** – Withholding funds from a spouse, controlling their access to finances and how they can use it, demanding receipts for money spent, giving the individual so little money each week/month that they struggle to survive;

**Sexual** – Abusing the individual in any way deemed sexual, not restricted to penetration, and can include groping, rape, un-consensual sex or touching in a sexualised way;

**Emotional** – Making derogatory and demeaning comments about the other person such as ‘you’re so stupid, unattractive, useless’ etc. as well as controlling who they see, what friends they have, where they go and what they wear; and

**Spiritual** – having control over what faith the individual engages in, when they can visit their place of worship, with whom and so on.

#### **What causes domestic violence?**

Domestic violence is a multi-layered,

multi-faceted complex problem that can be interpreted differently across different cultures – making the solutions more complex to implement.

Attempting to understand domestic violence from a familial and societal perspective needs to accommodate various factors, primarily focussing on situational and individual contributors.

**Situational factors:** Gender inequality is a significant issue of concern worldwide and in most countries around the world, women are significantly under-represented in all levels of society. This inequality positions women as less deserving, or capable, as their male counterparts and in some cultures, results in women being regarded as a ‘possession,’ belonging to their partner who has control over them. These customs, beliefs and social norms create ‘breeding’ grounds for domestic violence.

Children watching domination over their mother by their father or her partner may learn that women are less valued and respected than men are, and they may perpetuate the behaviours they have seen modelled, and so the cycle and ill-treatment of women continues.

Children who witness, or are the victims of domestic violence, may believe that violence is a reasonable way to resolve conflict between people. Boys who learn that women are not to be valued or respected, and who see violence directed against women are more likely to abuse women when they grow up. Girls who witness domestic violence in their families of origin are more likely to be victimized by their own husbands. Although women are most often the victim of domestic violence, the gender roles can, and are, reversed. (Source: <https://psychcentral.com/lib/what-causes-domestic-violence>)

**Individual factors:** Conclusive studies have shown that some people learn violent behaviour from their family, people in their community and other cultural influences as they grow up. They may have seen violence, or may have been a victim of domestic violence themselves. Some abusers were abused as children.

Alcohol and drugs contribute to domestic violence as they result in low impulse control and in conflict, often results in increased anger. When these two explosive ingredients are combined, the likelihood of domestic violence increases significantly. Whichever justification is given, there is no excuse for domestic violence.

Mental health issues (such as schizophrenia or borderline personality disorder) can result in domestic violence.

### **How does gender inequality, at the core of domestic violence, affect women in business and leadership in Australia?**

Gender inequality is prominent in all areas of society and manifests in women being repeatedly treated less equally than men. Statistics indicate that women are under-represented in leadership positions in all sectors of the paid workforce in Australia. In legal fields, for example, whilst 61.4 per cent of all law graduates are females, women hold only about 22 per cent of the most senior positions in law firms. In the Federal Court of Australia, women make up only 16 per cent of the bench. The statistics in corporate Australia are more concerning, indicating that only 8.4 per cent of board directorships are held by women.

### **Is the perpetrator of domestic violence always a man?**

No, women are equally as capable of domestic violence as men are. The research

and statistics show, however, that men are four times more likely to perpetuate domestic violence than women are.

### **In your opinion, do men and same sex relationships partners experience a form of domestic violence?**

Absolutely! According to the AIDS Council of NSW, domestic violence has become a 'silent epidemic' in the gay and lesbian community, despite it being the subject of increasing scrutiny in heterosexual relationships.

Roughly one in three lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) couples experience domestic violence. These statistics are echoed among the general population although I personally believe the incidence is higher.

Whilst more research is needed, it appears that within the LGBTI community, abuse is more regularly reported by women and transgender males than by gay men.

### **Why is it that the above groups are under reported or do not attract enough media attention?**

The answer to this question is complex on many levels. So, often it is difficult for them to admit to the fact that the relationship they have fought hard to have, is one that is domestically violent too. Reporting incidence of violence thus tends to be low. A survivor explains: There's an unspoken fear that if we start to tell the mainstream community that sometimes our relationships are toxic and horrible and abusive, then that will be used against us to say, 'see it's all unnatural and a sin anyway'. (Source: [www.smh.com.au/nsw/domestic-violence-a-silent-epidemic-in-gay-relationships-20150415-1mm4hg.html](http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/domestic-violence-a-silent-epidemic-in-gay-relationships-20150415-1mm4hg.html))

### **Do children experience domestic violence? If yes, how does exposure to domestic violence affect children?**

Besides concern for the female victim (I prefer the word survivor) of domestic violence, the greatest concern is for the children who witness domestic violence or are a victim of it. The impacts on them are significant, with the most severe being their own death.

Children who live in homes where there is domestic violence grow up in an environment that is unpredictable, filled with tension and anxiety and dominated by fear. This can lead to significant emotional and psychological trauma, like that experienced by children who are victims of child abuse or war. Instead of growing up in an emotionally and physically safe, secure, nurturing and predictable environment, these children are forced to worry about the future; they try to predict when it might happen next and try to protect

themselves and their siblings. Often getting through each day is the main objective so there is little time left for fun, relaxation or planning for the future.

(Source: [www.domesticviolence.com.au/pages/impact-of-domestic-violence-children-and-young-people.php](http://www.domesticviolence.com.au/pages/impact-of-domestic-violence-children-and-young-people.php))

Broadly speaking, children can suffer life-long effects of domestic violence, including emotional and psychological trauma, mental illness and physical symptoms of being anxious or unwell. It can also result in a dysfunctional perspective of women, how they should be treated and in some cases, children are turned against their mother by a perpetrator, and they end up hurting their mother too.

According to the National Research on Young People's Attitudes and Experiences of Domestic Violence 2000, a report undertaken by the Queensland Domestic Violence Taskforce stated that 90 per cent of children present in violent homes had witnessed the violence perpetrated against their mother. In research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology, 15 per cent of young people surveyed had experienced domestic violence, and 32 per cent of young people knew someone who had experienced domestic violence.

### **Does domestic violence only occur in economically disadvantaged families?**

Tragically, like death and taxes, domestic violence knows no boundaries, race, colour or creed. Domestic violence occurs across all levels of society, irrespective of whom or where. The thought that domestic violence only occurs in lower socio-economic families or communities is a myth. The super-rich experience domestic violence as well.

### **Why is it so hard for women and some men who are victims of domestic violence to report the abuse and leave their partners?**

This is where the complexity of domestic violence is important for people working within the area to understand.

There is a great deal of shame around domestic violence. Humiliation and embarrassment and feeling 'unworthy' are common terms used to describe being a victim of domestic violence, so reporting the incidence of domestic violence is difficult.

As children, girls are bombarded with the fairy tale of being a princess, meeting a prince and living happily 'ever after.' The princess meets her prince (regardless of gender and sexual preference in our modern age) and in her dream, they ride off into the sunset and are happy ever after. But mostly life does not



eventuate quite like that. As reality sets in, and the abused realises her life is not what she dreamed of when she was a little girl, she feels fear, sadness, anger, a sense of hopelessness and often gets to the point when she asks the question 'what's the point?'

Additionally, many women don't want to report it for fear of losing their children (thinking that if they report it and things 'go wrong' their children may be removed from them). For others, they don't want to make a 'fuss' about domestic violence as they are dependent on their partner for financial survival, so 'better the devil you know than the one you don't.'

Others (and this is truly a part of the tragedy) come to believe that their perpetrator is justified in abusing them because they did not 'cook his meal properly', or they did not 'clean the house well enough', or perhaps they fought back when they were being questioned about something.

**What if an adult experienced domestic violence as a child and never received help? Is there any hope for treatment at that stage?**

There is always hope. There are many adults walking around the world today who have

experienced domestic violence, in any of its forms, as a child. Many don't talk about it, or want to address it as it would be too painful to do so.

However, having worked extensively in domestic violence for decades, I know that if a person is willing to address what happened and is open to understanding the impact domestic violence has had on their lives then (and now), work through the experience and learn to not allow the impact of past domestic violence to control and predict their future, they can live happy and fulfilled lives.

Because of the psychological and physical long-lasting effects of domestic violence, moving through a therapeutic journey to healing can be traumatic, exhausting and difficult, but on the other side of the process it can be invigorating, exhilarating and empowering.

**If someone grew up in a violent home, is he or she doomed to repeat the same behaviour in intimate relationships?**

No, not necessarily. As children witness domestic violence, some will come to disrespect women and take on the values of the perpetrator, particularly in a culture where

gender inequality is part of the societal norm. In these situations, there is a propensity for boys to grow up and perpetuate the abuse. However, this is not the same for all children. Others will grow up respectful of their mothers and often protect them at all costs because of the trauma they experienced and the violence they witnessed. In short, children who grow up in domestically violent homes are not doomed to repeat the same behaviour as they move into adulthood.

**On September 2015, the Sydney Morning Herald published Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's announcement about \$100 million in Federal Government funding to combat domestic violence against women and children. What are your personal thoughts on this?**

I firmly believe that the more funds and resources that are meaningfully thrown behind this heinous act, the better. I use the word 'meaningfully' here as the funding must be used innovatively and strategically, to address domestic violence in Australia, and not as a token gesture.

Women and children are dying because of domestic abuse and whilst the evidence points to one woman a week dying due to

perpetrators and assisting survivors to turn their lives around and live the lives about which they dream. This means a need for funding, resources and policies to support the ongoing commitment to reduce domestic violence at all levels.

### **Tell us about Empowering Women to Thrive and what is involved?**

I wrote and deliver the Empowering Women to Thrive Program as part of my personal, deep conviction to help women develop the necessary skills they need to stand on their own, be assertive overall, live happily and free from fear and thrive in careers and relationships in which they choose to be. My goal is to upskill 1000 women a year.

### **Empowering Women offers the following:**

- A 12 stage program teaching women how to become empowered
- 3 x 2.5 day Retreats a year
- Monthly Webinars about Women's Topics (Building Resilience and Dealing with Self-Doubt are examples). Women from all over the world attend
- Monthly Meet-Ups, normally held for two hours each month in Sydney's CBD
- Coaching of women, one on one or in groups
- Monthly Seminars to help Women develop key skills in relationships or business. ('Communicating Assertively as a Woman' and 'Becoming an Emotionally Intelligent Woman' are two examples.)
- An Annual Empowering Women's Conference

### **Are your retreats funded by the State or Commonwealth government?**

Unfortunately no. I have given up trying to get Funding as there are so many hoops to jump through and the funding space is overcrowded.

So, I have decided to approach Organisations who would be interested in getting on board to help fight this societal issue by way of sponsorship. Currently, my blogs, posts and international media articles reach 32 000 women each month (and growing) so any Organisation who is interested in working with me would gain a fair amount of leverage through our social media clout and business contacts and conferences at which I so regularly speak.

### **To date have you received any sponsorship from Organisations who share the same vision as you?**

In monetary terms, no. However, the Master Builders Association has kindly offered us their Auditorium to use for our future training seminars for women and a local Real Estate Agent has offered to sponsor us as they

want to do something to eradicate domestic violence too. But I know there are many other Organisations out there who would like to get involved.

### **About the author: Caryn Walsh**

As an experienced psychologist with a keen interest in people and human behaviour, Caryn Walsh is a lecturer, international leadership and team development specialist and facilitator, keynote speaker and organisational change agent.

She has a long background in teaching psychology to students at two Sydney-based Universities and has focussed on teaching trainee counsellors how to work with all facets of domestic violence.

Caryn has also worked with women and children in domestically violent situations for more than 2 decades and in 2005 was instrumental in helping set up the 1800 Domestic Violence Helpline (under the auspices of Lifeline) training over 500 counsellors on the line. In 2016 she was the Chairperson of the annual STOP THE VIOLENCE conference in Brisbane that focussed on policies, robust strategies and creating forums to help prevent and deal with the increasing incidence of domestic violence in Australia.

She works with and coaches CEO's and Boards to help them create effective, sustainable leaders and organisations and consults to countless organisational leaders in Australia, Fiji and Africa in areas of leadership, team development, staff development, organisational resilience and sustainability.

[www.carynwalsh.com.au](http://www.carynwalsh.com.au)

***Omesh Jethwani, Government Projects and Programs Manager interviewed Caryn Walsh (psychotherapist, specialist in leadership and people development, international motivational speaker, and executive coach) on domestic violence and its impact on families, children and workplaces.***

***If you are or know someone who is experiencing sexual assault, domestic or family violence, please contact 1800RESPECT – 1800 737 732 National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service for people living in Australia***

domestic abuse, it is actually higher. At this stage, most funding is thrown at preventing domestic violence and dealing with the 'crisis' of domestic violence in one way or another – housing women and children in shelters and refuges to keep them safe.

Whilst preventing domestic violence and allocating funds to deal with the crisis that constantly surrounds domestic violence is critical, there must be an additional focus on providing funding to strategically help women and children learn key skills and develop enough self-confidence to live happily, and well, post-separation.

When a woman and her children leave a shelter, for example, there is very little available to comprehensively teach her the necessary skills and techniques to survive and ultimately, thrive. Already disempowered, she then struggles to 'make her way' and is often drawn back into the toxic relationship from which she has come, or she enters another relationship that ends the same way.

Domestic violence in Australia is a societal and national issue. It must be addressed holistically and with cultural sensitivity and that includes the causes of the problem, the education of