

The Links between Domestic/Family Violence and Homelessness for Women and Children.

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When we talk about family homelessness in Australia, the data and research tells us that we are primarily talking about women and children fleeing domestic or family violence. The most common face of family homelessness is a sole woman, usually accompanied by children, who has to leave her home because it is no longer safe for her to be there. She doesn't usually leave the first time she is abused. She doesn't want the relationship to end; she wants the violence to stop. She tries everything she can to stop or alleviate the violence. The impact on her of years of systemic ongoing abuse, fear and degradation has been likened by some professionals as being like a prisoner of war. Women's services end up with women physically and emotionally damaged from years of torture, who lack healthy self-esteem, suffer poor physical and mental health and in many cases have turned to alcohol or other drugs to help alleviate their distress.

We must continue to overcome stereotypical images of homelessness as lone men on park benches. Over 40% of Australia's homeless adults are women.ⁱ Most homelessness for women in Australia is either directly or indirectly caused by domestic or family violence.

Women often experience homelessness differently from men. For women, there is often the additional torment of physical, sexual, emotional, social and cultural abuse. We are not

saying that homelessness for men is safe, however because of women's socialisation women are less likely to 'sleep rough' than men – particularly if they have accompanying children. Women will often stay in violent and abusive houses simply to keep a roof over their head. Many women, young women in particular, say they are pressured into exchanging sex for a roof over their head. For many women this might be in an unhappy and abusive marriage.

It is important to remember the high correlation between women's homelessness and past and ongoing experiences of violence. This is supported by data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics ⁱⁱ and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare ⁱⁱⁱ.

There is a strong causal link between domestic violence and young women's homelessness. Previous ABS research shows that nearly half of homeless young women left the family home because of sexual abuse and 37% because of physical abuse.^{iv}

In Australia, 60% of all women murdered each year are killed by intimate partners. 40% of these murders were because the woman had left the relationship.^v There are between one and two domestic murders in Australia each week, often involving children.

Women who survive domestic or family violence often have chronic health problems and often have to put up with ongoing violence not just from an intimate partner but from others within the homelessness service system. Many of these women end up in homelessness services with serious and complex physical and psychological health concerns. In addition to physical injuries women who experience homelessness often suffer depression, other mental ill health problems, eating disorders, self-harming behaviours, misuse alcohol and other substances, and are suicidal^{vi}.

Women with a history of physical or sexual abuse are also at an increased risk for unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and adverse pregnancy outcomes. Women talk about having lost their self-esteem, being ashamed, and being always fearful. Many women suffer post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the violence they have experienced, and in many cases still experience.

Research tells us that women can recover from abuse, however, first the violence and abuse has to stop. Women who sleep rough or access boarding houses have reported that they often continue to be raped or abused by other clients.

Young women who 'couch surf' from one house to another report that they too experience rape and sexual assault or threats of assault regularly. Women report that they so called 'consent' to sex so that they don't have to sleep in the car or in a night shelter.

Women from immigrant and non-English speaking backgrounds are less likely to report domestic violence and experience added barriers to accessing appropriate services including crisis accommodation services.

Women from immigrant and non-English speaking backgrounds face language and cultural barriers, along with racism as they negotiate their way through alien systems with very limited appropriate interpreting and cultural support services to help them.

Women with children face the pressure of 'keeping families together' and where they do separate, often commit themselves to a lower standard of living, the stigma of sole parent families and continue to suffer the ongoing burden of post-separation abuse and danger due to continued contact with violent fathers. We are now fully aware of the devastating impact domestic and family violence has on children.

According to a recent Commonwealth report^{vii} issues identified by women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds included the following: (these will be no surprise to you)

- The "cultural position of women in some migrant groups" is a risk factor;
- Limited or no knowledge about the Australian system of law and about domestic violence, (studies show that in many communities domestic violence is still seen as a private issue to be dealt with by families).
- Fear of losing their children and/or community supports if they access services;
- Increase in newly arrived women as part of 457 Visas^{viii}. Women are highly reluctant to seek help as they fear they will get deported or lose their children;

- Increases in the number of women on temporary visas (women who have applied for a spouse visa – a visa granted because they married an Australian citizen or permanent resident), again fearful of reporting in case they are deported. Despite the fact that the perpetrator is legally bound to financially provide for her for those two years, women are reluctant to approach him due to fear. Many of these women are turned away from services due to lack of resources.
- Inconsistency in availability and quality of interpreter and translation services. Skills in understanding the nature of domestic violence and accessing various services such as courts, AVO's and shelters are needed;
- Many services are not culturally appropriate environments for many women, for example, a lack of discreet food preparation areas, prayer facilities or gender segregation of women and male children of certain ages;
- High levels of discrimination in the private rental market due to racial discrimination, lack of rental histories and prejudice against sole mothers;
- Inconsistent availability of appropriate services for immigrant women across many areas^{ix}.

Many recently arrived immigrant women who end up in our services report that they married Australian men who they thought they loved, and loved them and who would provide a good life for them and their children. When they arrive in Australia they find they are subjected to physical and psychological torment, denied basic resources and rights, and treated as slaves. They report that they are at their wits end to protect their daughters from becoming sex slaves to him. When they finally seek help because the abuse is so severe they are often met with contemptuous attitudes. Our Government punishes them by denying them income for 2 years or deporting them, sometimes back to dangerous or unsupported and isolated situations. Women from immigrant and non-English speaking backgrounds talk about the severe levels of violence and abuse they tolerate because they are fearful of being murdered if they leave or of being deported by our government – often this is what their husbands have told them.

Apart from having physical and mental ill health, many women lack appropriate access to supported accommodation services and health services. The women's shelters and domestic violence service system in Australia is seriously under resourced. Recent unmet demand figures show that people only have a one in two chance of getting into a shelter on any given day. Most of these are women, often women with children. The cohort most often turned away is young women with children under 4 years old.

Conclusion

We have to continually remember that domestic and family violence is about power and control, not just about physical violence. The United Nations has reported that a women's greatest risk factor is her gender, no matter her culture or background.

The United Nations states that:

"...violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women, by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into subordinate position compared with men".^x

We must not lose sight of this. We must resist at every level the tendency to either blame some individual women or even individual men. With the prevalence and costs to women in particular, and society in general, now exposed, the Australian government must not continue to fail to protect women from harm. Failure to treat this issue at least as seriously as other so called priorities of the State are treated, will demonstrate that they are not only failing in their obligation to women as citizens, but are vicariously colluding in the abuse.

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Online Resources

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Violence. The full report can be downloaded from
<http://www.wesnet.org.au/Research/research.htm#EAOOW>

and the Executive Summary with the full report on CD can be ordered free of charge from the Office for Women, Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, at women@facs.gov.au or 1800 808 863.

ⁱ AFHO Facts and Stats, accessed online http://afho.org.au/7_facts/stats/index/htm 16/4/05.

ⁱⁱ ABS (1996) *Women's Safety Survey, 1996*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

ⁱⁱⁱ The National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) operating from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare publishes annual data reports on homelessness in Australia.

^{iv} ABS, *Ibid.*

^v Loc. Cit.

^{vi} *Ibid.* p. 191.

^{vii} Australian Government Accessed on line 23 March 09
http://www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/publications/synthesis_report04/section4/4a4.htm

^{viii} These Visas are used by employers to employ overseas workers for a period of between three months and four years . Visa holders are allowed to bring secondary applicants who can work or study. *Ibid.* 4.1.4 p. 1.

^{ix} Loc. Cit.

^x UN General Assembly, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 20 December 1993, accessed online (27/05/04) <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm> p. 1.