## Contents

The social work profession .............................................. 3

Understanding family violence ........................................ 4

Role of social work in family violence ............................... 5

**Scope of social work practice in family violence with women** 6

- Prevention and early intervention ............................... 7
- Assessment .................................................................. 7
- Crisis interventions .................................................. 7
- Counselling, therapeutic interventions and group work .... 8
- Case management and service coordination ................. 8
- Advocacy & social activism ....................................... 8
- Policy and research .................................................. 9

Contribution of social work ............................................. 9

Conclusion ....................................................................... 9
Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers’ (AASW) *Scope of Social Work Practice: Family Violence* document provides an overview of the scope and contribution of social work practice in the family violence field. It focuses primarily on support services provided to women as victims/survivors of family violence. The aim of this document is to highlight in a concise, accessible and informative manner the crucial role and services that social workers provide and that clients and employers can expect.

The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals, families, groups, communities and society. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing is underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights.

Drawing on theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges, social workers focus on the interface between the individual and the environment and recognise the impact of social, political, economic and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing; and addressing any external and structural issues that may be negatively affecting it, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

The AASW’s *Code of Ethics 2010* is the core document which informs and guides the ethical practice of social workers. The Code expresses the values and responsibilities which are integral to and characterise the social work profession.
Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The AASW is the key professional body representing social workers in Australia and is responsible for the accreditation of social work university programs.

The academic qualifications accredited by the AASW include: a Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Honours, or a Social Work Qualifying Master’s degree. The curriculum provides entry-level professional social work education addressing the knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across the diverse range of practice settings, fields of practice (including family violence) and methods of social work practice, and includes an extensive period of field education.

Graduates of AASW-accredited social work courses are eligible for membership of the AASW.

Understanding family violence

Family violence is prevalent and preventable. The AASW knows that while family violence affects many members of society, it is a gendered issue most commonly perpetrated by men against women. It is this form of family violence that is the key focus of most social workers’ work, and therefore the central focus of this document. The AASW recognises that women’s experiences of family violence can be impacted by multiple factors including, but not limited to: Aboriginality, age, ability, experiences of homelessness, geographical location, and cultural and linguistic background.

The role of social work with men and children in the context of family violence will be explored in later editions of the Scope of Practice series.

The AASW also appreciates that family violence affects members of the LGBTIQ+ community. We acknowledge that these factors can intersect to create unique experiences of violence. The AASW acknowledges that this document does not include the voices of all of these experiences and therefore recommends additional research to better understand and address experiences of violence by marginalised groups in Australia in the future.

The AASW endorses Domestic Violence Victoria’s definition, identifying family violence as:

…a pervasive, life-threatening crime that impacts on thousands of women and children with serious physical, psychological and economic effects. Family Violence includes not only physical assaults but also an array of power and control tactics used along in concert with one another… Family violence can occur within any intimate relationship, age and ethnicity. While it can be perpetrated by any member of a family against another, it is more likely to be perpetrated by men (predominately by a woman’s current or ex-partner) against women and children.

The causes of family violence are complex and include individual, environmental, cultural and social factors, such as gender inequality and community attitudes towards women. Social workers
appreciate that factors such as age, Indigenous status, gender identity, location, disability, ethnicity, and English language abilities mediate experiences of family violence.

As a fundamental cause of violence against women, gender inequality is reflected across all aspects of a woman’s life. Women experience a range of discriminations, including lower incomes, poor health and wellbeing outcomes across the lifespan as a consequence of not only violence but structural discrimination based on their gender. Discrimination based on gender has been widely documented in a range of structural settings, such as unequal economic, social and political power between men and women.

The phrase ‘violence against women’ can be understood as an overarching term that encompasses all forms of gender-based violence. It includes, but is not limited to:

...physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, such as assault..., marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation; physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere; trafficking in women and forced prostitution; and physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs.

Violence against women has detrimental impacts on individuals, families, communities and the broader society. These impacts have a direct cost at a personal, family, community, societal and economic level.

In line with the profession’s commitment to human rights and social justice, social workers believe that every woman has the right to live free from violence. Accordingly, the social work profession has a critical role in addressing and responding to family violence at an individual and structural level, regardless of the context of practice.

**Role of social work in family violence**

With their commitment to human rights, social justice and a contextual understanding of an individual’s experience, social workers provide a significant contribution in the prevention and intervention of violence against women. This can occur via direct service provision; policy initiatives, legislative review, research, and advocacy for the structural changes needed that otherwise maintain and reinforce the determinants of violence against women.

Social workers work at several levels when addressing violence against women. These include:

- Individual client level, attending to the psychosocial needs of the client
- Family and cultural level, for example re-establishing parent-child relationships and working with communities
Organisational level, advocating for change in their own organisations
Societal/community level, advocating for change at a government and policy level, and at a whole of community level in relation to attitudinal change
Personal level, ensuring that their practice is ethical, attending to factors of discrimination and not reproducing inequitable gender norms.

In the field of family violence, social workers are employed in a broad range of roles and organisations providing prevention, early intervention, crisis and long term responses. However, social work with victims/survivors of family violence can occur in any practice context.

The various settings and fields of practice include:

- Advocacy groups
- Aged care
- Antenatal and postnatal services
- Child protection
- Community health services
- Community legal centres
- Corrections systems
- Crisis accommodation and refuges
- Disability services
- Drug and alcohol services
- Family support services
- Family violence support and outreach services
- Homelessness service
- Hospitals
- Indigenous support services
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) services
- Magistrates’ Courts, Family Court and other court support services
- Mental health services
- Multicultural or CALD agencies
- Policy and research
- Schools and other organisations that work with young people
- Sexual assault services
- Women’s health organisations
- Women’s support services

Scope of social work practice in family violence with women

Social workers are integral to the delivery of support and intervention services for women who are victims/survivors of family violence. In their practice, social workers are deeply committed to the belief that everyone has a right to live free from fear and violence in their home and broader society. The scope of social work practice includes all levels of management and program design, individual planning, group work, counselling, crisis interventions, consultation, coordination and case management, community development, as well as policy development, research, evaluation and advocacy.

As a complex social issue, social workers in direct practice draw on a broad range of theories, knowledge, research and skills to ensure comprehensive assessments and interventions. Social work assessments range from targeted and brief specific-needs analyses through to holistic

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psychosocial and risk assessments of the full range of social and psychological needs, strengths and stressors. These assessments underpin targeted interventions to address the issues that are impacting on a woman’s safety, recovery, health and wellbeing.

When working with women, the scope of social work practice in family violence includes:

**Prevention and early intervention**

- Working at a policy level around public awareness and social policy strategies
- Working in schools, sporting and community clubs, family support services with children, young people and their families around respectful relationships
- Antenatal and routine screening in all aspects of health care
- Better understanding and raising awareness of the complexities of family violence through research and academia
- Development, research and evaluation of existing and emerging preventing violence against women programs and strategies.
- Working internationally in consultation, training and evaluation roles regarding prevention of violence against women and girls.

**Assessment**

- Risk assessments for intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect, elder abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation
- Comprehensive biopsychosocial environmental assessments of clients, including their families, partners, carers and significant others (see [Scope of Practice for Psychosocial Assessment](#)).

**Crisis interventions**

- Crisis and risk assessments
- Safety planning and risk management
- Telephone crisis counselling and support
- After hours response – telephone and/or face-face
- Accessing emergency/safe accommodation
- Accessing emergency resources, including Centrelink crisis payments
- Advocacy and support in engaging with police, child protection and other relevant authorities
- Information about relevant services and safety options.
Counselling, therapeutic interventions and group work

- Counselling and targeted therapeutic interventions aimed at safety, empowerment and recovery
- Specialist trauma therapy including psycho education, exposure therapy and trauma focused cognitive behavioural therapy
- Social response models and safe and together models, based on feminist theory
- Mental health support and interventions
- Carer/child attachment therapy
- Grief, loss and bereavement support through counselling and therapeutic interventions
- Working with perpetrators of family violence (including individual and group behaviour-change work)
- Support groups for women and children
- Developing design, implementation and evaluation of programs
- Developing culturally appropriate therapeutic interventions
- Writing Victims’ of Crime Court Reports, Supporting victims through other court jurisdictions.

Case management and service coordination

- Case management and the coordination of services
- Supporting clients to navigate through the complex service system
- Information about relevant services and safety planning options
- Referrals to other services
- Resourcing and support in accessing appropriate information and financial assistance
- Legal information and support to access legal services and attend Court
- Access to longer term safe and affordable housing.

Advocacy & social activism

- Advocating for change on an organisational, policy and systemic level though submission and direct action
- Supporting clients to be self-advocates, or advocating on their behalf
- Advocacy and support during court proceedings, including County, Magistrates and Family Court; Department of Immigration and Border Protection
- Provision of secondary consultations and professional development/training for other professionals in relation to family violence.
Policy and research

- Developing social policy at all levels of government
- Advocating for the rights of victims and survivors through policy submissions
- Engaging in research and publishing peer reviewed journals
- Conference and workshop presentations.

Contribution of social work

Social workers support, assist and advocate on behalf of women and their children affected by family violence. With their focus on holistic support, an understanding of family violence as a gendered issue and an ability to consider the complexity involved from multiple perspectives, social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution by providing appropriate and targeted services to meet the whole of life needs of victims and survivors. This multi-focused approach includes knowledge of human functioning and behaviour, and how socioeconomic and legal factors interact and impact to produce the abuse, discrimination, oppression, marginalisation and social isolation experienced by women.

Working from a structural, feminist, human rights-based and strengths perspective, social workers develop assessments, planning and interventions within a client empowerment framework. Social workers are regularly involved in multidisciplinary teams, especially when interventions occur within complex social, psychological, family and institutional dynamics. In this respect, social workers can greatly inform and support the decision-making capacities of other professionals in relation to the dynamics and complexities of family violence, advocating for the rights of clients.

Above all, social workers are deeply committed to challenging family violence at both an individual and systemic level, with the aim of minimising its profound, long lasting impacts.

Conclusion

Family violence is both prevalent and preventable. Violence against women has detrimental impacts on individuals, communities and society, and these impacts have a direct cost at a personal, family, community and societal level. Social workers are integral to the delivery of support and clinical services for women who are victims and survivors of family violence and are deeply committed to the belief that every woman has a right to live free from fear and violence. Accordingly, social workers are key partners in addressing the national emergency that is family violence and violence against women in Australia.