



Introduction: The Social Work Platform

The social work profession is committed to maximising the well being of individuals and society. It considers that individual and societal wellbeing is underpinned by socially inclusive communities which emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights, including the right to freedom from intimidation and terror in society. Minimum standards of human rights include also the right to adequate housing, income, employment, education and health care.

Role of Social Workers

The AASW is the only national organisation for social workers in Australia, with over 6,000 members, many of whom are involved in the delivery of domestic and family violence services in a range of fields of practice.

Social workers support, assist, and advocate on behalf of men, women and children affected by domestic and family violence. They ultimately seek to empower family members to take control of their lives and move beyond the effects of domestic and family violence.

AASW members work with children, young people, adults and families to prevent family violence and assist families exposed to violence. Many of these social work roles focus on intervening before domestic and family violence occurs, supporting parenting, educating young people and influencing other social determinants of violence.

Policy Context

The AASW endorses the comprehensive definition from Domestic Violence Victoria:

... the repeated use of violent, threatening, coercive or controlling behaviour by an individual against a family member(s), or someone with whom they have, or have had an intimate relationship including carers. Violent behaviour includes not only physical assaults but an array of power and control tactics used along a continuum in concert with one another, including direct or indirect threats, sexual assault, emotional and psychological torment, economic control, property damage, social isolation and behaviour which causes a person to live in fear. Currently only certain behaviours and actions defined as family violence are criminal offences, any behaviour that constitutes family violence is unacceptable.



Family violence can occur within any intimate relationship, including same sex relationships. It affects trans gender people, the elderly and people with disabilities. While it can be perpetuated by any member of a family against another, victims are 3 times more likely to experience violence from a male than a female (predominately from a woman's current or ex-partner).

Whilst being mindful of the sensitivity to varied definitions, it is important to note that it is overwhelmingly women and children who experience the majority of the burden of family violence and that this violence is perpetrated by males they trust.

Research demonstrates that domestic and family violence contributes to compromised mental health, homelessness, reduced relationship, educational and employment success and long term financial instability for women and children. This research also confirms the additional vulnerability for indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse women and children who experience domestic and family violence. Whilst the research into Domestic and Family violence is still evolving, there is positive progress in the development of how Government and the non-government sector is responding with evidenced based programs and resources starting to emerge both for survivors of violence and for perpetrators seeking to change their behaviour. The AASW also welcomes the improved directives in Police responses in this area when compared to 10-15 years ago.

Domestic and family violence is likely to affect nearly 1 in 3 Australian women during their lifetime. It has been estimated that the costs of domestic and family violence annually are \$8.1 billion, including a \$3.5 billion estimate of pain, suffering and premature death.

Family violence directly contravenes Australia's commitment to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Rights of the Child. As a signatory to CEDAW, all Australian governments must continue to implement policies and programs to eradicate discrimination in all its forms, against all women regardless of ability, race, religion or cultural background.

Working from a strengths and rights-based framework, social workers seek to empower women and children to view themselves as active survivors rather than survivors of violence. Social workers address these effects by working from an advocacy perspective through influencing policy, structures and other sites of power that ultimately aim to minimise family violence.



Role of Government

The AASW welcomes the work of the Federal Government, including the consultation: *Family Violence – Improving Legal Frameworks* and the commitment to addressing family violence prevention as part of the National Women’s Health Policy. These efforts are beginning to address the incidence and impact of domestic and family violence. Coupled with integrated and coordinated family violence service initiatives operating in most states, community, justice and health responses are increasingly working together, which is making a real difference in women and children’s lives.

The recently released *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children: A Time for Action* heralds a new approach to ending family violence. The AASW welcomes the Federal Government’s cooperative federalism approach to deliver services and policy responses consistently and uniformly across States and Territories. This approach will support and assist women and children seeking to escape domestic and family violence, reduce barriers to accessing services and enhance prevention efforts.

Recommendations

Disability: The AASW notes that girls and women with disabilities are twice as likely to be survivors of domestic and family violence as women without disabilities.

The AASW **recommends** the Federal Government to appoint a representative of Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA) to the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children and to ensure that all policy areas impacting on domestic and family violence reflect the reality of women with disabilities who are survivors of domestic and family violence.

Indigenous: The AASW **recommends** specific programs to address the over-representation of Indigenous women and children in family and domestic violence statistics, and calls on all Governments to increase resources to services for Indigenous women and their families, which have proven successful in addressing this violence.



Family Court: The AASW notes that changes to the Shared Parenting Act 2006 requires all separating couples to use family dispute resolution as the primary means of determining care and contact arrangements of children. For women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence, family dispute resolution carries the risk of further abuse and trauma through the dispute resolution process. The AASW seriously questions this indiscriminate use of the dispute resolution process regardless of family circumstances. In any event it is imperative that these women and children are protected, supported and assisted through the Family Relationship Centres and associated service providers and the proposed new court structures.

The AASW **recommends** the Federal Government establish a specialist bench within the Family Court of Australia to hear cases involving domestic and family violence, to ensure that the long term impacts of these acts of violence on partners and children are addressed.

Service Delivery: The AASW **recommends** all governments work collaboratively to deliver seamless services and policy responses to survivors of domestic and family violence.

Workforce Issues

Work with families affected by family and domestic violence, including survivors, children and perpetrators, requires highly skilled and trained practitioners. Many of these services are currently provided in the non-government sector where remuneration is low and investment in training is hampered by inadequate funding. Government should recognise the complexity and priority of this work by providing adequate funds to attract retain and continue to develop highly skilled professional staff.

Talking Points

The *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children: A Time for Action* year heralds a new approach to ending family violence. The AASW welcomes the Federal Government's cooperative federalism approach to deliver services and policy responses consistently and uniformly across States and Territories. This approach will support and assist women and children seeking to escape domestic and family violence, reduce barriers to accessing services and enhance prevention efforts.



The dynamics of how domestic and family violence evolve in relationships is complex and we need to resist a simplistic response that ignores that in some situations multiple parties commit acts of violence, intimidation and threats. The AASW **recommends** the Federal Government establish a specialist bench within the Family Court of Australia to hear cases involving domestic and family violence, to ensure that the long term impacts of these acts of violence on partners and children are addressed.

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Domestic and Family Violence Position Paper

Disclaimer: Position statements

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