

Position Statement: Violence against Women

Introduction

Violence against women is preventable. Violence against women is a result of the unequal distribution of resources and power between men and women and an adherence to inflexible, culturally prescribed gender norms and stereotypes. Violence against women is a set of learned behaviours.¹

Social workers understand violence against women as a complex social problem with gender inequality at its core. Domestic violence will always exist where there are structural and normative gender inequalities in the fabric of a society. The social work profession uses a ‘feminist structural ecological systems analysis’ as the core theoretical and conceptual basis for understanding and responding to violence against women. This incorporates an understanding of the complex interplay of gender, ethnicity, ability, race, socio-economic status, sexuality and religion on women’s lived experiences of violence.

Violence against women occurs and is perpetrated across all levels of society:

- Institutional and systemic level
- Organisational and community level
- Individual, family and peer group level.

The role of social work

Social workers are employed in a broad range of roles and organisations and have the capacity to support the primary, secondary and tertiary prevention, early intervention and crisis response of violence against women by working across many levels of society: individual, community, workplaces, institutions and the embedded structures in which we live. Social workers are ideally placed with their commitment to social justice and their knowledge and skills to contribute to the prevention, early intervention and crisis response of violence against women. This can occur via direct service, policy initiatives, 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 the:

- Individual client level, attending to the needs of the client
- Organizational level, advocating for change in their own organizations
- Societal level, advocating for change at a government and policy level
- Personal level, ensuring that their practice is ethical, attending to factors of discrimination and not reproducing inequitable gender norms

¹ VicHealth, 2014, *Australian Attitudes to violence against women – Research Summary*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne

Prevalence

Violence against women is mostly perpetrated by men and is ‘the most pervasive, yet least recognized human rights abuse in the world’.² Recent global and local prevalence figures indicate that more than 1 in 3 women have experienced either intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.³ It is estimated that globally up to 38% of female murder victims die at the hands of a current or former partner.

These global statistics are consistent with non-Indigenous Australians, where 1 in 3 women have experienced physical violence; 1 in 4 have experienced emotional abuse from a partner or ex-partner; 1 in 5 have experienced sexual violence; and 1 in 6 have experienced intimate partner violence.⁴ Sixty-one per cent of Australian women who have experienced intimate partner violence reported having children in their care when the violence occurred, with 73% of all women reporting multiple incidents of violence.⁵ In 2012, 23,584 women reported being sexually assaulted in the past year and on average, one woman is murdered by a current or former partner each week.⁶ In the first five months of 2015 38 women had died as a result of domestic violence.

Underlying principles of social work intervention

The AASW’s position on responding to violence against women is underpinned by principles of human rights, social justice and professional integrity. Violence against women is ‘recognised by the UN as a violation of women’s rights and freedoms...especially concerning their entitlements to equality, liberty, integrity and dignity in political, social, economic, cultural and civic life’.⁷ Therefore, its prevalence in Australia reflects the need to think about violence against women as a significant abuse of human rights and an indication that current and historical responses to violence against women are failing to uphold or protect women’s human rights.

A fundamental cause of violence against women is ongoing and entrenched gender inequality, which is reflected across all aspects of a woman’s life. Women experience a range of disadvantages and 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 social work profession values honesty, transparency, reliability, empathy, reflective self-awareness, discernment, competence and commitment. In relation to violence against women, the AASW believes the social work profession has a critical role in addressing and responding to violence, regardless of the context of practice.

² United Nations Population Fund n.d., *Gender equality: Ending widespread violence against women*, retrieved 6 August 2014, <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/violence.htm>

³ World Health Organisation, 2013, *Violence against women: Factsheet no. 239*, retrieved 6 August 2014, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>

⁴ Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety, 2014, *Violence against women: Key statistics*, retrieved 6 August 2014, <http://www.anrows.org.au/sites/default/files/Violence-Against-Australian-Women-Key-Statistics.pdf> based on data from the ABS Personal Safety Survey 2012.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ UN, 1993, as cited in VicHealth, 2011, *Preventing violence against women in Australia: Research summary*

The role of governments

Governments can address gender inequity within institutions and structures as well as communities and workplaces that receive government funding, and government bodies themselves, by using a gender lens to review existing legislation and policies. Among the most important changes required are closing the gender pay gap and enabling equal representation of women in decision making and leadership positions. Such changes contribute towards change in the attitudinal and normative culture of our society.

Governments need to adopt a zero tolerance position with regard violence towards women that is reflected in laws and policies that are accompanied by swift and immediate sanctions for occurrences of violence and this needs to be accompanied by enforced penalties for breaches. This should specifically include policing and the courts.

Governments also need to adequately fund the service system that responds to women and children who experience violence, including family violence services, sexual assault services, health services, judiciary, law enforcement, men's behaviour change programs, and housing services.

Additionally governments need to adequately fund primary, secondary and tertiary programs across a range of settings so that the work of preventing violence against women is integrated into all levels of society. Integral to this is ensuring that every woman who makes a complaint of domestic violence is given the professional assistance of an accredited social worker.

Conclusion

Violence against women is prevalent and preventable. Violence against women has detrimental impacts on women, children, communities and society, and these impacts have a direct cost at a personal, family, community, societal and economic level. The reduction and eradication of violence against women will benefit society at all these levels. Not only are there the obvious social, health and moral reasons to reduce violence against women, there are significant economic reasons. The economic and financial toll of violence against women is substantial. Change is required at a structural, attitudinal and service-delivery level across all sections of society. Social workers are committed to ongoing professional development in this area in order to ensure they are well equipped to respond at all levels to violence against women in all settings.