

FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA

Prevalence, impacts and responses

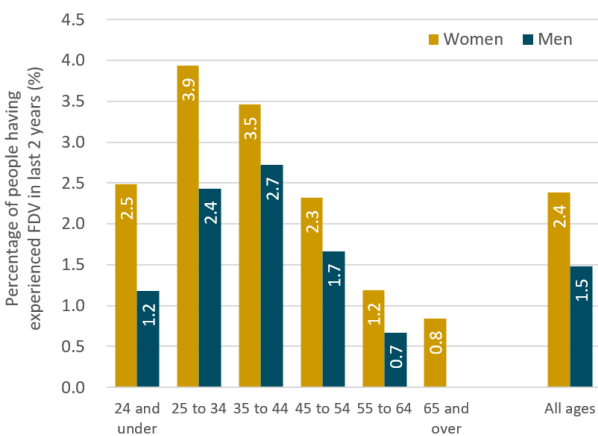
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Family and domestic violence in Australia - what do we know?

Family and domestic violence (FDV) is pervasive. It occurs among family members, and especially in intimate partner relationships. Around 1 in 6 women (17.3%) and 1 in 16 men (6.1%) men in Australia report having experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner since the age of 15.¹ At these prevalence rates, more than 1.7 million women and 580,000 men in Australia will have experienced partner violence in 2020.

The incidence of recent FDV in Australia is highest among younger cohorts, with around 75,000 women aged 25 to 34 (3.9% of their cohort) having experienced partner violence over a two-year period (Figure 1). For men, the share is highest among those aged 35 to 44, with 42,900 (2.7%) having experienced partner violence in the last two years.

Figure 1: Share of people who have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner over a two-year period in Australia: by age and gender



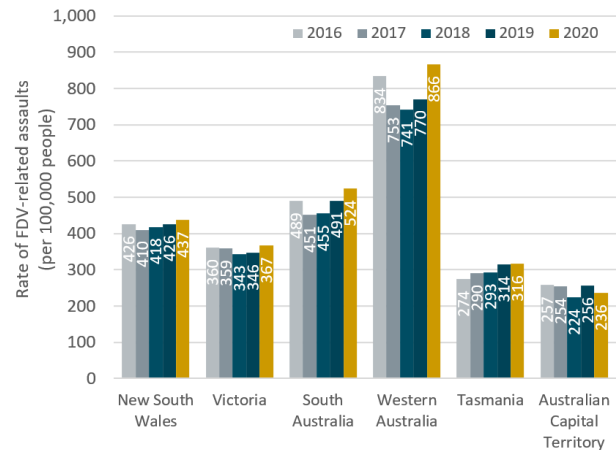
Notes: Percentages relate to the share of people who have experienced FDV from a cohabiting partner over a two-year period. This is to ensure sufficient sample size for reasonable statistical precision.

Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Data from Personal Safety Survey 2016

Figure 2 shows the overall prevalence of family and domestic violence-related assaults across selected states between 2016 and 2020. The general pattern is one of increasing FDV rates across most jurisdictions from 2018 onwards, with WA showing the highest overall FDV rates, at 866 per 100,000 according to ABS recorded crime data.

Sexual violence has spiked recently in NSW, with 86 incidents of sexual assaults per 100,000 people in 2020 – the highest rate across all state jurisdictions. Rates of sexual assault have risen between 2016 and 2020 in Victoria, Queensland, and Western Australia, but fallen slightly in South Australia, to 59 per 100,000 people in 2020.

Figure 2: Rate of family and domestic violence-related assaults, selected states: 2016 to 2020



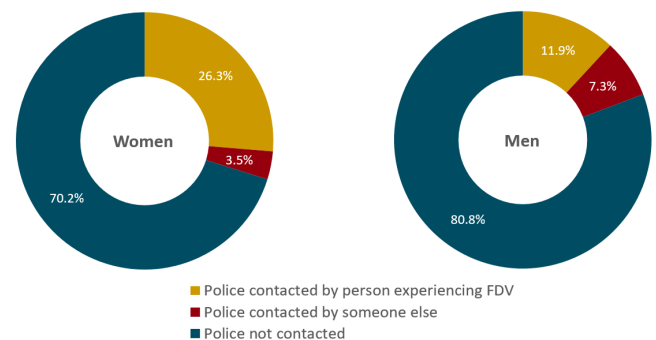
Notes: FDV-related assaults include assault resulting in serious injury, common assault, and sexual assault. Information on FDV assaults for Victoria is accessed from the Victorian Crime Statistics Agency, with all others based on ABS sources. Assault data are not reported to ABS for Queensland. Northern Territory is excluded due to lack of comparability of counts of FDV incidents.

Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Data from ABS Recorded Crimes - Victims (Table 30); Victoria Crime Statistics Agency (2021) Criminal incidents visualisation (Table 3).

The prevalence of FDV is known to be under-reported for a range of reasons including fear and safety, trust and concern of not being believed (Figure 4). During times of social crisis and increased personal stress such as those experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic, we are likely to see the prevalence of FDV go up if no action is taken.

Of those people who are assaulted by a cohabiting partner, the share who report the assault to the police is exceptionally low. Only a quarter of women (26.3%) and just over 1 in 9 men (11.9%) who experience FDV from a cohabiting partner report the incident to the police (Figure 3), with even smaller fractions of reports coming from someone else.

Figure 3: Share of people experiencing family and domestic violence from cohabiting partner who reported the most recent incident to police



Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Data from Personal Safety Survey 2016

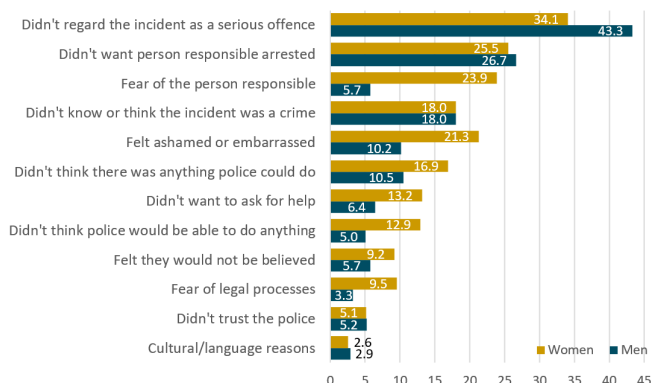
Of those who did not report an FDV incident to the police, just over a third of women (34.1%) and 43 per cent of men didn't regard the incident as a serious offence, and a quarter of women and men didn't want their partners to be arrested for the assault.

Fear explains the largest difference between women and men in the reasons for not reporting FDV incidents. Nearly a quarter of women (23.9%) who didn't report to the police felt in fear of the perpetrator. Among men, only 5.7 per cent cite fear as a reason for not reporting to the police.

More than 1 in 5 women (21.3%) who experience partner violence don't report incidents to the police because they feel ashamed or embarrassed to do so.

Women are more likely not to want to ask for help, more likely to fear they will not be believed, and more likely to feel that nothing could be done by the police.

Figure 4: Reasons for not reporting the most recent FDV incident from cohabiting partner to police



Notes: Respondents can cite more than one reason for not reporting FDV incidents to the police.

Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Data from Personal Safety Survey 2016

Has the incidence of FDV increased during COVID-19 lockdowns?

Existing research shows that FDV is impacted by crises such as natural disasters² and political unrest.³ Concern has been raised that the global COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to an increased incidence of family violence.

Recent research of FDV prevalence in Spain shows there has been an increase in reports of psychological abuse during COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions, but no difference in the number of reports of physical assaults.⁴ This research also concluded that FDV incidents are more likely to be driven by economic stress than lockdowns. Other research has highlighted an increase in Google search intensity of FDV-related topics after COVID-19 globally.⁵

An online survey commissioned between May and June 2020 by the Australian Institute of Criminology found that 4.6 per cent of respondents experienced partner violence since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Two thirds of those who experienced partner violence reported that the abuse had started or escalated in the three months prior to the survey, with many citing fear and safety concerns as reasons for not seeking help.

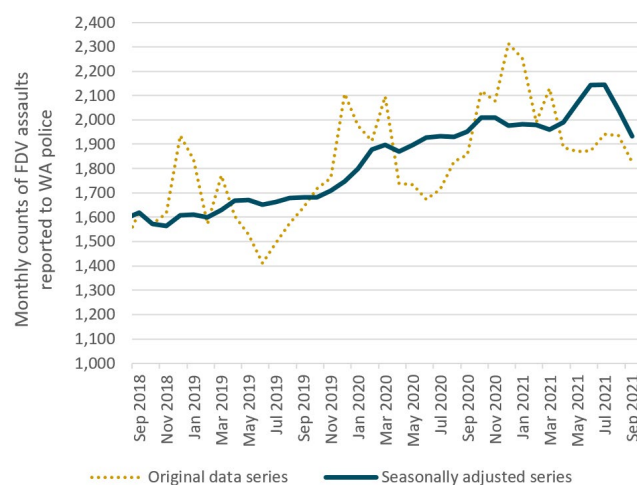
The Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre conducted a survey in April and May 2020 of 166 practitioners responding to women experiencing violence in Victoria during the first COVID-19 shutdown. More than half of survey respondents reported that the COVID-19 lockdowns have increased the prevalence and severity of partner violence against women.⁷

A recent study by Moslehi *et al.* (2021) uses data on offences reported to the NSW and Victorian police between 2019 and 2021 to examine differences in FDV reports during lockdowns.⁸ Their study suggested that the number of FDV incidents reported to the police fell during lockdowns, but not to the same degree as overall crime reports. They inferred that the *relative* incidence of domestic assaults rose during COVID-19 lockdowns in NSW and Victoria.

However, the Moslehi *et al.* study does not account for the presence of strong seasonal patterns in FDV incidence, which may compromise any inference on whether there has been an underlying increase in reports of FDV to the police during lockdowns.

For this Briefing Note we examine monthly patterns of family assaults reported to the WA Police Force to assess whether COVID-19 lockdowns have led to increased levels of family and domestic violence in Western Australia.

Figure 5: Monthly counts of total family assaults reported to the WA Police Force: 2018 to 2021



Notes: 'Original data series' represents the raw monthly counts of total family assaults collected by WA Police Force. The 'seasonally adjusted series' applies ABS methods of monthly seasonal adjustment to the original series, based on a Henderson filter using 3x5 term asymmetric weights.

Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Data from WA Police Force Crime Time Series Data, January 2007 to September 2021.

The hashed line in Figure 5 charts the raw counts of family assaults reported to WA police from September 2018 and reveal a strong seasonal pattern with higher numbers of reports of family assaults in December and January.⁹ We need to adjust for systematic seasonal variations to assess whether underlying patterns of reports of family assaults to the police have changed over the course of COVID-19.

Seasonally adjusted counts (the solid schedule in Figure 5) show that reported family assaults in WA have been rising

reasonably consistently for most of the period from September 2018 to the end of 2020.¹⁰

Reported family assaults rose in WA from October 2019 to February 2020, but there is little evidence of an increase in FDV reports to the WA police during the initial lockdown from March to May 2020. The numbers of reports in WA increased again between May and July 2021 but have reduced rapidly over the remainder of the year.

Western Australia has endured fewer and shorter lockdowns than other jurisdictions, which could suggest that their effects on family and domestic violence prevalence may be more limited.

An equivalent analysis for NSW reveals a stronger association between FDV reports and lockdowns. Reports of family assaults in NSW rose by 5 per cent on seasonally adjusted measures between March and May 2020, but a larger 13 per cent increase in reports of family assaults between January 2021 and May 2021.

This suggests that there is a lockdown effect, and the longer the lockdown, the greater the impact on incidents of family violence reported to the police.

Evidence in this note has already shown that only a quarter of FDV incidents against women are reported to the police. There is a real concern that lockdown restrictions may have further constrained the opportunities for women who experience FDV to contact police or seek assistance. If this is the case, then the underlying increase in FDV prevalence during COVID-19 is likely to be even greater.

Is family and domestic violence more likely to happen at certain times during the year?

The monthly patterns of FDV reports to the police reveal some important insights into heightened risks of family violence at certain times of the year.

Figure 6 shows the average monthly variations in FDV assaults reported to the WA Police Force, based on the ABS method of monthly seasonal adjustment.

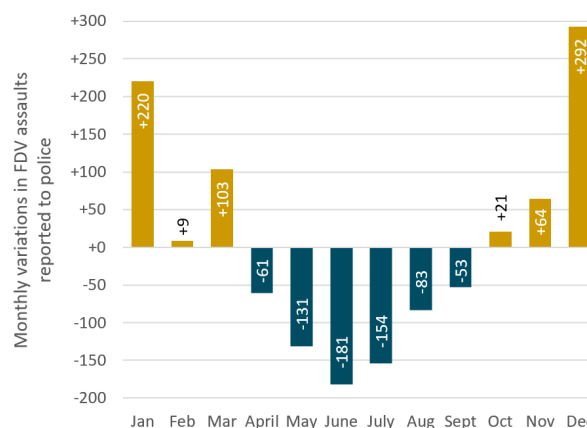
The findings are both clear and important:

- There is a significantly elevated risk of family and domestic violence during the summer vacation months of December and January
- An average of 220 more FDV incidents were reported to WA police in the month of December, and 290 more in January
- March is also associated with a greater number of FDV reports (+103).

These monthly patterns point to an increased risk of experiencing family and domestic violence during vacation periods and also suggest that the elevated incidence of FDV could be affected by the summer climate.

Governments, businesses and community services need to be attuned to these heightened periods of risk and provide appropriate protections and support measures over the vacation period.

Figure 6: Average monthly variations in FDV assaults by cohabiting partner reported to WA Police Force



Notes: Monthly variations are calculated by taking the average of differences between original and seasonally adjusted series for the same month in each of 8 years. Original data series' represents the raw monthly counts of total family assaults collected by WA Police Force. The 'seasonally adjusted series' applies ABS methods of monthly seasonal adjustment to the original series, based on a Henderson filter using 3x5 term asymmetric weights.

Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Data from WA Police Force Crime Time Series Data, January 2007 to September 2021.

What impacts does FDV have on people and their families?

Impacts on survivors

FDV has significant negative consequences for survivors. These include significant impacts on physical and mental health and wellbeing.¹¹ Under extreme circumstances, FDV can lead to loss of human lives through suicides¹² or homicides.¹³

Moreover, FDV has profound impacts on workplace performance and productivity. Existing research shows that the experiences of FDV are associated with decreased job satisfaction and reduced work performance among survivors.¹⁴ FDV exposure has also been linked with absenteeism.¹⁵ In projecting the costs of FDV in Australia, KPMG assume that 7.2 workdays are lost each year from absenteeism due to physical violence, 8.1 days as a result of sexual violence, and 10.1 days as a result of stalking.¹⁶ Survivors of FDV are additionally more likely to experience unstable employment and job losses.¹⁷

Consequently, FDV imposes significant costs on societies. The cost of violence against women to the Australian economy in 2014-2015 was estimated at \$21.7 billion.¹⁸

Poverty remains both a risk factor for abuse and a barrier to the ability to escape it. Family violence remains the leading cause of homelessness among women and children in Australia.¹⁹

Impacts on children

Child exposure to FDV is extremely common. One in ten Australian men and one in eight Australian women are estimated to have witnessed violence towards their mother before the age of 15.²⁰ The consequences of such exposure to violence are profound, with a growing body of evidence demonstrating that a range of children's social, emotional, behavioural and health functioning outcomes are

compromised.²¹ Moreover, witnessing of FDV in childhood is associated with higher likelihood of subsequent experience of intimate partner violence.²²

Violence exposure also has implications for the human capital development in children. Existing evidence suggests adverse consequences on children’s cognitive outcomes.²³ It is likely that the adverse impacts of FDV on children also extend well into their adult lives, affecting economic, health and social outcomes across the entire life course.

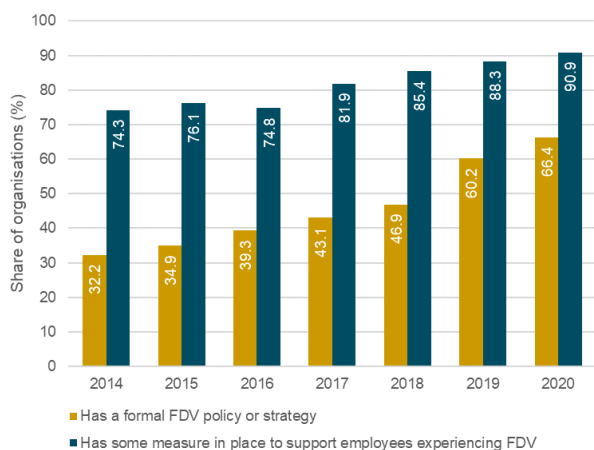
The impact of FDV exposure is not limited to directly exposed children’s outcomes alone. Children from troubled families can also significantly affect their peers’ educational outcomes and increase behavioural problems in the classroom.²⁴

What are businesses doing to support workers experiencing FDV?

Recent years have seen significant increases in business initiatives to support workers experiencing FDV. As Figure 7 demonstrates, the share of companies with formal FDV policies or individual support measures has gone up tangibly in the period from 2014 to 2020.

Only 32 per cent of companies had a formal FDV policy or strategy in 2014. As of 2020, that share had more than doubled, reaching 66 per cent. Similarly, the share of companies that had some measure in place to support employees experiencing FDV went up from 74 per cent in 2014 to 91 per cent in 2020 – an increase of 17ppts.

Figure 7: Share of companies with formal FDV policies or individual support measures: 2014 to 2020



Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Data from Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA)

In the period from 2016 to 2020, there has been a significant increase in the share of organisations offering confidentiality of disclosure (32.5ppts), access to leave (31.2ppts) and flexible working arrangements (29.8ppts).

As of 2020, 35.5 per cent of companies offered paid domestic violence leave to support employees experiencing FDV – an increase of 23.5ppts since 2016 (Table 1). Almost a quarter of organisations offered financial support to employees experiencing FDV, with some also providing

medical services (19.7%) and emergency accommodation assistance (10.7%).

Table 1: Measures offered by companies to support employees experiencing FDV: 2016 and 2020

Measures offered by organisations to support employees experiencing FDV	2016	2020	Change (ppt) 2016 to 2020
Access to any leave (overall measure)	52.6%	83.9%	+31.2
Employee assistance program	66.4%	82.3%	+15.8
Flexible working arrangements	48.6%	78.4%	+29.8
Unpaid leave	49.3%	78.3%	+29.0
Confidentiality of disclosure	41.2%	73.7%	+32.5
Referral to support services	26.9%	52.2%	+25.3
Protection from adverse action or discrimination	21.3%	48.8%	+27.4
Paid domestic violence leave	12.1%	35.5%	+23.5
Unpaid domestic violence leave	3.8%	32.7%	+28.9
Change of office location	13.7%	32.7%	+19.0
FDV clause in enterprise/workplace agreement	6.9%	24.9%	+18.0
Financial support	11.2%	24.8%	+13.6
Workplace safety planning	8.3%	22.1%	+13.8
HR or other staff training	11.0%	22.0%	+11.0
Medical services	10.0%	19.7%	+9.7
Emergency accommodation assistance	4.0%	10.7%	+6.8

Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre | Data from Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA)

Recent research suggests that the benefits that arise from businesses providing paid family and domestic violence leave to their employees would more than offset the costs of so doing.

Cassells *et al.* (2021) estimate that the total annual cost to employers of providing an entitlement of 10 days of paid family and domestic violence leave to employees covered by award wages would be no more than \$34m per year.²⁵

Stanford (2016) suggests that providing financial support to workers through paid FDV leave will reduce absenteeism, increase productivity and reduce costs associated with staff turnover, and most importantly, help employees to resolve and escape from violent situations more effectively.²⁶

What are governments doing to support people experiencing FDV?

The 16 Days in WA Campaign commenced in 2017 with the support of the WA Minister for Women, Simone McGurk.

The key messages of 16 Days in WA are:

- Violence against anyone is unacceptable. We all have a responsibility to help stop the violence.
- Stopping violence against women means promoting equality and respectful relationships, violence-free spaces, and safer communities.
- Breaking the cycle of family and domestic violence starts with respect for women.
- Everyone has a part to play by calling out disrespectful behaviour in all areas of life.

An additional \$60m was committed to FDV programs and services in 2021. These efforts are part of the broader [Stronger Together Action Plan](#) for gender equality in WA.

At the national level the [Fourth Action Plan](#) of the [National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022](#), was launched by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2019. It agreed on five national

priorities to reduce family, domestic and sexual violence: primary prevention; support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children; respect, listen and respond to diverse lived experiences; respond to sexual violence and harassment; and improve support and service system responses.

The profile of both family and domestic abuse and violence against women has been raised significantly in the last few years. Rosie Batty put FDV on the national agenda as the Australian of the Year in 2015, and Grace Tame highlighted child sexual abuse and grooming in the same role in 2021. Brittany Higgins' report of rape in Parliament House has firmly placed the issue of violence against women on the political agenda in the lead up to a Federal election in the first half of 2022.

While women's safety in Parliament House and issues of integrity and oversight are front of mind, the real challenge for political advocacy is to move beyond crisis services to address the underlying causes of FDV. We need to see widespread public education campaigns to change community attitudes, backed up by greater education on safety, consent and respect in our schools, as well as increased support within workplaces and local communities. Intensive intervention programs with perpetrators that can actually change their thinking and behaviour are needed to further prevent violence against women from happening.

Supporting women's empowerment and changing societal norms

Woman's empowerment has often been seen as a means to reduce FDV. However, recent research evidence on how women's empowerment relates to the incidence of FDV shows that the relationship is far more complex.

Empowerment through work, increased income and economic independence may alleviate financial stress as a source of relationship conflict, and increase the independence and bargaining power of women.

Workplaces can also provide supportive relationships and safe spaces outside the home, as well as access to support measures offered by employers.

However, women's empowerment may also increase the risk of conflict where violence is used as a means to control a woman's resources or as a way to assert dominance if there is a perception of a threat to status or of increased independence.²⁷

Empowerment alone is unlikely to address the underlying causes of coercive control, given that the balance of risks to women is uncertain.

Some studies have shown that FDV declines with women's empowerment.²⁸ However, women's empowerment can also lead to an increase in FDV in relationships that follow conservative or 'traditional' gender role norms.

Recent research for Australia shows that violating the male breadwinner norm leads to a 35 per cent increase in the likelihood of partner violence and a 20 per cent increase in

emotional abuse against women.²⁹ What this finding implies is that increasing women's economic power may not be effective in reducing FDV if not accompanied by concurrent changes in societal norms.

But what do we know about the origins of societal norms that may have had some role in enabling FDV?

Studies in different settings have highlighted the significance of historical circumstances including the legacies of conflict,³⁰ historical family structures³¹ and socio-economic hierarchies.³²

Evidence from Australia highlights the historical circumstances around colonisation that created a shortage of women relative to men, intensifying competition and violence.³³ There is also a hidden history of the kidnapping and domestic servitude of First Nations women. Once entrenched in cultures, masculinity norms have been found to persist over time and resist change.

Strategies to mitigate the risks to women from FDV should be part of a much broader social agenda to combat gender inequalities and break down deeply entrenched attitudes towards gender roles.

Summary

There is compelling evidence that family and domestic violence has a significant economic and social cost for our community – in terms of health and justice system costs, lost productivity, missed opportunities and lost lives. The greatest costs by far are borne by its victims, and the children who grow up in its shadow. Prevalence rates remain unacceptably high, particularly in Western Australia.

The vast majority of intimate partner violence remains unreported and untreated. More needs to be done to address barriers to reporting, to secure better outcomes from reported cases, and to assist women and children fleeing abusive and controlling relationships.

There is some evidence that suggests increased rates of family assaults during COVID lockdown periods, particularly in states experiencing more protracted and severe restrictions.³⁴ However, with only a quarter of FDV incidents being reported to police, there is also a possibility that we are under-estimating real rates of harm and conflict because lockdowns make it harder to report and to escape controlling and abusive relationships.

It is clear that community awareness of violent, abusive and controlling relationships has risen significantly, and there is a real sense that we may be at an inflection point that could herald a significant generational shift in attitudes.

There is perhaps a greater imperative on political parties now than ever before to address FDV issues, given the enhanced visibility and heightened awareness of violence towards women. Demand for action to promote greater equity of opportunity, safety and respect for women is creating real leverage for policy change ahead of next year's Federal election.

We have recently seen commitments at a state and federal level to crisis services, increased support for victims and some investment into community awareness campaigns.

However, if we are to succeed in reducing violence against women in the longer term, there are key barriers that need to be addressed. Successful prevention and early intervention require shifting attitudes and behaviours in offenders as well as bystanders. While we need family and friends to embrace the message “Don’t be silent when you see violence,” effective prevention requires us to address the attitudinal foundations of violent and controlling behaviours in boys and young men. Consent education in schools is a step in the right direction.

Reducing levels of harm and death arising from family violence also requires addressing the barriers women and children face in seeking to escape abusive and controlling relationships. This includes better access to adequate income support, safe and secure housing, and support to exit physically, emotionally or financially abusive situations.

Notes

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017). Personal safety, Australia, 2016. ABS Cat. No. 4906.0. Canberra: ABS.

² Gearhart, S., Perez-Patron, M., Hammond, T. A., Goldberg, D. W., Klein, A., & Horney, J. A. (2018). The impact of natural disasters on domestic violence: An analysis of reports of simple assault in Florida (1999–2007). *Violence and Gender*, 5(2), 87–92.

³ Bargain, O., Boutin, D., & Champeaux, H. (2019). Women’s political participation and intrahousehold empowerment: Evidence from the Egyptian Arab Spring. *Journal of Development Economics*, 141, 102379.

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⁵ Berniell, I., & Facchini, G. (2021). COVID-19 Lockdown and Domestic Violence: Evidence from Internet-Search Behavior in 11 Countries. *European Economic Review*, 103775.

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¹⁰ The ‘seasonally adjusted series’ applies ABS methods of monthly seasonal adjustment to the original series, based on a Henderson filter using 3x5 term asymmetric weights.

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¹³ Garcia, L., Soria, C., & Hurwitz, E. (2007). Homicides and intimate partner violence: A literature review. *Trauma, violence, & abuse*, 8(4), 370–383.

¹⁴ Banyard, V., Potter, S., & Turner, H. (2011). The impact of interpersonal violence in adulthood on women’s job satisfaction and productivity: The mediating roles of mental and physical health. *Psychology of violence*, 1(1), 16.

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¹⁶ KPMG (2016). The cost of violence against women and their children in Australia.

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²⁰ ABS. (2017). Personal Safety, Australia Statistics for family, domestic, sexual violence, physical assault, partner emotional abuse, child abuse, sexual harassment, stalking and safety. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release>

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³⁴ Boxall *et al* (2020), *Ibid*, p.2.