

## Submission

to the

## Royal Commission into Family Violence

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## 1. Introduction

On Sunday, 22 February 2015, His Excellency the Governor, the Hon. Alex Chernov AC QC, signed the letters patent appointing former Justice Marcia Neave AO as Commissioner and Patricia Faulkner AO and Tony Nicholson as Deputy Commissioners to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. The Royal Commission is required to inquire into and make recommendations on how Victoria's response to family violence can be improved.

Specifically, the Commission is required to:

1. *examine and evaluate strategies, frameworks, policies, programs and services across government and local government, media, business and community organisations and establish best practice for:*
    - a. *the prevention of family violence;*
    - b. *early intervention to identify and protect those at risk of family violence and prevent the escalation of violence;*
    - c. *support for victims of family violence and measures to address the impacts on victims, particularly on women and children; and*
  2. *investigate the means of having systemic responses to family violence, particularly in the legal system and by police, corrections, child protection, legal and family violence support services, including reducing re-offending and changing violent and controlling behaviours;*
  3. *investigate how government agencies and community organisations can better integrate and coordinate their efforts; and*
  4. *provide recommendations on how best to evaluate and measure the success of strategies, frameworks, policies, programs and services put in place to stop family violence;*
- and inquire into and report on any other matters reasonably incidental to those set out in paragraphs 1-4 above.<sup>1</sup>*

In keeping with its terms of reference, the Royal Commission aims to make recommendations which:

- *foster a violence-free society*
- *reduce and aim to eliminate family violence*
- *prevent the occurrence and escalation of family violence*
- *build respectful family relationships*
- *increase awareness of the extent and effects of family violence*
- *reinforce community rejection of the use of family violence*
- *ensure the safety of people who are or may be affected by family violence, by:*
- *facilitating early intervention before violence occurs*
- *providing fast, effective responses to those who report family violence*
- *providing effective protections to adults and children who have been affected by family violence in the past, and remain at risk of family violence*
- *support adults and children who have been affected by family violence*
- *hold those who have been violent accountable for their actions<sup>2</sup>*
- *help people who use or may use family violence to change their behaviour.*

The Royal Commission is due to provide its report and recommendations to the government by Monday, 29 February 2016.

FamilyVoice Australia is a national Christian voice – promoting true family values for the benefit of all Australians. Our vision is to see strong families at the heart of a healthy society: where marriage is honoured, human life is respected, families can flourish, Australia’s Christian heritage is valued, and fundamental freedoms are enjoyed.

We work with people from all major Christian denominations. We engage with parliamentarians of all political persuasions and are independent of all political parties. We have full-time FamilyVoice representatives in all states of Australia.

FamilyVoice Australia has a longstanding interest in promoting healthy relationships in Australian families and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

## 2. Dealing with domestic violence

On average, two women die every week in Australia as a result of domestic violence, and this figure is rising.<sup>3</sup>

It is not only women who suffer. Some Australian men are assaulted by female partners or by other males in a homosexual relationship. Women in lesbian relationships may also suffer. Children can be victims too – like Luke Batty, who was murdered last year by his father, Rosie Batty’s former partner.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, most victims of domestic violence are women who are emotionally, physically or sexually abused by their male sexual partner or former partner.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott has initiated an advisory panel to roll out a multi-million dollar action plan and conduct a national awareness campaign to combat domestic violence. He has also promised extra funding for the phone line 1800 RESPECT to help women victims. These are positive moves.

But no one seems to be asking a key question: *Why are rates of fatal violence against women increasing at the same time that murder rates in general are going down?*<sup>5</sup>

At least three factors appear to be behind this increase:

- fewer couples are getting married and more couples are “shacking up”, even though domestic violence rates are significantly higher in de facto relationships;<sup>6</sup>
- more men are becoming addicted to freely available online hardcore pornography, which promotes the abuse and exploitation of women;<sup>7</sup>
- drug addiction – particularly drugs like crystal methamphetamine (“ice”) – is growing in a “soft on drugs” political environment.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Recommendation 1:***

***Strategies to address these three issues should be part of any plan to address domestic violence:***

- *schools to teach the many advantages of committed marriage over de facto relationships;*
- *internet cleanfeed options to block harmful websites including those demeaning women;*
- *a return to the previous “tough on drugs” policies, which saw a drop in drug abuse in Australia – compared with later years when drug abuse rates have risen.*

### 3. Family violence doesn't discriminate

In conducting its inquiry, the Commission should recognise that domestic violence occurs in a wide variety of situations and involves men, women and children as perpetrators and men, women and children as victims.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005 Personal Safety Survey reports the following data:<sup>9</sup>

- 73,800 women (77.7%) and 21,200 men (22.3%) were physically assaulted in the previous 12 months by a current or previous partner;<sup>10</sup>
- 125,100 women (67.3%) experienced physical assault by a male perpetrator in a home in the previous 12 months while 60,900 men (32.7%) experienced physical assault by a female perpetrator in a home in the previous 12 months;<sup>11</sup>
- Since the age of 15, 105,600 women (69.6%) had experienced physical assault by a current male partner and 46,200 men (30.4%) had experienced physical assault by a current female partner;<sup>12</sup>
- Since the age of 15, 674,700 women (72.2%) had experienced physical assault by a previous male partner and 259,300 men (27.7%) had experienced physical assault by a previous female partner;<sup>13</sup> and
- Children of 463,300 women (84.3%) witnessed their mother being subjected to violence by a partner and children of 86,500 men (15.7%) witnessed their father being subjected to violence by a partner.<sup>14</sup>

Overall nearly one in three victims of domestic violence is a male victim of a female perpetrator. In over one in six cases it is “men and their children” who need protection from a female perpetrator.

David Fergusson and his colleagues have reported on an in-depth analysis of women's and men's experience of domestic violence at age 25 as part of the Christchurch longitudinal study.<sup>15</sup>

Their findings include:

- 37.4% of women reported that they perpetrated acts of domestic violence compared to 30.9% of men;
- 3.9% of women were injured as a result of domestic violence compared to 3.3% of men;

- 2.5% of women reported being fearful as a result of partner violence compared to 0.3% of men;
- Women were more likely than men to initiate physical assault;
- Overall adverse mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation) are as frequent for men as for women, although women are more likely than men to suffer depression and anxiety;

In many cases there was mutual violence leading Fergusson and his colleagues to observe that “commonly occurring domestic violence may be better conceptualized as an issue relating to violent partnerships rather than violent individuals”.

In considering the policy implications of this study the authors note:

*The present study has a number of implications for policies relating to domestic violence. First and foremost, the results provide a further challenge to the dominant view that domestic violence is a “women’s issue” and arises predominantly from assaults by male perpetrators on female victims.*

*What the findings suggest is that among young adult populations, men and women are equally violent to intimate partners on the basis of reports of both victimization and perpetration for the range of domestic violence examined within this study. Furthermore, the spectrum of violence committed by men and women seems to be similar and there is evidence suggesting that both men and women engage in serious acts of physical violence against their partners. Finally, the consequences of domestic violence in terms of injury and psychological effects were similar for both men and women.*

In 2007-08, of a national total of 78 intimate-partner homicides, 18 victims were male (23%).<sup>16</sup> In 2006-08 one in three (32.3%) victims of intimate partner homicide was male.<sup>17</sup>

Another form of domestic violence receiving increasing recognition and attention is adolescent violence towards parents. The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse published a report on this subject in 2004, which said:

*There are few overseas and no Australian statistics on the prevalence of adolescent violence against parents. Shame and guilt are singled out as the main reasons for parents’ unwillingness to report their children’s violence...<sup>18</sup>*

The Women’s and Children’s Health Network make a similar observation:

*Violence towards parents or other family members by young people is more common than many people think. It’s not often talked about because parents can feel embarrassed, scared or alone.<sup>19</sup>*

In the light of this data, it is inappropriate to focus solely on family violence committed by men. This runs the risk of obscuring the reality of family violence perpetrated by women and making male victims of family violence invisible or more likely to be overlooked. Both men and women are victims of family violence. Both men and women are perpetrators of family violence. Perpetuating and entrenching a one-sided, gendered, discriminatory account of family violence will not help reduce family violence or assist government agencies to respond adequately to all victims of family violence regardless of the sex of the victim or of the perpetrator.

**Recommendation 2:**

***In conducting this inquiry, the Commission should recognise that men, women and children are victims of family violence, that men, women and children are perpetrators of family violence and that it is best characterised as domestic violence.***

## 4. Endnotes

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9. *Personal Safety Survey Australia 2005*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat. No. 4906.0, Reissued 21 August 2006: [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/056A404DAA576AE6CA2571D00080E985/\\$File/49060\\_2005%20\(reissue\).pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/056A404DAA576AE6CA2571D00080E985/$File/49060_2005%20(reissue).pdf)
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12. *Ibid.*, p 30.
13. *Ibid.*
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