

# Women and Violence

‘...violence occurs in all cultures, races, ethnicities and religions...’

Miriam Grech rsm



Miriam Grech is a Sister of Mercy from North Sydney and up until this year has been involved with many families during her ministry at Mercy Family Centre (10 years) and with Centacare (7 years) in Sydney. Although Miriam worked with both men and women, she talks about her involvement with many women who were in abusive relationships.

When I commenced my ministry on the upper North Shore of Sydney, a comment occasionally made to me, was “Why the North Shore, why not out west (considered to be less affluent)?” I was aware that violence occurs in all cultures, races, ethnicities and religions but I could never have imagined how horrid and violent some of the women’s stories would be. I worked with very disadvantaged women and also with professional women who were living a ‘privileged’ lifestyle. The effects of violence on all of these women regardless of their situation were similar. In the majority of cases, the women left the relationship, however long it may have taken. They tended to leave and return a number of times before permanently leaving. I recall a young woman who had left on four occasions and when she wanted to return yet again, I reminded her that the situation would not have altered. She then made a tiny circle with her thumb and finger and said to me, “While there is this much hope left, I want to give to give it a chance for the sake of the children”. Having four children she didn’t think that she would be able to cope on her own. This woman did finally leave – for the sake of the children!

My experience made me realise the impact violence has on women, and of course, the children. The physical and psychological damage can have long term effects with the majority of the women experiencing low self-esteem and depression as a result. This impacts on all aspects of their lives.

Some of the women feared reporting to police or to carry out a threat to take out an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) out of fear of retaliation and threats from their partner; or of the shame of having a partner who was violent. I always considered it a privilege to support women who did go to court, as on their own they were more likely to withdraw their complaint. The women’s lack of confidence in their own ability made it difficult for them to continue with the process of the legal system.

*“We gained the strength, the courage to reach up out of the quicksand, and there were people who reached back.”*

R.O.S.E. Award recipient

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## Take Some Action Today!

How can we stand with and for other women in eliminating violence in Australia and across the globe?

### Take time to do one of the following:

- In the weeks leading to the Federal Elections take note of the policies of the main parties that impact on:
  - women and their access to suitable and safe housing
  - the IR laws that contribute to instability in the family, resulting in women being subjected to various forms of violence.
- Engage with Indigenous women regarding John Howard’s proposed amendments to the Preamble of the Australian Constitution.
- View the movie/documentary *Forbidden Love* written and directed by Anna Broinowski. This dramatised documentary investigates accusations that “Forbidden Love” author Norma Khouri made up her biographical tale of a Muslim friend who was killed for dating a Christian. Explore the various levels of violence depicted against women: and the ambiguity of ‘truth’. We suggest viewing the film with a friend and then follow up with reflection and discussion.
- Meditate on Jesus’ actions in the Gospel account of ‘The women accused of adultery’. John 8:1-11

## Facts

Often women do not disclose that they have been abused. Shame, self-blame, fear of other barriers, some within the health services, commonly prevent them. The majority of victims are never asked about it by their health service providers. Some services can often be uninformed and inappropriate. At worst, these services can re-traumatise, re-victimise, stigmatise or be unwittingly drawn in to the abuser's web of control, further harming the woman's emotional self. (Hegarty & Taft 2001 – Issues Paper No 8 – D.V. Clearing House)

Domestic violence directly affects the victims, their children, their families and friends, employers, co-workers, and has repercussions for the quality of life in a local community. There can be far-reaching financial, social, health and psychological consequences. The impact of violence can also have indirect costs, including the costs to the community of bringing perpetrators to justice or the costs of medical treatment for injured victims. (D.V. in Australia – an Overview of the Issues 2006 [http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom\\_violence.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom_violence.htm))

When compared to women from non-violent homes, victims of domestic violence have higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression and other psychiatric disorders. These women are almost five times more likely to attempt suicide; to have higher rates of alcoholism; to be nine times as likely to abuse drugs; to frequently present to medical caregivers with psychosomatic complaints; to have more sleep disturbance including nightmares; to have reduced coping and problem-solving skills; to be more likely to abuse dependent children; and to be socially isolated. (Aust. Bureau of Statistics 1996, Women's Safety Aust. No 4120.0 Canberra.)

Gender-based violence against women – female infanticide, sexual trafficking and exploitation, dowry killings and domestic violence – causes more death and disability among women in the 15-44 age group than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined. (Centre for Women Policy Studies, 2003)

Child abuse is more likely to occur in families experiencing domestic violence. Children of victims are also at risk of continuing the violence with their own children and partners and are at heightened risk of alcohol and drug abuse and delinquency in later life. (Economic Costs of Domestic Violence, 2002, Lesley Laing and Natasha Bobic)

## Websites worth looking at...

### ***Ending violence against women: from words to action Study of the Secretary-General, 9 October 2006***

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/launch/english/v.a.w-exeE-use.pdf>

Violence against women was drawn out of the private domain into public attention and the arena of State accountability largely because of the grass-roots work of women's organisations and movements around the world. This work drew attention to the fact that violence against women is not the result of random, individual acts of misconduct, but rather is deeply rooted in structural relationships of inequality between women and men. The interaction between women's advocacy and United Nations initiatives has been a driving factor in establishing violence against women as a human rights issue on the international agenda.

### ***Domestic Violence in Australia – an Overview of the Issues (Parliament of Australia)***

[http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom\\_violence.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom_violence.htm)

This e-brief is a guide to Internet resources and research on domestic violence in Australia. The e-brief includes a survey of Commonwealth Government programs and initiatives and an overview of the research on the prevalence of domestic violence, at risk groups and communities, the costs of domestic violence to business and the community, and policy approaches designed to prevent domestic violence. Also included are key journal articles, a list of references and links to domestic violence websites in Australia, both government and non-government.

**From:** Specific Issues Committee, Women and Poverty (Sisters Leonie Crotty, Miriam Grech, Angela Reed, Anne Ryan). The Committee warmly invites your response to the article or the issue.

**Email:** [women.poverty@mercy.org.au](mailto:women.poverty@mercy.org.au)

**Contact:** Carmel Heagerty RSM, Institute Justice Co-ordinator

**Email:** [Institute.Justice@mercy.org.au](mailto:Institute.Justice@mercy.org.au)