

Domestic violence figures mask true picture

TERRI REILLY

The issue of domestic violence (also called intimate partner violence) as a serious social issue is now widely accepted.

However, much debate has occurred around the extent and severity of domestic violence and the frequency of perpetration by men and women.

The article in *The West Australian* (Men Can be Victims Too, May 22) reported that about one in three victims of domestic violence in Australia were male and that the effects of such abuse on men could be just as devastating as for women.

This figure flies in the face of reputable national representative surveys and police statistics conducted in many countries, including Australia, which show consistently that women experience more frequent and severe violence from male partners and that men who abuse their partners cause more fear and injury, including more deaths.

On the other hand, women's use of violence in relationships has been found to be defensive or retaliatory

in response to violence by their partner.

It has also been shown that the physical and emotional impacts of violence on female victims are significantly greater than on male victims.

Consistent with this distinction, men have tended not to report partner abuse because they considered the incident "too trivial" or "not worth reporting".

Consequently, women are the biggest group to seek help and be in contact with services, which is a major reason for the need to continue to provide and expand on services for female victims of domestic violence.

The Intimate Partner Abuse of Men report recently released by researchers at Edith Cowan University, commissioned by the Men's Advisory Network and supported by Lotterywest contributes to research in the area.

While violence towards women is more likely to be controlling and cause fear and injury, it is important to acknowledge, understand and be responsive to men who experience violence and abuse in relationships.



Abuse: Women are the main victims.

However, given the small sample size of this report which involved interviews with only 15 men Australia-wide, and given the accumulation of domestic violence research showing male violence as more severe, it is rather surprising to see the authors then recommend government-funded public awareness campaigns and the provision of dedicated services for male victims of domestic violence, including accommodation and crisis-response services, helplines and training programs for workers.

In fact, men who are experiencing abuse in their relationships are

already seeking help from a wide variety of organisations providing relationship services, including those by Relationships Australia.

In the past financial year, about 7000 men attended relationship and family counselling programs offered by Relationships Australia which constitutes almost half the total client number.

The claims in *The West Australian* that it is difficult to get a "true" understanding of the prevalence of domestic violence against men, partly because of the "extreme" reluctance for men to report such abuse is not only a male issue.

Many female victims of domestic violence also experience shame, a sense of failure and self doubt as barriers to disclosing abuse, which are further compounded by societal, systemic and institutional male dominated systems which are uniquely faced by women.

Furthermore, the issue of getting men to access services cuts across many domains, including the areas of men's physical and mental health where advertising campaigns and training of workers has been widely promoted.

Relationships Australia's own efforts to reach out to men have involved advertising campaigns, outreach services and the active recruitment of male counsellors who are trained to provide a range of male-friendly services.

Relationships Australia provides the Men and Family Relationships program, a male-specific service across the Perth metropolitan area which offers a range of services by men for men, including counselling, assistance on relationship and parenting issues and education courses on relationship issues and personal growth.

These programs also offer specific counselling for those men who, as the article says, may experience emotional and psychological abuse in relationships (rather than the systematic controlling abuse which is the general definition of domestic violence).

Relationships Australia also provides couples counselling to a significant proportion of men and women who reciprocally use violence in their relationships.

Terri Reilly is chief executive of Relationships Australia (WA).