

DISHONESTY IN THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INDUSTRY, 2006

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The domestic violence industry in Australia is a multi-million dollar enterprise, ostensibly designed to ensure that women live free of violence. However, it seems that some sections of this industry such as the White Ribbon Campaign (WRC) are engaging in the use of dishonesty to further the interests of organisational growth rather than contribute to addressing a social problem. While questions of probity are important where substantial amounts of government funds are involved, the dishonesty being practiced is also contrary to the interests of those women the industry claims to champion.

The following notes some of the most glaring instances of false and misleading claims in the current campaigns on violence against women. Secondly, some data is provided from the recently released Personal Safety Survey (2005), which could be described as the “gold standard” of research on interpersonal violence in Australia. The PSS data shows that levels of violence against women are nowhere near the magnitude so often cited, and suggests that the simplistic causal models championed by some parts of the DV industry need to be replaced with more comprehensive models that take into account the significant factors of alcohol abuse, mental illness and social deprivation & disadvantage. Similarly, the emphasis on partners as the main source of violence is unwarranted – women experience significant levels of violence from male & female strangers, and other family members and acquaintances, both male and female.

The International Violence Against Women Survey (2004)

The major national campaign sponsored by the Federal government – and influential members of government, media, business and sporting identities – is the White Ribbon campaign. Unfortunately, the data propagated by this UNIFEM managed campaign can only be regarded as fundamentally flawed.

The White Ribbon campaign cites data from the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS), 2004. This data is being used and promoted to demonstrate that there is a terrifying level of violence against women – all of it by men. The flyer and publicity information for UNIFEM’s 2006 “White Ribbon” day claims:

57% of Australian women will experience an incident of physical or sexual violence by a man in their lifetime.

and:

Over 30% of women will experience abuse in a relationship in their lifetime.

This data is extracted from the IVAWS (2004) study. Yet the IVAWS does not pass the most basic criteria of good research, being both conceptually and methodologically flawed. Its primary failings are:

1. The definition of violence against women. The study notes that it dismisses normal understandings of violence, and includes as violence anything that can leave a woman feeling “put down” in collecting its figures. Even one woman aged 69 noting that she had felt “put down” at perhaps the age of 18 would have led to the inclusion of this woman as a victim of violence. And while this unique definition of violence was used

to collect data, attention is not drawn to it when propagating the data by the WRC. The brief reporting from this study leaves us to assume that the “violence” referred to is what would be normally understood by community members (that is, some physical or severe psychological harm).

2. The sampling procedures used by IVAWS led to what may be a highly biased sample. Many more women refused to participate in the survey than those who agreed to do so. While this is a common problem in survey research, it can lead to substantial errors whereby only those who have a specific interest in the survey participate, so do not adequately represent the broader community. Given the large discrepancies between this study and the results from the Personal Safety Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005) it does seem likely that the sample was significantly biased.
3. It uses “lifetime”, or prevalence, estimates. The IVAWS questioned women to the age of 69 who experienced any form of “violence” (including “put-downs” as noted above) since the age of 16. In no other areas of social reporting is this type of measure used. We do not circulate rates of child abuse & neglect over a lifetime, but rates in the preceding 12 months, that is, measures of incidence, not prevalence. We do not try to educate people about the level of driving offences by producing rates based on adding every offence from the past 53 years, as the IVAWS study does. Using an uncommon form of measurement has the potential to deceive, not enlighten.
4. It makes no mention of violence by women against women. The Women’s Safety Survey (1996) – as well as the recent and more comprehensive Personal Safety Survey (2005) – show that about 30% of physical assaults on women are from other women. The IVAWS study does not say if it excluded all instances of female-to-female violence, or simply and erroneously assumed that if it was violence against women it must have been done by a man (which would of course inflate the figures substantially). As the authors of IVAWS frequently cite the WSS, where rates of female to female violence were reported, it is surprising that this phenomenon goes unmentioned. In their reporting on violence against women from intimate partners, no mention is made of rates of partner violence in lesbian relationships. There are a number of studies showing significant rates of violence in both gay & lesbian relationships. This survey either excluded all such instances by identifying gay women at the outset and refusing to question them, or it made the inept assumption that all women are heterosexual.

Violence against children

A further related aspect to the dishonesty of these campaigns concerns violence against children. Over the past few years “violence against women” campaigns have begun to refer to “violence against women and children” – clearly implying that both are primarily the victims of male perpetrators. This probably increases the levels of our concerns for women, as children being in danger guarantees a heightened level of emotional response. Yet conjoining the two is at odds with the established data showing that women were the perpetrators of physical assaults of children in up to 50% of cases; 50% of recorded infanticides, and up to 7% of sexual assaults on children (FitzRoy, 2003). Women are also responsible for the majority of instances of emotional abuse and neglect of children (Tomison, 1996 - although note that this latter data is rather old, as Australian government agencies do not readily provide gender breakdowns of perpetrators of child abuse). The US Department of Health & Human Services is not so coy about the gender of perpetrators. In their report “Child Maltreatment 2004”, mothers acting alone were responsible for 38.8% of cases of abuse, and fathers for 18.3% of cases. In child fatalities, the mother acting by herself was responsible for 31.3% of cases, and fathers for 14.4%.

The claims associating “women and children” as the victims of (inevitably male) violence restrict men from seeking help in those instances where their children experience violence from a female partner. As the above shows, women do perpetrate a substantial amount of the violence that children experience. We should encourage any adult to be able to seek help for their partners of whatever gender, not limit such support to only those instances where a male is the perpetrator.

I would also note that in the frameworks we use to explain rates of child abuse and design services that there is an emphasis on contextual factors such as substance & alcohol abuse, mental health problems and severe social disadvantage. It is odd that this framework guides services to prevent one form of social violence – from women to children – yet is regarded as inadequate in attempting to address another form of social violence.

The Personal Safety Survey (2005)

Contrasted to the IVAWS study that includes instances of being “put down” 53 years ago as examples of violence against women, there is the far more rigorous Personal Safety Survey (2005), conducted by an organisation of the highest integrity – the Australian Bureau of Statistics. While the PSS does provide lifetime rates – presumably to enable comparisons with these measures from other studies such as IVAWS - it also reports on incidence - the far more readily understood rates of violence over the preceding 12 months. A summary of some of its major findings is produced below.

Rates of violence in last 12 months

Experience of violence in past 12 months	Yes	No
Men	10.8%	89.2%
Women	5.8%	94.2%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Personal Safety Survey Australia 2005, Commonwealth of Australia, p 5-6

Nature of experience of violence in past 12 months	Physical assault	Physical threat	Sexual assault	Sexual threat
Men	6.5%	5.3%	0.6%	0.1%
Women	3.1%	2.1%	1.3%	0.5%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Personal Safety Survey Australia 2005, Commonwealth of Australia

Lifetime rates of physical and sexual violence

While lifetime rates do not provide a readily understandable estimate of levels of violence in the community, the figures from the PSS showing lifetime rates are substantially less than those used in media releases by such groups as the White Ribbon Campaign.

Nature of experience of violence since age 15	Physical assault	Physical threat	Sexual assault	Sexual threat
Men	41%	22%	4.8%	0.9%
Women	29%	11%	17%	4.6%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Personal Safety Survey Australia 2005, Commonwealth of Australia

Proportion of population who were physically assaulted in previous 12 months (x characteristics of perpetrator). Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Personal Safety Survey Australia 2005, Commonwealth of Australia

As noted above, I believe that incidence rates provide a more readily understood set of data. The following table shows the proportion of the population who were physically assaulted in the preceding 12 months, and identifies the nature of the perpetrator. Unfortunately, the limited size of the male sample resulted in a high relative standard error for male victims of female assault. While many studies show that males are less likely to be assaulted by females than the reverse, the lack of conjunction of these figures with other recent studies showing levels of female to male violence does suggest that it is probably substantially higher than the rate in the PSS (see eg Professor Bruce Headey, Associate Professor Dorothy Scott, Professor David de Vaus, “Domestic Violence In Australia: Are Women And Men Equally Violent”? in International Social Science Surveys Australia, Volume 2, Number 3: July 1999; David M. Fergusson, L. John Horwood, And Elizabeth M. Ridder, 2005, “Partner Violence and Mental Health Outcomes in a New Zealand Birth Cohort“ in Journal of Marriage and Family 67 pp 1103–1119).

	MALE PERPETRATORS			FEMALE PERPETRATORS		
	Male stranger	Male current or previous partner	Family /friends / other known persons	Female stranger	Female current or previous partner	Family /friends / other known persons
Female victims	0.46%	0.96%	1.2%	0.28%	N / A	0.6%
Male victims	4.2%	N / A	1.9%	0.17% *	0.28% **	0.6% *

* = estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution – likely to be a significant underestimation

** = estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use

Contextual factors

One of the most serious problems with some of the current violence campaigns is their failure to recognise the clear associations between various personal and social factors and rates of violence. One of the factors most obviously and commonly associated with rates of all forms of violence is alcohol abuse, as the following from the PSS indicates.

Alcohol or drugs contributed to most recent incident	Male perpetrator	Female perpetrator
Men	75.3%	49.8%
Women	48.5%	50.6%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Personal Safety Survey Australia 2005, Commonwealth of Australia

The involvement of contextual factors such as alcohol, poverty & substance abuse in relationship violence is supported by the data from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics (2005). This study indicates that the areas of New South Wales with the highest rate of issuing of AVOs are also those ranking highest on terms of social disadvantage (according to the SEIFA index). Additionally, the PSS 2005 reveals a greater likelihood of experiencing violence for those who are unemployed / under-employed or on other forms of government benefits.

In summary, the PSS 2005 – like a number of other studies - does not offer support for the more dramatic claims of the White Ribbon campaign, nor its simplistic focus on gender. The CEO of UNIFEM has been notified about the problems of their quoted data, and provided with a copy of the PSS, but seems disinterested in using figures from the credible source of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This is counter-productive not only because it diminishes the credibility of UNIFEM and the White Ribbon campaign, but more importantly because the continuing use of falsely inflated figures unnecessarily increases women’s fear. I am pleased to note that there has been a significant decrease in the reported incidence of physical assault against women between the 1996 Women’s Safety Survey (7.1%) and the 2005 Personal Safety Survey (5.8%). Women should not be encouraged to be fearful, but given confidence by recognising that the vast majority will not experience violence from partners or others. The WRC’s use of inflated figures could also be seen to “normalise” male violence against women. While very few men (probably less than 5%) are perpetrators of any violence against women, these men may believe their behaviour is relatively normal if they are told that 30% of women are experiencing partner abuse. The use of the simplistic gendered framework proposed by the WRC has other unwanted consequences, as the inadequate understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal violence leads to misguided interventions.

To reduce violence against women requires frameworks for planning interventions that recognise the reality of inter-personal conflict and contextual factors, including the contributions of poverty and alcohol. Services should target those groups most at risk – young women and men living in situations of social stress and who use alcohol and other substances to excess, and who may lack adequate levels of social support. The overt rejection of these factors in violence may be attractive to those determined to blame men for all social ills, but does not assist women – or children - at risk of violence. Women’s well-being appears to have become the sacrificial lamb on the altar of the domestic violence industry.

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