

Bystander Attitudes to Hearing Family Violence: An Australian Survey

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Abstract: Male violence against women and children is a pernicious global problem responsible for a high burden of injury, illness, and premature death across societies and cultures. Socio-cultural beliefs, attitudes, and practices underpin the conduct of perpetrators, targets, bystanders, and responding service providers, including police, health, and social welfare services. Bystanders' willingness to act to help targets of family violence is a key dimension framing the social environment of using violence against family members. An anonymous internet survey of 464 Australians, mainly women, identified that around three-quarters of respondents would respond if they heard a cry for help from a nearby home. Most said they would call the police. The key deterrents to taking action were fears for their safety and their confidence that calling the police would lead to effective action. Despite their willingness to act, most believed that the typical Australian public would not do so. They attributed reluctance to take action to bystanders' fears for their safety, beliefs that it was not their business, and not wanting to get involved. Respondents wanted more financial, housing, and legal support for victims of violence to end abusive relationships. Nationally consistent FDV laws, changes to media reporting, and school-based education were nominated as key strategies to prevent and reduce family and domestic violence.

Keywords: Attitudes to Violence, Bystander, Family and domestic violence, Violence Against Women, Police.

INTRODUCTION

This article reports on an Australian survey study examining the willingness of bystanders to take action in response to cries for help with family or domestic violence (FDV) from neighbouring homes. The term 'family or domestic violence' used in this article follows the World Health Organisation definition and encompasses acts of violence, abuse, or coercive control involving current or former intimate partners or other family members. FDV and abuse involve gendered behaviours where primarily women and children are the targets of abusive behaviours by male family members or intimate partners. It includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse behaviours.

The term 'bystander' used in this article refers to those who witness, or become aware of, violent or abusive behaviours (McDonald and Flood 2012; Powell 2011) and are thus able to take action to assist the victim, directly or indirectly. Bystander approaches to reducing and preventing violence against women range from encouraging individual witnesses to report violence to police, to campaigns, policies and organisational practices aimed at supporting attitudes that condemn violence against women (Powell, 2011).

The research was instigated and funded by the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (NCSMC), which is the peak body advocating the

interests of single-mother families in Australia. NCSMC concerns relate to social factors impacting on single-parent families, including poverty, relationship breakdown, family law, and family violence. NCSMC initiated the study to learn more about bystander inaction towards women's cries of distress in their homes. Although there has been research (Vichealth 2009, 2016) identifying that attitudes to violence shape bystander reactions, these have not specifically been researched about violence against women (VAW) in their homes. The following sections of the introduction detail the prevalence and characteristics of FDV in Australia, attitudes towards VAW and bystander approaches to responding to VAW.

The Prevalence and Characteristics of Family and Domestic Violence

FDV is a significant contributor to homicide and sexual assault offences. In 2020 the Australian Bureau of Statistics counted 396 victims of homicide or related offences. Thirty-seven percent of these (145) were recorded as FDV related deaths. Eighty-six FDV victims (59%) were women. Eighty-six percent of FDV deaths (124) occurred in a residential location. There were 10,162 FDV related sexual assaults, accounting for 37% of all sexual assaults. Eighty-four percent of FDV related sexual assaults (8,522) occurred at a residential location and eighty-six percent of FDV-related sexual assault victims (8,723) were women (ABS, 2021).

An analysis by ANROWS (2015) of the 2012 Personal Safety Survey of the Australian Bureau of

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Statistics identified that forty percent of women and fifty percent of men had experienced at least one incident of violence since the age of 15. Men were more likely than women to be victims of physical violence. One in two men and one in three women reported experiencing physical violence since age 15. Women were more likely than men to be victims of sexual violence. One in five women and one in 22 men had experienced sexual violence since age 15. Both men and women were more than three times as likely to be physically assaulted by a man than by a woman. A woman was most likely to experience violence in her home whereas men were most likely to experience violence in a place of entertainment.

The characteristics of the locations of violence impact bystander exposure. Whereas violence in public places is subject to scrutiny and action by witnesses, violence in private residences, where women and children are most at risk, is largely concealed behind closed doors. Screams or cries for help can alert neighbours to seek help. This research aimed to explore factors impacting bystander intentions or responses to cries for help.

These Australian statistical data establish that women are most at risk of physical and sexual assault by a current or former male intimate partners in their homes. The willingness of bystanders to respond to cries or screams for help from neighbouring residences impacts their access to assistance when under attack.

Knowledge and Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women

Webster *et al.* (2018) analysed the 2017 National Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS), finding that understanding of violence against women had generally improved since the 2013 survey in Australia. Attitudes that were supportive of VAW had decreased since the 2013 survey, also indicating the positive change. Whilst 64% agreed that FDV was more commonly perpetrated by men, this view had declined from 71% since 2013, indicating a rise in false beliefs that women were equal or majority perpetrators of FDV. Males over 65 with mainly male social networks and living with disadvantages, such as low income and/or low education, were most likely to have lower levels of knowledge about FDV and higher attitudinal support for VAW.

Since the 1990s men's antifeminist groups in Australia have been active, claiming 'victim' status of being unfairly treated in FDV policy and services

naming men as primary aggressors (Flood, 2004; Kaye & Tolmie 1998). Antifeminist men's groups have publicly campaigned on views that women's violence against men is as prevalent and serious as men's and that they are unfairly demonised (Flood, Dragiewicz, and Pease, 2021). Such views have found some fertile ground, serving the interests of men who benefit from avoiding accountability for using violence.

Pease and Flood (2008) point to the limits of a focus on attitudes in addressing VAW and note the significance of social institutions, social structures, and social practices in reproducing VAW. Flood and Pease (2009, p. 56) argue for a social constructionist approach to attitudes to VAW, shaped by social norms amongst social groups in specific settings. They argue that reducing VAW requires changes in structures organising social relations in ways that perpetuate women's subordination, in addition to changes to social attitudes to FDV and VAW.

Australia's residential suburbs provide the social infrastructure where most incidents of FDV take place. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Census Data The majority of housing is a stand-alone dwelling (71%), with some semi-detached dwellings (18%), and a smaller proportion (9%) of apartments. In suburban areas stand-alone dwellings predominate, providing some separation and privacy from bystanders.

McDonald and Flood (2012) and Powell (2011) identified that bystander approaches could provide a key safety strategy. Knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions about FDV were important to the actions of bystanders, shaping their willingness to take action to help.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An online anonymous survey titled 'Silence Kills: Attitudes Informing Actions of Bystanders to Violence Against Women' was published using Qualtrics software in 2017-18 and circulated through memberships of large organisations, including unions, and social media such as Facebook. The survey asked 24 questions about demographics of age, gender, and religion, as well as knowledge and beliefs about VAW, experiences of bystander exposure to VAW, or intentions if such exposure occurred, concluding with views regarding effective policies to reduce and respond to VAW.

The survey was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Australia.

Table 1: Age Range by Gender Identity

Age Range	Male	Female	Other	Total
18-24	0	13	0	13 (3%)
25-44	19	221	1	241 (52%)
45-64	25	166	1	192 (41%)
65+	4	14	0	18 (4%)
Total	48	414	2	464 (100%)

Valid N = 464: Missing 22.

Data were analysed using SPSS V26 to generate descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

There were 486 completed responses. There were 415 (85%) responses from women and 48 (10%) from men. Two respondents (0.4%) selected Other Gender and 21 (4.3%) did not answer. The predominance of responses from women in an anonymous online public survey appears to be indicative of men's reluctance to engage in research into the topic of men's violence against women. Whilst some research has found women are more likely to respond to online surveys (Smith 2008), the size of the gender disparity in the number of responses indicates that women were more responsive to the survey invitation.

As seen in Table 1, just over half of the sample was aged between 25-and 44, and nearly half were in the 45-64 age group. These two age groups were dominant for both men and women.

The survey investigated religious status as religious views influence attitudes to gender roles (le Roux & Bowers Du-Toit 2017). Fifty percent of respondents did not identify with any organised religion. Twenty-seven

percent identified as Christians, with the Catholic religion being the largest Christian denomination. Five percent were distributed across Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism and 18% gave no response. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Census data (2017) indicated that 60% of Australians identified with religion with Christianity being the dominant group. The sample was thus a little more likely to identify with no religion in comparison to the Australian population. 139 respondents (29%) indicated that they believed that religion provided men with control over women. These comprised 31% of the survey's 130 Christian respondents, 37% of the 242 who did not identify with a religion, and 35% of the 26 respondents from non-Christian religions. Religion did not have a statistically significant influence on respondents' views of typical Australian public responses to a cry for help from a home.

To assess awareness of VAW, respondents were asked whether they recognised a range of terms as forms of violence against women. The terms were 'domestic violence', 'family violence', 'family and domestic violence', 'intimate partner violence', 'sexual violence', and 'sexual harassment. At least 4 out of every five respondents recognised all terms as describing violence against women. 'Family and

Table 2: Recognition of Australian FDV Statistics

FDV Statistics	Percent Recognition	N= 464
Risks of violence increase when a woman is leaving or has left her partner	82%	379
1 woman a week is killed by a partner or former partner	80%	372
Domestic violence is the biggest cause of homelessness for women and for children	78%	363
1 in 4 women has experienced physical or sexual violence	69%	322
1 in 3 women over the age of 15 has experienced physical violence	60%	279
Risks of violence increase when a woman becomes pregnant or gives birth to a child	59%	273
More than half the women victims have children in their care	50%	231
Violence contributes to more death, disability and illness in women aged 15 to 44 years than any other preventable risk	47%	220

domestic violence was the most recognised term (92%), whilst 'sexual harassment' was the least recognised (79%).

Knowledge about VAW has been identified as a factor affecting attitudes to FDV (Webster *et al.* 2018). Respondents were presented with a range of VAW statistics relevant to Australia's context and asked to indicate if they were aware of these.

Table 2 indicates that 82% knew women were most at risk at the time of relationship separation. The least known detail, at 47%, was that violence was the biggest contributor to preventable disability, disease, and death amongst women aged 15-44. The statistic that one woman a week is killed by her partner or former partner was of the highest concern to both men and women.

Respondents were asked what they thought was the main reason for men's violence against women. The two main reasons selected by both male and female respondents for men's violence were men failing to take responsibility for their violence (75%) and men copying other men (62%). Men were more likely to regard men's violence as not knowing how to manage their emotions. "Many men have grown up in environments where violent behavior is tolerated and accepted and have not been taught other ways to regulate or express their emotions" (Male respondent). Women raised issues of men's sense of entitlement and social reproduction of male VAW. "Our society is based on a patriarchal model and men feel entitled, also they are groomed at an early age to be violent via media, games, clothing, music, internet, peers, etc." (Female respondent).

Asked what they believed would be the 'typical Australian public response to a cry for help', 87% of 412 respondents thought that bystanders would not intervene, mostly because people would not want to get involved, believing it was not their business, or thought others would act. Only 13% thought a typical bystander would call the police.

Half the sample (50%) had previously heard a woman cry out from a house. Of those who had heard such a cry, 77% said they had responded. Of those who had responded, 90% had called the police. Of those who had heard such a cry and had NOT responded, fear for themselves, being unsure what to do or what was happening, or not knowing where the cry came from, were common reasons for their inaction.

Of those who had not heard such a cry, 78% thought they would respond if they did. Being confident of their safety was the most common condition required to respond in the future, however, participants also wanted to have their calls taken seriously and acted upon. "If the police wouldn't dismiss calls for help as unimportant is the biggest factor. I've rung them after several incidents over the last 10 years but due to them not turning up, I don't bother now unless someone's life is in imminent danger. Living in a lower socioeconomic area seems to mean that unless someone's being murdered, then we don't matter" (Female respondent).

There was a strong understanding of the barriers to women leaving a violent relationship. Fear, lack of police protection or legal support, lack of family support, homelessness, and lack of money were the most recognised barriers, known to four out of every five respondents. Women were also aware that leaving a violent partner placed them at risk of loss of care for their children in the family law or child protection systems. "Children will be removed from her. It happened to me 9 years ago and I don't see my little boy now. I spoke up, I left the violence and the courts gave my ex custody. It's not fair. I did the right thing by leaving and my ex was rewarded. I still suffer physical pain from the injuries he inflicted on me 9 years ago" (Female respondent).

Nearly all respondents (86%) recognised the importance of financial support to enable women to leave violent relationships. Three in five respondents wanted victims to have access to at least the equivalent of the minimum wage, while one in four thought they should receive income support.

Asked what would be most important to improving women's safety, four in five respondents nominated access to adequate housing and recovery services, access to income and safety for children, as well as mothers, followed by police training and powers to remove perpetrators.

Asked about needed changes to reduce FDV, four in five respondents wanted nationally consistent FDV laws, changes in the media's portrayal of violence and education of school children about FDV.

DISCUSSION

The strong skew to women's responses to the anonymous widely disseminated public survey arguably reflects men's disengagement or avoidance of

an address to men's violence against women. With 94% of survey responses from women, the men who engaged in the survey were a minority who were willing to acknowledge and reflect on men's violence against women.

As noted by Webster *et al.* (2018), the 2017 survey of Australia's community attitudes to VAW showed a 7% fall from the 2013 survey in agreement that VAW was commonly perpetrated by men. Flood (2019, p. 23) notes that many anti-feminist men's groups falsely claim that large numbers of men are violently victimised by women. He argues for the necessity of engaging men and boys in preventing and reducing violence against women (2019, p. 89), however, antifeminist men's groups offer positions that variously deny or justify men's violence or focus on women's violence to men (Flood *et al.* 2021). These perspectives offer alternatives to collective accountability for preventing and reducing men's violence against women. A limitation of this survey, therefore, is that men who were resistant to acknowledging men's violence against women refused to engage with it. In this sense, the survey responses reflected that the survey was engaging with a population who attended to topics of gendered violence.

Aside from the numeric disparity in the gender balance of respondents, there were few statistically significant differences in responses. The survey content drew on the Australian language used to name VAW and the Australian statistical characteristics of FDV. The knowledge profile of male respondents was shared with that of female respondents, indicating that respondents had shared knowledge of published statistics that had entered public discourse about VAW in Australia.

A key difference in understandings by women and men of reasons for violence was evident in the data regarding reasons given for men's violence against women. Whilst men were more likely to regard men's violence as an indication of social acceptance of men's violence and individual men's failure to know how to safely manage their emotions, women respondents pointed to social structures and institutionalised practices that rewarded men's violence. Men's views implied that prevention requires (mothers') improved training of boys in emotion management, and attitude change, whereas women's views implied the need to change social structures and institutional practices which sustain men's gender privilege.

A majority of respondents had different expectations of themselves and others if a cry for help was heard. More than four in five respondents believed that bystanders would not respond to a cry for help, even though half the sample said they had heard such a cry, and three-quarters of these said they had responded. Of those who had not heard a cry for help, again just over three-quarters thought they would respond. These responses revealed that four in five survey respondents did not believe that others would respond to a woman's cry for help as they had or would. This disparity could be partly explained by sample bias toward women and people with an interest and level of knowledge about FDV, but it also reveals a lack of confidence in bystanders' willingness to help.

Fears for safety, uncertainty about what was happening, and lack of confidence in the police response were the main reasons impacting beliefs about their own and others' likely responses to a woman's cries for help from a residence. A USA study examining bystander behaviour relating to sexual assault and intimate partner violence (IPV) (Weinstein, Cowan & Walsh 2020) found similar factors of uncertainty about what was happening, and fears for their safety, affecting bystander willingness to take action. Bystander confidence in effective police responses was not named as a factor in the USA research in contrast to the Australian sample in this study.

Respondent reports of delays in police attendance, lack of action to protect victims' safety, and lack of faith in court systems to protect mothers and children were derived from personal experience for some respondents, but also reflected respondents' views that men's violence was often enabled by police and court systems. These views are congruent with McInnes' (2015) research identifying that victims risked police arrest if they were seen as primary assailants or had outstanding warrants, having their children removed by child protection authorities if they were perceived as failing to act protectively, or having their children placed in the care of the perpetrator through the family law system.

Australian research has found the risks arising from calling the police are highest for women FDV victims who are marginalised through poverty and racism. Buxton-Namisynek's (2021) review of Australian First Nations women's experiences of FDV policing identifies harms for victims arising both from police inaction and police action. Bystanders' lack of confidence in the

safety and efficacy of calling police thus creates a barrier to bystander action to protect victims of FDV in Australia. Living in a low-income area, being Indigenous, or from another minority culture, increased the level of risk for women FDV victims of relying on police and justice systems for safety.

The respondents' high levels of recognition of multiple barriers facing women trying to leave a relationship signalled widespread understanding of why women didn't 'just leave' violent relationships. Factors such as lack of access to effective financial, housing, and safety support, combined with the uncertainty of criminal and family legal systems, were seen as barriers for FDV victims ending unsafe situations. A bystander's call to the police might save a life or lead to the arrest of the victim, or loss of care of her children through the child protection or family law systems. Bystanders could thus not be confident that the risks of taking action and calling the police would result in effective help.

Respondents' favoured strategies for reducing and preventing FDV targeted national strategies to align FDV legislation across Australia's 8 states and territory jurisdictions, changes to media representations of FDV, and school-based education programs. Respondents indicated these changes would collectively influence bystander willingness to respond to a woman's cries for help by impacting public discourse about VAW and FDV to reduce acceptance and reproduction of support for men's VAW and increase accountability of perpetrators.

CONCLUSION

The survey revealed respondents' lack of confidence in the willingness of bystanders to respond to a woman's cries for help from a home. Whilst most who had heard such a cry had responded, and most of those who had not heard a cry believed they would respond if they did, most did not believe that other bystanders would respond. This lack of confidence no doubt reflects that 85% of respondents were women, with many drawing on knowledge informed by personal experience. Poor past experiences of police involvement, as well as fears for their safety, and lack of knowledge about the context of cries for help, led respondents to believe most bystanders would not seek help. The findings indicate a need to improve public confidence in effective police responses to FDV.

Considering FDV prevention strategies, women respondents wanted structural change in social

institutions which reinforced male privilege, whereas men considered men needed better skills in managing their emotions. The research confirms the need for continuing emphasis on education to change understanding and attitudes to FDV and reforms to support victims of violence to safely end abusive relationships, particularly attending to improving policing and legal system responses to keep women and children safe.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest.

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