

Uniting Church of Australia Queensland Synod – Position Statement on Domestic and Family Violence

Background and context

Domestic and family violence (DFV) is a major national health and welfare issue in Australia that can have lifelong impacts for victim-survivors and perpetrators. It occurs across gender, ages and backgrounds, but mainly affects women and children. Children who experience or are exposed to domestic and family violence can experience adverse developmental outcomes.

Some domestic and family violence incidents are fatal:¹

- Intimate partner homicide is one of the most common forms of homicide in Australia.
- DFV remains the most common homicide threat for Australian women, who are the victims of three quarters of all intimate partner homicides.
- Since the early 1990s, there have been an average of 49 women killed each year by their current or former intimate partner.

The most recent Australian statistics show the extent of the DFV problem across Australia:²

- 1 in 5 adults have experienced DFV since the age of 15.
- over 1 in 4 women have experienced DFV since the age of 15.
- over 1 in 8 men have experienced DFV since the age of 15.
- around 1 in 16 women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15 from a father, son, brother or other male relative or in-law.
- 12% of people have witnessed partner violence against their mothers when they were children, 4.3% of people have witnessed violence against their fathers.

Intimate partner violence, in particular, continues to be primary relational context for DFV. Both women and men were more likely to have experienced DFV by an intimate partner than other family members:³

- 23% of women had experienced DFV by an intimate partner compared with 8.1% who experienced DFV by other family members
- 7.3% of men had experienced DFV by an intimate partner compared with 5.9% who experienced DFV by other family members.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are overrepresented as victims of intimate partner homicides.⁴ Family violence among First Nations people should be understood in the context of intergenerational trauma and the ongoing impacts of colonisation.⁵ In Australia, intergenerational

¹ Cubitt, T., Morgan, A., Dowling, C., Bricknell, S. & Brown, R. (2024). Targeting fixated individuals to prevent intimate partner homicide: Proposing the Domestic Violence Threat Assessment Centre. Research in Practice 48, Australian Institute of Criminology. Available at: <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rip/rip48>

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Bricknell, S. & Miles, H. (2024). Homicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Australian Institute of Criminology Statistical Bulletin 46. Available at: https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/sb46_homicide_of_aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_women.pdf

⁵ Based on the AIHW's reporting of Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey (PSS) data for 2021–22. Available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/types-of-violence/family-domestic-violence>.

trauma particularly affects First Nations people, especially the children, grandchildren and future generations of the Stolen Generations.⁶

- 2 in 3 First Nations people aged 15 and over who had experienced physical harm in the 12 months before the research survey reported the perpetrator was a former or current intimate partner or other family member.⁷

Position

Australia is a signatory to several United Nations conventions prohibiting violence to women and children, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁸ These international human rights conventions support the Uniting Church in Australia's position that Australian society and governments need to prevent such violence, hold perpetrators to account and ensure that victim-survivors are properly supported in their recovery.

In 2018, the fifteenth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia resolved to adopt the *Statement on Domestic and Family Violence* and encouraged all presbyteries and agencies to undertake the commitments outlined in the statement. The Uniting Church in Australia Queensland Synod adopts this resolution, which is presented in Appendix A.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Based on the AIHW's reporting of Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey (PSS) data for 2021–22. Available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/types-of-violence/family-domestic-violence>; Based on the AIHW's reporting of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS, 2018–19) ABS 2019. Available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/types-of-violence/family-domestic-violence>

⁸ Commonwealth of Australia (2023). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023–2025. Under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032. Available at: <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-action-plan-2023-2025>

Appendix A

Assembly Resolution 18.06

Adopted by the Fifteenth Assembly 2018

The Assembly resolved to:

- 18.06.01 to adopt the Statement on Domestic and Family Violence;
- 18.06.02 to acknowledge and lament the presence of Domestic and Family Violence within the church including in the Uniting Church; the role some theologies have played in its legitimation and that Christian communities have sometimes failed to acknowledge the presence of such violence in their midst and respond appropriately;
- 18.06.03 to affirm the work being done by:
 - a) Agencies of the Uniting Church in addressing Domestic and Family Violence;
 - b) Congregations, ministry agents and members of the Uniting Church who are compassionately responding to people affected by Domestic and Family Violence; and
 - c) Uniting Church theological colleges in their formation of people for ministry which supports and encourages mutually respectful relationships between women and men; and
- 18.06.04 to request the Assembly Standing Committee, liaising with other parts of the Church, to:
 - a) create educational, theological and liturgical materials for distribution to the wider church within the current triennium to resource the Church to meet these commitments; and
 - b) encourage Uniting Church members, synods, presbyteries, congregations, agencies, theological colleges and schools to carry out the commitments found in the Statement.

Statement on Domestic and Family Violence

1. Introduction

1.1 Broad community concern has brought Domestic and Family Violence into sharp focus in recent years. It is a global issue affecting people in Australia and across the world. The Uniting Church acknowledges that we as a community are not immune to incidents of Domestic and Family Violence and their consequences. We further acknowledge that Christian teachings have been used inappropriately to justify unhealthy relationships that can lead to Domestic and Family Violence.

1.2 It is important for the Church at this time:

- to be clear in repudiating all forms of Domestic and Family Violence;
- to express God's desire for life-giving mutually respectful relationships, homes and communities, where all people can flourish;
- to educate our members about the reality of the situation and how they can respond to point people to support, resources and care;
- to develop safe practices and safe spaces within all our congregations, agencies, schools, groups and communities consistent with the commitments made in the Uniting Church's National Child Safe Policy Framework⁹; and

⁹ Uniting Church in Australia National Child Safety Policy Framework.

- to acknowledge the work of our agencies (within the UnitingCare network as it connects to UnitingCare Australia that includes all agencies and Uniting World) in addressing this issue¹⁰;
- congregations, ministry agents and members of the Uniting Church who are compassionately responding to people affected by Domestic and Family Violence; and
- Uniting Church theological colleges in their formation of people for ministry which supports and encourages mutually respectful relationships between women and men.

1.3 For the purposes of this document, Domestic and Family Violence refers to a situation where someone who has a close personal relationship to another person physically injures them or makes them feel afraid, powerless or unsafe. Domestic and Family Violence can take the form of physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, social, financial or spiritual abuse¹¹.

2. UCA Theology and Belief

2.1 In making this statement, the Uniting Church affirms the following biblical and theological understandings:

- All people are created in the image of God and are known and loved by God.
- Every person is of infinite worth and entitled to live with dignity and each person's life and humanity needs to be protected or the human community and its reflection of God are diminished¹².
- As Christians we base our values on Jesus, who in his life and ministry loved and respected women and men, girls and boys, and people of all ages.
- We recognise Jesus' specific care for people who were powerless and those who were vulnerable.
- Our commitment to the equality of men and women and respect for all humans underlies our rejection of any form of violence.
- People grow into their fullest humanity when they are nurtured in situations of love, trust and safety – people should not have to live in fear.
- Liberation from oppression and injustice is central to the incarnation of God through Jesus Christ. God desires us to be free to make choices about our lives and to be responsible in that freedom to each other.
- The Basis of Union (Par 11) calls us to engage with literary, historical and scientific enquiry and to stand in relationship with contemporary society in ways that will help us understand our own nature and mission. Therefore, we must listen to the voices that inform us about Domestic and Family Violence and be willing to join others working to overcome this violence.
- The Basis of Union (Par 18) notes the Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in our life.

2.2 We acknowledge that:

- We live in a world where women are often treated as less than equal;

¹⁰ The Uniting Church, through its agency UnitingWorld, is working with our Church Partners to address Domestic and Family Violence and gender inequality. They do this through projects that challenge theological understandings, empower women and encourage male advocates.

¹¹ Based on the definition used by Lifeline.

¹² Dignity in Humanity, A UCA Statement on Human Rights (2006).

- Some violent men who are members and adherents of Christian churches have used phrases in the Bible to reinforce their power in intimate relationships¹³;
- Theologies and teachings which support a power imbalance in family relationship can nurture an environment in which violence and other forms of abuse are present; and
- The lifelong commitment of marriage does not mean that people should stay in violent relationships. There are times when “divorce may be the only creative and life-giving direction to take”¹⁴.

2.3 We give thanks for:

- The courage and witness of those who have come forward to share their stories of Domestic and Family Violence within the church and the wider community; and
- The ways in which light has been shed on the serious issue of family violence including through the work of public figures, journalists and government commissions.

3. The current context

3.1 Domestic and Family Violence is now recognised as a serious and widespread problem in Australia with huge impacts on individuals, families and communities.

3.2 The incidence of Domestic and Family Violence in Australia is not only restricted to women, but also includes abuse directed at men, children and increasingly towards older family members.

- Approximately one in four women (23%) has experienced violence by an intimate partner¹⁵.
- On average, one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner, according to the most recent analysis of homicide statistics in Australia¹⁶.
- One in 5 women has experienced sexual violence.
- One in two women and one in four men have experienced sexual harassment.
- The majority of women (nine out of 10) did not contact police about the most recent incident of sexual assault by a male.
- Intimate partner violence contributes to more death, disability and illness in women aged 15 to 44 than any other preventable risk factor¹⁷.
- Domestic or family violence against women is the single largest driver of homelessness for women¹⁸.
- Rates of domestic and family violence are higher in regional, rural and remote areas¹⁹.

¹³ Dr Lynne Baker's 2010 book, “Counselling Christian Women on How to Deal with Domestic Violence” and Julia Baird with Hayley Gleeson, “‘Submit to your husbands’: Women told to endure domestic violence in the name of God”, ABC News, last updated 23 January 2018.

¹⁴ Statement on Marriage, Eighth Assembly 1997, Resolution 97.31.12, Uniting Church in Australia.

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics’ (ABS) 2016 Personal Safety Survey (PSS).

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) 2017. The 2017 National Homicide Monitoring Program report.

¹⁷ VicHealth (2004) The health costs of violence: Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2012) Specialist homeless services data collection 2011-12, Cat. No. HOU 267, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/Understanding-Violence/Facts-and-figures>.

¹⁹ Monica Campo and Sarah Tayton, Domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote communities, CFCA Practitioner Resource— December 2015.

- People who, as children, witnessed partner violence against their parents were 2–4 times as likely to experience partner violence themselves (as adults)²⁰.
- 55,600 children were placed in out-of-home care as a result of abuse (2015-16).
- 1 in 16 (0.5 million) men have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a cohabiting partner since age 15.

3.3 When children are exposed to violence in their homes it can cause profound harm to their social development²¹.

3.4 Domestic and Family Violence is a global issue. Global estimates published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) indicate that about 1 in 3 (35%) women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime²². In some of our neighbouring countries research shows that more than 70% will experience some form of domestic violence in their lifetime²³.

3.5 Risk factors identified by WHO that increase the likelihood of a person to perpetrate intimate partner or sexual violence include, a history of child maltreatment, witnessing family violence, unequal gender norms including attitudes accepting of violence, and a sense of entitlement over women.

4 Commitment

4.1 In the light of our Theology and Beliefs and in the Current Context, the Uniting Church commits itself to:

- Speak out strongly against Domestic and Family Violence of all types;
- Acknowledge this is an issue in all cultural, economic and social contexts including among our own church members and leaders;
- Reject any abuse of theology to legitimate Domestic and Family Violence, recognising that theologies which affirm gender equality and human dignity play an essential role in bringing to light and preventing Domestic and Family Violence;
- Develop sound policies and practices that:
 - Promote the equality of men and women, girls and boys and people of all ages;
 - Create safe and inclusive communities, where people experience mutually respectful relationships and all can flourish;
 - Listen to the voices of children, young people and vulnerable people; and
 - Receive and take seriously reports or complaints of Domestic and Family Violence;
 - Provide support and referral to appropriate support services;
 - Educate ministry agents, lay leaders and church members on Domestic and Family Violence and how to respond appropriately;
 - Resource the church in how to respond to this issue, recognising and engaging with the diversity of cultures and languages that make up our communities; and

²⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia, 2018.

²¹ Our Watch, *Facts and Figures* <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/Understanding-Violence/Facts-and-figures>.

²² World Health Organisation, *Violence Against Women*, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>.

²³ Pacific Women, *Shaping Pacific Development, Ending Violence Against Women*, <https://pacificwomen.org/our-work/focus-areas/ending-violence-against-women/>

- Work constructively with people of other Christian denominations and other faiths, and with other organisations and groups across Australia in order to achieve these commitments.

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