

Let's build respectful communities

RECOGNISE | RESPOND | PREVENT - Domestic and Family Violence

Open Letter from Catholic Social Services Victoria – October 2024

Domestic and family violence has received increased attention via extensive media reporting this year due to the tragic deaths of women in Victorian communities and beyond. Tragically, these deaths are not isolated incidents, with an average of one woman being killed by her partner or ex-partner every single week in Australia. The use of violence and abuse is far more widespread, with 23% of women having experienced at least one incident of violence by their partner or ex-partner.

Disturbingly, [research has shown](#) that the experience of domestic and family violence within Christian faith communities can be equivalent to, or even higher than, those in the wider community. Domestic and family violence is being used throughout our communities and parishes, likely against and by people we may know. Catholic social services providers support many individuals and families who experience this reality. We dream of an Australia where this work is not required at such scale.

Leaders across the Catholic Church in Australia have spoken out strongly over a number of years with calls for our communities to confront the causes of violence and work together to see families as a place of safety and love. In [2016 the Victorian Bishops released a joint statement](#) in which they “condemn[ed] domestic violence in the strongest possible terms” and called on parishes, church organisations and people of faith to play a part in its elimination. This statement spoke of the different forms that violence can take, with the root causes being the abuse of power and the control of one person over another. This 2016 statement laid out a clear objective:

Our goal must be a society where all people are safe in their home, families and close relationships, where violence and abuse are not acceptable, and where all relationships respect the equality and dignity of each person. This is part of the Gospel vision of love and respect.

It was also a call to action:

To our priests, pastoral associates and others in leadership positions – we say that our churches should be a safe place for victims of domestic and family violence, where understanding and assistance are readily available. For this to happen we all need to reflect on our attitudes and equip ourselves with the knowledge to assist those who ask for help, through referrals to specialist services where needed.

The Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference Statement released in August 2022, [Respect: Confronting Violence and Abuse](#), saw domestic and family violence front and centre. Along with highlighting the importance of listening to the experiences of women and understanding the drivers and enablers of violence, this Statement pointed to the structural and cultural factors that create an environment where violence is possible:

Family and domestic violence is more than a matter of some men behaving badly. It involves direct violence, when the instigator of an act of violence can be traced to a person or persons, but it also involves structural and cultural dimensions in which we all may be implicated, sometimes unconsciously or involuntarily. Structural violence is built into systems and institutions and their policies and practices... (p. 8)

The ACBC challenged us to all play a role:

Our faith provides hope for transformation for both victim-survivors and perpetrators. It calls us to believe and support women and children experiencing violence and to ensure their safety and well-being. It calls us to challenge perpetrators to take responsibility for their behaviour and to assist them to change. (p. 10)

With this urging, and with expert contributions made by CSSV's members who provide vital services to those experiencing domestic and family violence, CSSV has together developed a number of initiatives to enable Catholic communities to play a meaningful role in prevention and response. Alongside the Victorian Bishop's Statement in 2016, CSSV developed a parish kit to provide a resource with information and key contact details in seeking assistance. 2022 saw CSSV partnering with the Catholic Diocese of Sale in the 'Shining A Light' pilot program – a series of workshops designed to equip Church and lay leaders to respond to and work for prevention of violence in their local communities. This work is a start, but much more needs to be done.

For 2024, CSSV has developed a new brochure and poster for use in parishes and beyond, to provide key information and to start deeper conversations about what we can all do. Attached is a copy of the brochure and poster. We are writing to ask you to display these and make them available in your community. We know that bringing attention to the use of violence and its causes is crucial in then being able to enact change.

If you would like to explore opportunities for deeper engagement and action to prevent domestic and family violence please visit www.css.org.au/advocacy-policy/prevention-of-family-violence/. And you can always contact the CSSV office – office@css.org.au or 03 9287 5566.

The damaging impacts of domestic and family violence are immense, but together it is possible for us to challenge ourselves and our communities to reflect on harmful behaviours and attitudes and to reimagine ways we can together build respectful communities — where peace and love allow all to flourish:

Ensuring the safety and respecting the dignity of those who experience violence and abuse is an urgent priority which must also be accompanied by preventative action. Laws and policies play an important role, but these will not succeed without community action and cultural change too. Faith communities can play a powerful role in reducing domestic violence. (Respect: Confronting Violence and Abuse, Australian Catholic Bishop's Statement, 2022-23, p. 11)

Yours in peace,



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