

## The costs and causes of domestic violence

~ Jess Hill ~

After decades of ignoring domestic violence, Australians have learnt to condemn it. The statistics are now well known: a woman is murdered at least every week, another hospitalised every three hours. We say we're horrified, and wonder what could possibly make a man hurt a woman he claims to love. Does he drink? Take drugs? Was he stressed, unemployed, frustrated? Did she provoke him? What could make a man lose control like that? There must be *some* reason for it.

The woman looks for reasons too, which is why it can take her so long to realise she's being abused. He's jealous because he loves me. He doesn't like me going out because he's overprotective. He's got a temper, but everyone's got their demons – he just needs a strong woman to help him overcome them. On average, a woman will endure 35 assaults before she makes her first complaint. In the meantime, she'll make as many excuses for his behaviour as we do.

We reach for these excuses because the alternative – that hundreds of thousands of Australian men have *chosen* to inflict diabolical cruelty on their partners – is almost inconceivable. Men's behaviour change programs don't treat perpetrators for anger problems, because anger management doesn't work. The violence isn't an overreaction, it's a tool – one of many that abusers can use to exert control over their wives and girlfriends. Drugs and alcohol may aggravate the violence, but they don't cause it.

Political action is urgently needed. In Victoria alone, police were called out to 65,393 domestic violence incidents in 2013–14 – twice as many as in 2009–10. Of those, almost 30,000 were serious enough for police to press charges. Victims are reporting more frequently, but women's services say the actual rate of domestic violence is also increasing, as is the severity of the physical attacks. Despite growing confidence in the police, it's still a massively under-reported crime: police estimate they only get called out to 40–50% of cases.

When women do leave their partners, they're jumping into a safety net that's full of holes. Across Australia, the demand for refuges is so high that every second woman has to be turned away. Many of these women will end up homeless. More than half the women who seek help from homelessness services cite domestic violence as the reason they left home.

This doesn't make for polite dinner party conversation. It's deeply disturbing. But the longer the community evades the truth about domestic violence, the easier it is for politicians to vow to eliminate it in one breath and slash funding to address it in the next.

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“I think there's a tremendous amount of confusion in the community about the difference between family violence and relationship conflict,” says Annette Gillespie, the head of Victoria's Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre.

“People really struggle to understand that for family violence to be present, there are two key attributes to it. One of them is that one party is in fear of the other. The other is that the abuser uses a planned, systematic approach to remove a person’s confidence, support networks and independence in order to highlight their own power and control within the relationship.”

Most people have arguments with the person they love. It’s normal to feel jealous, say things you regret, even scream the house down. It only becomes domestic violence when this is bent towards controlling the other person, in a way that provokes fear.

There’s another thing people are confused about. “When I do presentations on domestic violence,” says Gillespie, “I now start by saying, ‘Let’s get this question out of the way,’ because someone is sitting there waiting to say it.”

Do women abuse as much as men? No. The idea that domestic violence is “gender equal”, and that women’s violence against men is a “silent epidemic”, is nonsense.

Men do suffer domestic violence, at the hands of both female and male partners. They can become isolated, humiliated and injured, and they too need support. But when men’s rights groups claim that one in three victims of family violence is male, they promote a dangerous fiction. According to sociologist Michael Flood, these statistics derive from a widely criticised measurement tool that only counts individual acts of violence (such as slapping and punching). It doesn’t ask whether that act was part of a pattern of abuse or if it was an act of self-defence, and it neglects to measure other violent acts such as sexual abuse, stalking and intimate homicide.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics is clear on this: in 2012, 87% of domestic violence victims were women. Where women *are* the perpetrators, the violence is different: studies have repeatedly shown that it’s not as prolonged, and that men are far less likely to be living in fear. They’re also far less likely to be murdered: men kill women in four out of five intimate partner homicides. In the vast majority of cases where women kill their partners, the death follows a history of being subjected to domestic violence.

So what does domestic violence look like?

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Lucy met Tom when she was 17. At Tom’s insistence, they married within six months and moved to his farm, far away from Lucy’s family.

After promising a countryside idyll, Tom became controlling, jealous and violent. When Tom wanted to punish Lucy – for disobedience, or whatever he’d just come up with – he’d drag her around the house by her hair. Any mention of Lucy going out was a provocation. “I was stuck there,” she says. “I had no friends, no family. I was in a prison, basically.”

Why did she stay? Because Tom undermined her self-esteem so severely that she felt she had no options outside the relationship, and she was fearful of what he might do if she tried to leave. Then there were the apologies and promises from the Tom who really loved her, who needed her help to become a better man, who only hit her when she “provoked” him.

Over the next 13 years, they had two children together. Each time Lucy fell pregnant, Tom would stop the physical violence and assume the role of protector. “If I wasn’t eating right, he’d force me to eat,” she says. “I’d be about to vomit and he’d be forcing me to eat, saying, ‘I don’t want anything to be wrong with my child.’”

One day, Lucy told Tom she planned to go to the movies with a woman she’d befriended on a rare trip into town. In 13 years, Lucy had never once been on a girls’ night out. Tom turned on her, his teeth clenched, and snarled, “You’re not fucking going anywhere.”

For the first time, Lucy stood up to him. “I said, ‘Well, I’m letting you know that I’m going on Friday, whether you clench your teeth or not. I’m not your daughter, I’m your wife.’” When Lucy returned home that night, Tom had locked her out of the house.

The next time Lucy decided to venture out, Tom came at her more ferociously than ever. He accused her of having an affair, and punched her so hard she was thrown across the room. This time, Lucy fought back. “I just felt this power,” she says, with a faint smile. “I jumped up and knocked him flying over the bloody computer table. He was just so shocked that I’d done it. I said, ‘Don’t you ever do that to me again. You ever touch me, or push me, or shove me again, I’m gonna divorce you and I will leave.’”

Tom didn’t hit Lucy again for three years. The next time he did, she left.

Tom’s abuse was a straight lift from the perpetrator’s handbook: isolate the victim, reduce her to a state of total dependence, then use intimidation and abuse to gain total control, and escalate if she resists. But there are myriad ways an abuser can dominate their partner; often they don’t need physical violence at all.

Anna is 45 and has three children under ten. She lived with domestic violence for years, but had no bruises to prove it; her partner’s abuse was emotional and financial. At weekends, for example, when it was time to do the grocery shopping, he would tell her which supermarket she could go to, and tell her to wait there while he went to watch his nephews play football. Anna would do the shopping and then wait in the supermarket with a trolley full of items. When he returned, he’d start going through the items one by one, pulling out everything she wasn’t “allowed” to have for the children. “He’d say ‘What do we need this for?’ in front of people, and I’d be so embarrassed, humiliated – in fear all the time,” she says. “I was so frightened because his behaviour was so erratic and controlling. You want to run but you don’t know where to go and you are thinking, *This is just completely ridiculous. Like, it’s not normal, is it? Is it normal?*”

“The stereotype of domestic violence – the woman with the black eye – really misses the dynamic,” says Michael Flood. “Often there’s no physical aggression, or the threat of physical aggression is really doing the work of controlling that partner.”

It may seem hard to believe, but Anna’s partner was just as dangerous as Lucy’s. Controlling behaviour is more closely correlated with domestic homicide than violence on its own. Sydney businessman Simon Gittany, convicted of the murder of Lisa Harnum, his fiancée, didn’t hit her until the day she tried to leave him in 2011. But for years he’d controlled her every move: monitoring her texts and emails, telling her what to wear, and instructing her not to look at other men. When Harnum tried to leave, Gittany knocked her unconscious and dropped her from the balcony of their 15<sup>th</sup>-floor apartment. At the murder scene, police found

a torn-up note in Harnum's pocket, written in her handwriting. It read, "There are surveillance cameras inside and outside the house."

"There's some research called 'Out of the Blue', where they studied men who'd killed their wives," says Julie Oberin, who heads up the Annie North Refuge in Bendigo, country Victoria. "You often hear on the news that it just came out of the blue ... He was a nice man, you know? This research has proven that he was actually lethal the whole time, and all the hints were there – society and the family just didn't pick them up."

Oberin knows about dangerous men. Before she started working at Annie North, she was in love with one for years. Even after she was promoted to chief executive, there was still one secret she was too ashamed to share. "When I was eight months pregnant and asleep, he pushed me out of bed onto the floor. I couldn't believe that anybody would do that – it's such a calculating, cruel thing to do." She only spoke about it when she heard three other women in a group session say it had happened to them, too. "It's such high-level shame – you're treated like a piece of garbage."

Even a man who pushes his pregnant wife out of bed can seem, to everyone else, like a nice, well-adjusted guy. That's because an abuser's realm of control commonly has one subject: his partner. Power at home is his entitlement, whereas power in public has to be negotiated. If the woman has the temerity to leave, and deny him that power, his sense of entitlement becomes dangerously inflamed. That's when the stalking can begin.

"We've had some very, very complicated stalking matters. They're horrific," says Detective Superintendent Rod Jouning, the head of Victoria Police's family violence unit.

The frequency and severity of stalking has "really escalated over the past 12 months", says Oberin, who is also the national chair of the Women's Services Network (WESNET). With WESNET, she's brought out experts from the United States to educate support workers, lawyers, court staff and police about high-tech stalking methods such as GPS tracking, listening devices and spyware. "It's so simple now ... You don't have to be tech-savvy any more."

One popular piece of software is an app you can subscribe to for an annual fee of \$200. Once installed on a phone, it's totally hidden from view. This single app gives a stalker remote access to the phone's text messages, call log, photos, emails, contacts and browsing history. It can even record phone calls or serve as a listening device. Using the phone's in-built GPS function, stalkers can literally watch their victim's every move. Using spyware like this, which is marketed to parents who want to keep track of their children, a man can trace a woman who has fled interstate or find out where she is hiding.

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At the office of Safe Steps, Victoria's dedicated 24/7 family violence response call centre, the phones have gone quiet. "I get nervous when the phones stop ringing," says one worker. It's a rare occurrence. At their busiest, Safe Steps' phone counsellors receive a call every three minutes. Last year, they received more than 50,000.

Here, family violence response specialists do everything from placing women in emergency accommodation to educating them on what constitutes domestic violence. Many of the

women are repeat callers: on average, they will go back to an abusive partner eight times before leaving for good.

“You must get so frustrated when you think a woman’s ready to leave and then she decides to go back,” I say.

“No,” replies one phone counsellor, pointedly. “I’m frustrated that even though he promised to stop, he chose to abuse her again.”

Sometimes the threat posed by the abuser is so severe that Safe Steps has to send the woman overseas. An average year sees ten women flown to the UK, Canada, the US – anywhere Safe Steps has a relationship with a family violence centre that can accommodate them immediately.

“We often have to rely on women’s resources, then we have our own resources, and sometimes we’re able to get support from Centrelink,” says Annette Gillespie. “Sometimes the receiving country will pick up some of the tab. It’s about cobbling something together as quick as we can. We just need to get her out.”

In the boardroom, framed photographs of feminists like Miles Franklin and Rebecca West line the walls. The first women’s refuges emerged during the feminist movement in the 1970s, taking domestic violence services out of the hands of faith-based charities and into small, community-based organisations. These feminist refuges wanted to be more than ambulances at the bottom of cliffs. They wanted to tackle domestic violence at its root.

“It’s gender roles that allow this violence to thrive,” says Gillespie. “For women, society’s gender expectation is that they will meet the needs of men: women will look how men want them to look, say things men want to hear, and do things – make the right meal, stay home for the evening – to please and nurture men. Men, on the other hand, are trained to be the protector, the provider. So for some men, when they feel like they’re out of control, or they’re unable to protect, or there’s resistance to their needs being met, that somehow means they’re less of a man. All of their focus is on getting back in control, to make them the man they need to be.”

Despite fashionable debates about whether we’re living in post-feminist times, the uncomfortable truth is that our not-so-distant history still feeds into our beliefs. A late-19<sup>th</sup>-century married woman was literally a man’s property, and it was his duty to protect her. The common law doctrine of coverture vanquished a woman’s legal rights on her wedding day, and assigned them to her husband. From that day on, she and her husband were considered to be the same person – and that person was the husband. Coverture was abolished in 1882, but its legacy endured; until the 1990s, a marriage certificate conveyed permanent sexual consent, and Australian men were permitted by law to rape their wives.

Domestic violence is the modern legacy of this history. When the art collector Charles Saatchi throttled his celebrity chef wife Nigella Lawson at an upmarket restaurant in London in 2013, he wasn’t just losing his temper. Lawson later testified in court that she had noticed “a sweet baby” in a stroller nearby and said she was looking forward to becoming a grandmother. Saatchi grabbed her by the throat and told her, “I am the only person who should be giving you pleasure.” He described the incident to the press as a “playful tiff”.

Saatchi's public meltdown was a rare glimpse of the domestic violence concealed behind high gates and glamorous façades. Domestic violence advocate and survivor Kay Schubach had her violent relationship play out among the super-rich of Sydney's Point Piper. Wealthy women are far less likely to report domestic violence, she says, because they're afraid either they'll lose their friends and social status if they leave or they simply won't be believed. "On the outside your marriage looks perfect. He may be a well-regarded businessman," she told ABC Radio in 2014. "The pressure from friends, from family, from the school mums ... is to just zip it and keep battling on."

Regardless of where a man stands on the income ladder, similar factors will influence the likelihood of his becoming abusive. Was he exposed to domestic violence as a child? Was he raised on traditional gender norms? What circles does he move in? In short, will his sense of male entitlement be challenged, or taken for granted?

Luke Ablett, a former AFL player who's campaigned against domestic violence, detects the germ of abusive behaviour in the banter boys throw around in the playground.

"I clearly remember being in Grade 6, and I had this girlfriend – you don't even talk to each other, but somehow she's your girlfriend," he says. "She was talking to this other guy, and all my mates were like 'Oh, you've gotta go do something about that.'

"Later, when the girlfriend is real, and you want to spend Friday night with her instead of your mates, you get 'You're pussy-whipped' and 'Who wears the pants in your relationship?' Girls fall for it as well: 'This guy's harassing me, go and teach him a lesson.' You think they're harmless comments as a 12-year-old, but they can really teach you about how you should behave in a relationship."

Schoolyard banter can later devolve into sexist jokes and catcalls, and sink further to where it becomes sexual assault and domestic violence. "I place family violence in a wider culture where vulgar and violent attitudes to women are common," said the former Victorian police commissioner Ken Lay at a family violence forum in 2013. "Our culture is filled with men who hold an indecent sense of entitlement towards women. Our culture is heavy with warped and misspent masculinity. And every single day the casual groping and lewd comments that go unchallenged erode our standards. And if none of us are saying anything, then this feral atmosphere gets worse, until it becomes an endorsement of violence against women."

Among young men, the attitudes underpinning this kind of sexism appear to be growing more prevalent: in 2013 Roy Morgan Research found that the percentage of young men who believe a woman's place is in the home had increased since 2008 from 6.5% to 11.6%. That puts them neck and neck with men over 65.

Rigid gender stereotypes don't just victimise women. "Traditional ideas about what it means to be a man really hurt a lot of guys, because they aren't that person, and peer pressure says they should be," says Ablett. "It's not necessarily about being powerful and strong; it's the fear of being seen as not that. It's this fear of being 'the girl', or 'the pussy', or 'the fag' that drives men to try to prove themselves as big and strong, and often that ends up as violence."

Abusive men commonly cite their duty to protect as the reason for their abuse. A few minutes' drive from the office of Safe Steps is the headquarters of No to Violence, Victoria's peak body for men's behaviour change programs. Manager Rodney Vlasis says that many of

the men see protection as key. “We don’t just go into the work assuming that men don’t care about the safety of their partners and families. Yes, some men certainly don’t. But for other men, it’s like, ‘I’m here to protect.’ But it is that hyper-masculine form of protection: ‘I guard the family from the perils outside, I guard the family’s finances.’” If the woman gets in the way of that by disobeying him, then he believes that she needs to be brought back into line – supposedly for her own safety.

For men who think controlling women is their birthright, the growth in women’s empowerment is confusing and infuriating. Data collected by Safe Steps shows that the physical aspect of domestic violence is becoming more frequent and severe, which Annette Gillespie puts down to a growing backlash against gender equality. “These men are exerting control more firmly within the relationship,” she says, “because that’s where they can still be the king of the castle.”

When, in 2014, *Guardian Australia* asked Australia’s state and territory police commissioners to diagnose the cause of domestic violence, they overwhelmingly singled out society’s attitudes towards women. “We are all responsible for shifting social norms that blame, excuse, minimise and justify violence against women and their children,” wrote the Tasmanian commissioner, Darren Hine. “Addressing this issue is going to require lasting generational change. Lead by example. Challenge others. Own the change.”

But who’s owning the change in Canberra? It’s no secret that the blue ties in our nation’s capital have no real interest in gender equality, let alone confronting domestic violence. The federal government’s plan to eliminate domestic violence is being funded to the tune of \$100 million over four years. That’s less than half of what they’re spending on religious school chaplains. Even this meagre contribution is being undermined. Since 2013, the government has slashed nearly \$300 million from services that assist women fleeing domestic violence – services that are already chronically under-resourced and dangerously overstretched.

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At Queensland’s domestic violence hotline, the volume of calls has risen so dramatically that counsellors are being forced to leave calls in the queue. “We are beyond capacity in Queensland,” DV Connect’s CEO, Di Mangan, told last year’s federal Senate inquiry into domestic violence. “Yesterday we would have received 300 calls ourselves. We can manage 100 calls a day before becoming concerned about our ability to respond.”

Last year, 66,326 domestic violence incidents were reported in Queensland – a 13% increase since 2012. “We’re to the point now where if someone doesn’t have fractures or other serious injuries, we are starting to see them as not so serious,” Mangan told the inquiry.

It’s not just helplines that are straining to meet demand. Across Australia, half the women seeking protection in refuges have to be housed temporarily in motels. In Victoria, Safe Steps places 50 women and their children in motels every night, where they wait for a refuge to become available. Five years ago, women in Victoria only had to wait one night in a motel. Now they wait an average of five nights. The wait is getting longer because refuges are filled with women who can’t find affordable housing and have nowhere else to go. Motels are better than nothing, but they’re a poor substitute for the support offered through a refuge. They’re also very expensive: Safe Steps has to raise an extra \$800,000 through community fundraising appeals and government lobbying just to cover its accommodation bill.

“Research shows that 50% of women who go to a motel room go back home the next day because it’s just too hard,” says Jocelyn Bignold, CEO of McAuley Community Services for Women, whose McAuley Care crisis centre in Melbourne provides short-term emergency accommodation. “When women come to us, they’ll get tea, coffee, fed, children put to bed, pyjamas, toothbrush, bras, knickers – whatever they need, they’ll get. We’ve also got a playroom, so children are safe and occupied while their mothers speak with our workers to figure out their next step.”

More than anything, the centre gives women a chance to breathe. “What we often hear is ‘I feel safe’, ‘I can sleep for the first time’, ‘I can have a shower in peace’.”

McAuley Care is funded through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness, a five-year state–federal arrangement established by Labor in 2009. Last year, the federal government cut the partnership by \$44 million and only agreed to extend it for 12 months. There’s no budget allocated to it beyond 2015. “I’ve got nothing to tell me on paper what the plan is for funding homeless services after June 30,” says Bignold. If the partnership is cancelled, as many expect it to be, McAuley Care will be forced to close.

Nowhere have women’s refuges been in greater turmoil than in New South Wales. Last year, the Coalition state government announced a radical restructuring of the social services sector. Under the Going Home Staying Home reforms, the entire network of homeless shelters and women’s refuges – many of which had been under the same management for decades – was put out to tender. “The day the tenders were released, there was a sharp intake of breath,” says Roxanne McMurray, spokesperson for Save Our Women’s Services, “because there were hardly any women’s-only services to tender for.” Services were told they couldn’t just bid for their own service – the government wanted new providers that could manage multiple services for homeless people across entire areas.

The shadow minister for family and community services in New South Wales, Linda Burney, says the changes were so radical that nobody thought they’d ever happen. “The idea that you would dismantle domestic violence services at a time when it appears to be getting more prevalent just didn’t make any sense.”

When the successful tender bids were announced, the response was one of shock, outrage and grief. Of the hundred or so shelters the women’s refuge movement had been running, only 20 were awarded back to them; the rest were mostly handed over to faith-based charities, many of whose expertise is in generalist homelessness services. Long-term shelter workers were dismissed en masse.

The NSW assistant police commissioner, Mark Murdoch, says the police received no prior warning about which shelters were going to close. “It’s like, ‘OK, we were making good use of that shelter, now we’ve got to find somewhere else to refer victims to,’” he told me. “If they were going to close or withdraw funding from shelters, it would have been nice to know in advance.”

The government says these reforms have improved services: funding to the homelessness sector has increased by 9.6%, and shelters now offer “an improved balance between early intervention and crisis assistance”. But where women’s refuges were once dedicated to victims of domestic violence, many now have to accommodate the homeless, too.



“Already half of the women seeking a place in a refuge must be turned away, and now they have to stand in line with all the homeless, who may be homeless for reasons that could put domestic violence survivors at risk,” said Christine Bird, spokesperson for the advocacy group No Shelter!, at a public forum last year. “These are cottages with adjoining walls, massed in a block, and what are we going to have? Somebody with mental health problems in one, a family in intergenerational poverty in the next, and then a woman and her children fleeing domestic violence in the next one? It’s absolutely unworkable in terms of the link between safety and confidentiality.”

In Maitland, Carrie’s Place, which has been a refuge for 35 years, now has to accommodate homeless men in order to keep its funding. Its CEO, Jan McDonald, says this creates potential for conflict, when victims of violence and perpetrators come to them from the same family. “It’s happened already,” she told the *Maitland Mercury*, “with a male we helped. The male turned around and boasted to the female, ‘Ha ha, they’re helping me as well.’” McDonald wants people to know that they won’t work with perpetrators of domestic violence.

Aside from making specialist services more generalist, the reforms were designed to shift money from the city to the regions, where services are even scarcer. It’s unclear, though, whether regional domestic violence services have actually become better funded. Coast Shelter, which runs four women’s refuges on the NSW Central Coast, now has \$450,000 less to spend across the refuges and has had to cut staff. Its CEO, Laurie Maher, told *New Matilda* that he was allocated funding on the proviso that he provide more of a generalist homeless service, but he’s prioritising domestic violence services because the demand is so high.

The state’s family and community services minister, Gabrielle Upton, refused a request for an interview. The NSW minister for women, Pru Goward, says the government is tackling domestic violence through its “historic” It Stops Here reforms. The package, which includes increased information sharing between agencies, research into prevention and \$150,000 for men’s behaviour change programs, will cost \$9.8 million over three years. The government also last year established the Violent Domestic Crimes Taskforce, which has been looking at sentencing, reporting and prevention.

Shadow Minister Linda Burney says there’s only one way for governments to deal with domestic violence. “It requires a massive, massive campaign, and that will mean more money.”

Meanwhile, in the vital legal assistance sector, community groups are being forced to do more with much less. Speaking to Fairfax earlier this year, Michael Smith, the CEO of Victoria’s Eastern Community Legal Centre, painted a bleak picture: “Family violence is about a third of all the work that community legal centres are doing across the country, so it’s a bit hollow to talk about family violence being a national priority while you’re cutting funding out of these services.” Smith’s legal centre is one of 14 in Victoria alone that have lost federal funding after the Abbott government slashed \$20 million from community legal centres. Smith predicts the \$200,000 budget cut could force his centre to close down.

It’s the same story in indigenous Australia, only the need is even greater. Indigenous women are 31 times more likely to be victims of domestic violence. Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS), comprising 13 organisations around Australia, is the only program of its kind dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims of family violence. Not only did it absorb a \$3.6 million cut from last year’s budget, but there’s no guarantee its

funding will even continue. In December 2014, when FVPLS became the responsibility of the prime minister, it was effectively defunded. It's had to reapply for funding from the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, which is set to announce the details of \$534 million in cuts to indigenous programs.

The cuts to legal assistance directly contradict advice from the government's own advisory bodies. The Productivity Commission urged state, territory and federal governments to increase funding to legal services by \$200 million, and the Allen Consulting report, commissioned by the government, found funding for legal assistance was already inadequate to meet the government's own objectives.

We could also talk about the federal funding cuts to housing affordability and men's behaviour change programs, as well as the lack of support for women in the country on visas – the list goes on, and on. We're barely even parking the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff any more.

There are many good things being done, but much of it is piecemeal. Take, for example, the domestic violence team at Blacktown in Sydney's west, which has one of the state's highest domestic violence rates. Across New South Wales, domestic violence takes up 40% of police time, and every local area command has at least one liaison officer devoted to it. In Blacktown, however, Chief Inspector Bob Fitzgerald elected to shift two police officers out of general response to work side by side with Blacktown's domestic violence liaison officer, Genelle Warne. This decision has freed up Warne and her team to pay regular visits to women at risk, including women still in violent relationships, and keep their eye on perpetrators.

This approach is saving lives. Late in 2012, Warne made a routine follow-up call to a woman who'd come into the station to make a complaint about her boyfriend. In this one phone call, Warne managed to convince the woman to talk about the torture to which her boyfriend had been subjecting her. In the past six years, he had forced her to commit sex acts on his friends, carved a game of noughts and crosses into her back, and burnt skin off her arms with a hair iron. "I said to her, 'You're going to be dead if you don't leave. He's going to kill you,'" Warne recalls. She convinced the woman to leave, and her abuser now awaits sentencing on 27 charges. Since then, Warne has stayed in touch with the woman and, after two years of regular encouragement, finally convinced her to see a counsellor. The day of her appointment, Warne dropped her off and picked her up.

There should be teams like this in every high-incidence area around the country. There are many proven initiatives that could make women safer. These need to be started at a federal level, says Annette Gillespie, but that's not even on the government's radar.

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"All governments are determined to eliminate violence against women," says Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

Here's what happens when a society genuinely wants to eliminate a kind of violence.

When 18-year-old Thomas Kelly was fatally punched at Kings Cross in mid 2012, his family launched a campaign for tougher sentencing. The following year, when another 18-year-old,

Daniel Christie, was fatally punched at the Cross on New Year's Eve, the response was swift and powerful. Tabloids and talkback radio stations decried Australia's culture of drinking and violence, and demanded immediate action. Within days, the NSW government had launched the public service campaign "A Coward's Punch Can Kill", and the prime minister called for tougher penalties. In just five weeks, the state parliament had passed new mandatory sentencing laws and, in a dramatic act of social engineering, introduced a 1.30 am lockout policy for bars and clubs across Sydney's CBD (excluding the casino precinct, of course).

Since 2000, "coward punches" have killed roughly seven men each year. That's how many women were killed by their partners in the first five weeks of 2015. Where's the national outrage? How many talkback hosts are railing against the culture that enables these murders? Where's the rush to strengthen domestic violence orders, which continually fail to protect women, or address numerous other systemic failings?

The minister for women hasn't exactly sounded the alarm. The day after domestic violence survivor Rosie Batty was named the 2015 Australian of the Year, Tony Abbott re-announced a seven-month-old plan to create a scheme to make domestic violence orders enforceable across state borders.

Then again, Abbott had already made his position clear. Last year, two days after Batty's son Luke was murdered by his father at a public cricket practice, Abbott was asked if the death would spur a rethink on funding for the under-resourced sector. The prime minister demurred. "I'm not sure that every tragedy requires a change of policy."

Why such a different reaction? Perhaps, at the heart of it, we just don't believe that a woman attacked by her partner is as innocent as a young man attacked on the street. Despite our condemnation of domestic violence, there is an abiding false belief that victims of domestic violence are somehow responsible for what happens to them, as if the perpetrator came with a label announcing his intention to victimise them. The truth is, like a coward punch, it can happen to anyone, no matter how wealthy or well adjusted they are. Until this is understood, politicians will be allowed to continue to slash funding from services, and leave an increasingly overstretched police force and community sector to pick up the pieces.

Momentum is building for action, though, evidenced by the recognition of Rosie Batty and the upcoming Victorian royal commission into family violence. While the commission may not enlighten service providers, who already know what needs doing, it will lay bare the true extent of the problem. As we have seen in the case of institutionalised child sexual abuse, community awareness and understanding are half the battle.

But one state is not enough. Although the federal government has dismissed the idea of a national royal commission into domestic violence, it may be exactly what Australia needs.