

Myths and misunderstandings

> A victim of domestic and family violence is able to leave the abusive relationship

Many victims of domestic and family violence may be motivated to leave, however they may face a myriad of barriers, including: lack of financial resources; concerns for the welfare of **children**, family and **pets**; **disability**, lack of alternative, safe accommodation; inadequate formal support systems; disrupted social networks; **religious and cultural beliefs** preventing them from leaving; and fear of retaliation by the perpetrator. A perpetrator may also use a variety of coercive and manipulative tactics to actively prevent the victim from leaving. These barriers may be too great for a victim to ever overcome, or they may explain why a victim leaves and returns to an abusive relationship on multiple occasions before finally leaving.

> The domestic and family violence will stop when the victim and perpetrator separate

A victim leaving an abusive relationship may be viewed by the perpetrator as a direct threat to the perpetrator's ability to maintain control over the victim. Research has shown that **one of the most dangerous times for a victim** is in the months after separation when the perpetrator may use a variety of tactics to reassert control over the victim.

> Domestic and family violence involving physical violence is more serious than other controlling behaviours

Most Australian state, territory and federal legislation now recognises that domestic and family violence can be characterised by a **range of non-physical abusive behaviours as well as physical violence**. In the past, courts have shown a tendency to focus judicial responses on separate incidents of physical violence, and the severity of that violence, without having regard to the history and dynamics of the abusive relationship. Legislative change has assisted a more developed understanding of the complex and intersecting nature of domestic and family violence behaviours, and how they may operate over time to exercise control over not only the victim's physical condition and environment but their emotional wellbeing, self esteem and sense of identity.

> Domestic and family violence only affects particular groups of people

Research has consistently shown that domestic and family violence occurs in all sectors of society irrespective of race, gender, age, sexual identity, socio-economic status, location, culture or religion. However, some groups of people are **more vulnerable** to the experience and impacts of violence than others due to their specific circumstances or needs.

> Men and women are equally victims and perpetrators of domestic and family violence

While men do experience domestic and family violence, and women can be perpetrators, research demonstrates that, predominantly, **women** are the victims and men are the perpetrators of this form of

violence. One in six Australian women and one in twenty Australian men experience violence by their cohabiting opposite-sex partner. One in four Australian women report violence by a partner they may or may not have lived with; and two-thirds of those women experience more than one episode of abuse. In 73% of female homicide cases, the current or intimate male partner is the perpetrator/offender. Women are also more likely than men to experience emotional abuse by their partner and are more likely to experience anxiety and fear as a result.

➤ **Domestic and family violence does not include sexual assault**

While **sexual assault** in intimate relationships is recognised by the law as a form of domestic and family violence and as a criminal offence, victims may not know or understand this, and police may minimise or fail to respond adequately to the behaviour. Casework experience suggests that many sexual assaults in intimate relationships are unreported, and often undisclosed, even where other forms of violence are reported.

➤ **Women often make false or exaggerated claims of domestic and family violence to obtain a tactical advantage in parenting proceedings**

A 2015 evaluation of the 2012 Family Violence Amendments to the Commonwealth *Family Law Act 1975* observes that this belief persists among some sections of the community, including some lawyers and non-legal professionals, despite the fact that false denials of true allegations are more common. Data also shows that since the amendments there has been a decrease in the percentage of mothers (who experienced domestic and family violence since separation) having a protection order.

➤ **Domestic and family violence is a relationship issue; both parties are responsible**

Domestic and family violence is often minimised by perpetrators attempting to shift the blame to the victim and others. Conceptualising violence as a product of dysfunction in the intimate relationship overlooks the critical aspects of dominance and control central to the behaviours of most perpetrators towards victims.

➤ **Domestic and family violence is caused by external factors such as alcohol or drug misuse, financial pressure or a prejudicial family law system**

The view that domestic and family violence derives from factors other than a perpetrator's motivations and behaviours may have the effect of diminishing a perpetrator's sense of personal responsibility. In many situations violence occurs in the absence of these factors. Similarly, there are many situations where these factors are present and violence does not occur.

➤ **Victims of domestic and family violence are weak, passive and powerless**

Referencing or relying on victim stereotypes may potentially exclude or fail to give due consideration and fair hearing to victims whose profiles and experiences do not align with those stereotypes. For example, some victims may physically resist violence or attempt to defend themselves. Victims and their circumstances are as diverse as in the broader population.

> **Mothers who experience domestic and family violence have a duty to keep the family together and to protect the children from violence**

This view potentially pits a mother's safety against her children's safety. This may manifest as: the mother tolerating the violence in the interests of preserving the family unit; or reporting the violence and risking the accusation that she has failed to adequately **protect her children**.