

# Australians' attitudes to violence against women



2013 NATIONAL COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SURVEY – RESEARCH SUMMARY

## Why focus on violence against women?

Violence against women is widely recognised as a global issue. It is an often invisible, but common form of violence, and an insidious violation of human rights. It has serious impacts on the health and wellbeing of those affected and exacts significant economic costs on communities and nations. In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) gave international significance to the epidemic rates and serious consequences of intimate partner violence by naming it a leading public health concern for countries around the world (WHO 2002).

Australia is not immune. More than one in three women in Australia (39%) aged over 18 have experienced violence at the hands of a man since the age of 15 (ABS 2013), 32% have experienced physical violence, and 19% have experienced sexual violence (ABS, customised report, 2014). One in five (22%) Australian women aged 15 to 64 have also been the target of sexual harassment (McDonald & Flood 2012), and 17% of women over 18 have been stalked by a man (ABS 2013).

Although violence against women is prevalent and serious, it is also preventable. A number of factors contribute to violence against women. Research shows that significant drivers of the problem are:

- the unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women
- an adherence to rigidly defined gender roles and identities, i.e. what it means to be masculine or feminine (VicHealth 2007).

There is growing international consensus that the causes of violence against women can be eliminated. Communities and governments can prevent violence against women before it occurs, and attitudes have an important role to play.

Attitudes that condone or tolerate violence are recognised as playing a central role in shaping the way individuals, organisations and communities respond to violence (VicHealth 2010). Measuring community attitudes tells us how well we are progressing towards a violence-free society for all women. It also reveals the extent of the work that lies ahead, where to focus our efforts, and the messages and approaches likely to be effective.

## The 2013 National Community Attitudes Survey

The 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS) is one of two studies designed to monitor the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

(VicHealth) was commissioned by the Department of Social Services in 2012 to undertake the NCAS. VicHealth led the project in collaboration with the Social Research Centre and The University of Melbourne as research partners. The NCAS detailed summary report, *Australians' attitudes to violence against women*, and technical report can be accessed via [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/ncas](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/ncas).

The 2013 NCAS involved more than 17,500 twenty-minute telephone interviews with a cross-section of Australians aged 16 years and older. This is the third survey of its kind, with the first undertaken in 1995 and the second in 2009. The research investigates four key areas:

1. community knowledge of violence against women
2. attitudes towards violence against women
3. attitudes towards gender roles and relationships
4. responses to witnessing violence and knowledge of resources.

The aims of the NCAS are to:

- gauge community knowledge of, and attitudes towards, violence against women to identify areas that need attention in the future
- track changes in attitudes over time (between 1995, 2009 and 2013)
- improve understanding of the factors that influence knowledge, attitudes and responses
- identify particular parts of the population to target prevention efforts.

## Overall findings

- The majority of Australians have a good knowledge of violence against women and do not endorse most attitudes supportive of this violence.
- On the whole, Australians' understanding and attitudes remained stable between 2009 and 2013. However, when you look at the findings from individual questions, some areas improved, whereas others became worse.
- Young people's attitudes remain an area of concern. Young people have somewhat more violence-supportive attitudes than others but their attitudes are gradually improving over time, particularly among young men, with fewer young people in 2013 holding attitudes at the extreme end of the spectrum.
- People's understanding of violence against women and their attitudes to gender equality have significant impacts on their attitudes to violence against women.

## Community knowledge of violence against women

A good understanding of the causes, dynamics, patterns and prevalence of violence against women is important to ensure appropriate responses by and towards those affected by violence (Flood & Pease 2006, 2009). A well-informed community is also

better able to help prevent the problem (Carlson & Worden 2005; McMahon & Baker 2011; O'Neil & Morgan 2010). Research has also shown that knowledge influences the formation of attitudes (Ajzen & Fishbein 2005; Chaiken & Trope 1999; Fazio 1990). For these reasons, the NCAS includes a number of questions to measure knowledge of violence against women. These responses are summarised in the following table.

**Table 1: Community knowledge of violence against women**

|   | 1995 | 2009 | 2013             |
|---|------|------|------------------|
| <b>Certain behaviours are a form of partner violence/violence against women (% agree)</b> |      |      |                  |
| Slaps/pushes to cause harm and fear   | 97   | 97   | 97               |
| Forces partner to have sex  | 94   | 97   | 96 <sup>#</sup>  |
| Tries to scare/control by threatening to hurt others                                      | n/a  | 98   | 97               |
| Throws/smashes objects to frighten/threaten   | 91   | 97   | 96 <sup>#</sup>  |
| Repeatedly criticises to make partner feel bad/useless                                    | 71   | 85   | 86 <sup>#</sup>  |
| Controls social life by preventing partner seeing family and friends                      | 74   | 83   | 85 <sup>^</sup>  |
| Tries to control by denying partner money   | 62   | 71   | 70 <sup>#</sup>  |
| Yells abuse at partner  | 77   | 88   | n/a              |
| Stalks by repeatedly following/watching at home or work                                   | n/a  | 90   | 89               |
| Harasses by repeated phone calls  | n/a  | 89   | 87 <sup>**</sup> |
| Harasses by repeated emails/text messages   | n/a  | 85   | 85               |
| <b>Understanding of the law (% agree)</b>   |      |      |                  |
| Domestic violence is a criminal offence   | 93   | 97   | 96 <sup>#</sup>  |
| A woman cannot be raped by someone she is in a sexual relationship with                   | n/a  | 6    | 9 <sup>**</sup>  |
| <b>Prevalence of violence against women (% agree)</b>                                     |      |      |                  |
| Violence against women is common  | n/a  | 74   | 68 <sup>**</sup> |
| Women with disabilities are more likely than other women to experience violence           | n/a  | n/a  | 41               |
| <b>Patterns and consequences of violence (% agree)</b>                                    |      |      |                  |
| Women are more likely to be raped by someone they know than a stranger                    | 76   | 70   | 64 <sup>^</sup>  |
| Men mainly or more often commit acts of domestic violence                                 | 86   | 74   | 71 <sup>^</sup>  |
| Women are more likely to suffer physical harm from domestic violence                      | n/a  | 89   | 86 <sup>**</sup> |
| Level of fear is worse for women  | n/a  | 55   | 52 <sup>**</sup> |
| <b>Perceived main cause (%)</b>   |      |      |                  |
| Some men being unable to manage their anger   | n/a  | n/a  | 64               |
| The belief that men should be in charge of the relationship                               | n/a  | n/a  | 18               |
| Some men being under financial stress   | n/a  | n/a  | 13               |

See p. 7 for an explanation of symbols in tables.

## ENCOURAGING RESULTS

- Most Australians recognise that violence against women includes a wide range of behaviours designed to intimidate and control women – not just physical assault.
- Since 1995 there has been an increase in the proportion of Australians who recognise non-physical behaviours as violence against women.
- Most are aware that partner violence and forced sex in a relationship are against the law.
- Most people recognise that partner violence is usually perpetrated by men.

## AREAS OF CONCERN

- Although more Australians are now aware of the many different forms violence against women can take, there is still more work to do to emphasise that it can be more than physical violence.
- Since 1995 there has been a decrease in people who agree that violence is perpetrated mainly by men.
- Between 2009 and 2013 there was a decrease in those who recognise that women are more likely than men to suffer physical harm and fear as a result of this violence.
- Between 2009 and 2013 fewer people agreed that violence against women was common.

- Since 1995 there has been a decrease in understanding that women are at greater risk of sexual assault by a person they know than by a stranger, despite evidence that a woman is three times more likely to be sexually assaulted by someone she knows (ABS 2013).
- Only 4 in 10 Australians are aware of the greater risk of violence experienced by women with disabilities.
- Most people see violence against women as due to some men being unable to manage their anger.

## Attitudes towards violence against women

Attitudes contribute to violence against women because they influence expectations of what is acceptable behaviour. Our understanding of these expectations has a strong influence on our behaviour (Flood & Pease 2006, 2009). Community attitudes influence how people respond to violence, from victims and their friends and family to law enforcement professionals, employers and policy-makers. This means that attitudes are an important barometer of how we fare generally as a society in relation to violence and gender relations.

Our attitudes are often shaped by the world around us, for instance, through how we see gender roles and relationships in families and organisations, and how women and men are portrayed in the media and popular culture (Flood & Pease 2006, 2009). As a result, preventing violence against women is not simply a matter of changing attitudes, but will also involve challenging the social factors that shape those beliefs (Pease & Flood 2008).

## What are violence-supportive attitudes?

Five key categories of violence-supportive attitudes have been identified by researchers. These include attitudes that:

- **justify** violence against women, based on the notion that it is legitimate for a man to use violence, particularly against a woman with whom he is in an intimate relationship, in certain circumstances (e.g. the idea that partner violence is justified if a woman has sex with another man)
- **excuse** violence by attributing it to external factors (e.g. stress) or proposing that men cannot be held fully responsible for violent behaviour (e.g. 'rape results from men not being able to control their need for sex')
- **trivialise** the impact of violence, based on the view that the impacts of violence are not serious or are not sufficiently serious to warrant action by women themselves, the community or public agencies (e.g. 'women who are sexually harassed should sort it out themselves rather than report it')

- **minimise** violence by denying its seriousness, denying that it occurs or denying that certain behaviours are indeed violence at all (e.g. the idea that it's only rape if the woman physically resisted)
- shift **blame** for the violence from the perpetrator to the victim or hold women at least partially responsible for their victimisation or for preventing victimisation (e.g. the idea that women ask for rape).

This does not mean that people who hold violence-supportive attitudes would necessarily use or condone violence themselves. However, such views expressed by influential individuals or held by a substantial number of people can create a culture where violence is not clearly condemned and even subtly condoned or encouraged.

**Table 2: Attitudes towards violence against women**

|  | 1995 | 2009 | 2013 |
|--|------|------|------|
| <b>Circumstances in which violence towards a current/former partner can be justified (% agree)</b> |      |      |      |
| Partner admits to sex with another man   | 6    | 5    | 6    |
| Partner makes him look stupid or insults him in front of his friends                               | n/a  | 3    | 5**  |
| Partner ends or tries to end relationship  | n/a  | 3    | 4    |
| Against ex-partner to get access to children   | n/a  | 4    | 4    |
| If ex-partner is unreasonable about property settlement and financial issues                       | n/a  | 2    | 4**  |
| <b>Attitudes excusing violence (% agree)</b>   |      |      |      |
| Rape results from men not able to control their need for sex                                       | n/a  | 35   | 43** |
| A man is less responsible for rape if drunk/affected by drugs at the time                          | n/a  | 8    | 9    |
| Domestic violence can be excused if people get so angry they lose control                          | n/a  | 20   | 22   |
| Domestic violence can be excused if the violent person regrets it                                  | n/a  | 25   | 21** |
| Domestic violence can be excused if the violent person was abused as a child                       | n/a  | n/a  | 12   |
| Domestic violence can be excused if the violent person is under a lot of stress                    | n/a  | n/a  | 12   |
| Domestic violence can be excused if the offender is heavily affected by alcohol                    | n/a  | 8    | 9    |
| <b>Attitudes trivialising violence (% agree)</b>   |      |      |      |
| Where one partner is violent it's reasonable for them to be made to leave the family home          | n/a  | 90   | 89   |
| It's hard to understand why women stay   | 77   | 82   | 78** |
| Most women could leave a violent relationship if they really wanted to                             | n/a  | 54   | 51   |
| Women who are sexually harassed should sort it out themselves                                      | 20   | 13   | 12#  |
| Domestic violence is a private matter to be handled in the family                                  | 18   | 14   | 17** |
| It's a woman's duty to stay in a violent relationship to keep the family together                  | n/a  | 8    | 9    |
| <b>Attitudes minimising violence</b>   |      |      |      |
| Violence against women is a serious issue  | n/a  | 96   | 95   |
| <b>Certain behaviours are serious (% agree)</b>  |      |      |      |
| Slaps/pushes to cause harm/fear  | 93   | 92   | 92   |
| Forces partner to have sex   | 95   | 96   | 96   |
| Tries to scare/control by threatening to hurt others   | n/a  | 97   | 97   |
| Throws/smashes objects to frighten/threaten  | 87   | 94   | 93#  |
| Repeatedly criticises to make partner feel bad/useless   | 72   | 84   | 85#  |
| Controls social life by preventing partner seeing family and friends                               | 84   | 85   | 87#  |
| Tries to control by denying partner money  | 77   | 75   | 74#  |
| Yells abuse at partner   | 70   | 79   | n/a  |
| Stalking by repeatedly following/watching at home or work  | n/a  | 96   | 94   |
| Harassment by repeated phone calls   | n/a  | 92   | 90   |
| Harassment by repeated emails, text messages   | n/a  | 86   | 86   |

See p. 7 for an explanation of symbols in tables.

|  | 1995 | 2009 | 2013 |
|--|------|------|------|
| <b>Seriousness/acceptability of tracking a female partner by electronic means without their consent (% agree)</b>          |      |      |      |
| Serious  | n/a  | n/a  | 85   |
| Never acceptable   | n/a  | n/a  | 61   |
| <b>Attitudes towards false allegations of partner violence and rape (% agree)</b>  |      |      |      |
| Women going through custody battles often make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence in order to improve their case | n/a  | 51   | 53   |
| Women rarely make false claims of rape   | 59   | 60   | 59   |
| A lot of times women who say they were raped led the man on and later had regrets  | n/a  | n/a  | 38   |
| If a woman doesn't physically resist – even if protesting verbally – then it isn't really rape                             | n/a  | n/a  | 10   |
| <b>Attitudes shifting blame from perpetrator to victim (% agree)</b>   |      |      |      |
| If a woman is raped while drunk/affected by drugs she is at least partly responsible                                       | n/a  | 18   | 19   |
| Women often say 'no' when they mean 'yes'  | 18   | 14   | 16   |
| If a woman goes to a room alone with a man at a party, it is her fault if she is raped                                     | n/a  | n/a  | 12   |
| Domestic violence can be excused if the victim is heavily affected by alcohol  | n/a  | 9    | 11   |

## ENCOURAGING RESULTS

- Only 4% to 6% of Australians (depending on the scenario) believe violence against women can be justified.
- Since 2009 there has been a decrease in the proportion of Australians who believe that domestic violence can be excused if the violent person is regretful afterward.
- Most do not believe that women should remain in a violent relationship to keep the family together or that domestic violence is a private matter to be handled in the family.
- Since 1995 there has been a decrease in those who believe that women who are sexually harassed should sort it out themselves.
- Most support the current policy that the violent person should be made to leave the family home.
- Most agree that violence against women (both physical and non-physical) is serious.
- Since 1995 there has been an increase in the percentage recognising non-physical forms of control, intimidation and harassment as serious.
- There has been a 7% decline since 2009 in the proportion of young people who hold attitudes that support violence against women at the extreme end of the spectrum. The decline is 10% in young men. Young people have been the target of recent efforts to prevent violence against women.

## AREAS OF CONCERN

- Sizeable proportions believe there are circumstances in which violence can be excused.
- There has been an increase in Australians agreeing that rape results from men not being able to control their need for sex, from 3 in 10 in 2009 to more than 4 in 10 in 2013.
- Nearly 8 in 10 agree that it's hard to understand why women stay in a violent relationship.
- More than half agree that 'women could leave a violent relationship if they really wanted to'.
- Compared with physical violence and forced sex, Australians are less inclined to see non-physical forms of control, intimidation and harassment as 'serious'.
- More than half agree that women often fabricate cases of domestic violence in order to improve their prospects in family law cases and nearly 2 in 5 believe that a lot of times women who say they were raped led the man on and later had regrets.
- Up to 1 in 5 believes that there are circumstances in which women bear some responsibility for violence. There has been no change since 2009.



## Attitudes towards gender roles and relationships

The NCAS also gauges attitudes to gender equality, gender roles and relationships. These attitudes are important because they influence the formation of attitudes which support violence against women. People with weak support for gender equality tend to be more likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes.

**Table 3: Attitudes towards gender roles and relationships**

|  | 2009 | 2013 |
|--|------|------|
| <b>Attitudes towards gender roles in public and private life (% agree)</b>                             |      |      |
| Men make better political leaders  | 23   | 27** |
| When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women  | 11   | 12   |
| University education is more important for a boy   | 4    | 5    |
| A woman has to have children to be fulfilled   | 11   | 12   |
| It's okay for a woman to have a child as a single parent and not want a stable relationship with a man | 60   | 66** |
| <b>Attitudes towards decision-making in relationships (% agree)</b>                                    |      |      |
| Men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household                              | 18   | 19   |
| Women prefer a man to be in charge of the relationship   | 27   | 28   |
| <b>Attitudes towards the status of women (% agree)</b>   |      |      |
| Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the workplace in Australia                      | 11   | 13** |

### ENCOURAGING RESULTS

- Most Australians support gender equality in the public arena, such as workplaces.
- Most acknowledge that women still experience inequality in the workplace.

### AREAS OF CONCERN

- More than a quarter believe that men make better political leaders.
- Up to 28% of Australians endorse attitudes supportive of male dominance of decision-making in relationships, a dynamic identified as a risk factor for partner violence (for more information see page 34 of the detailed summary report, *Australians' attitudes to violence against women*, which can be accessed via [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/ncas](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/ncas)).

## Responses to witnessing violence, and knowledge of resources

The fourth area investigated in the NCAS concerns the willingness of the public to take bystander action and respond to violence if they witness it.

**Table 4: Responses to witnessing violence, and knowledge of resources**

|  | 1995 | 2009 | 2013 |
|--|------|------|------|
| <b>Preparedness to intervene (% agree)</b>   |      |      |      |
| If a known woman is being assaulted by her partner                                   | n/a  | n/a  | 98   |
| If an unknown woman is being assaulted   | n/a  | n/a  | 92-  |
| <b>Knowledge of sources of assistance and responses (% agree)</b>                    |      |      |      |
| Would know where to get help regarding a domestic violence problem                   | n/a  | 62   | 57** |
| Police response times have improved  | n/a  | 44   | 44   |
| Women with disabilities are less likely to be believed when reporting sexual assault | n/a  | 37   | 42** |

### ENCOURAGING RESULTS

- The overwhelming majority of Australians (98%) say they would intervene if they witnessed a woman being assaulted by her partner.

### AREAS OF CONCERN

- Since 2009 there has been a decrease in those who would know where to go to get help with a domestic violence problem.
- Less than half recognise that police response times have improved. This percentage did not change from 2009 to 2013.
- A new challenge is to engage the community in responding to known risk factors for violence, such as controlling behaviours or disrespect towards women.

See p. 7 for an explanation of symbols in tables.

## Factors influencing understanding and attitudes

- Those with high levels of support for equitable gender roles and relationships are more likely to understand that violence against women can involve a physical, psychological, social and economic means of intimidation and control (versus only physical violence and forced sex).
- Those who understand violence against women as comprising this range of behaviours and have more equitable attitudes to gender roles and relations are less likely to be supportive of violence against women.
- After taking attitudes towards gender and understanding of violence against women into account, the survey found that demographic factors (e.g. age, gender, country of birth, socioeconomic status) have a limited influence on Australians' attitudes.

## Knowledge and attitudes in particular groups and places

It is important to note that attitudes towards women are fairly consistent across the population, regardless of your education, where you live or what job you do. The survey found virtually no differences between respondents in rural, remote, urban and regional areas or between states and territories.

However, there are some differences in particular groups and places. Groups who are most likely to endorse violence-supportive attitudes and who have the poorest understanding of what constitutes violence against women are:

- men, especially young men and those experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage
- younger people (16-25)
- people from countries in which the main language spoken is not English, especially those who have recently arrived in Australia.

### Guide to table symbols

- \*\* Difference between 2009 and 2013 is statistically significant,  $p \leq 0.01$ .
- # Difference between 1995 and 2013 is statistically significant,  $p \leq 0.01$ .
- ^ Difference between 1995, 2009 and 2013 is statistically significant,  $p \leq 0.01$ .
- ~ Difference between assault of a stranger and assault of a family member or friend is statistically significant,  $p \leq 0.01$ .

## Implications of NCAS findings for practice and policy

Focusing on shifting the attitudes that support violence is key to turning the tide on violence against women in Australia. Australian and international experience in primary prevention of violence and other complex health and social issues shows that attitudinal change is most likely to occur when all levels of society work together towards the same goals. A concerted effort to prevent violence against women must involve multiple and reinforcing strategies led by individuals and families, organisations and communities (UN 2006; WHO 1997, 2002; WHO & London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine 2010).

Australia is well advanced in this regard, having adopted the *National Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*, a 12-year strategy that aims to bring together Commonwealth, state and territory efforts, as well as work being undertaken by civic society, the business sector and the wider community to achieve a sustained reduction in violence against women.

On the whole, Australians' understanding and attitudes remained stable between 2009 and 2013. However, when you look at the findings from individual questions, some areas improved, whereas others became worse. There is no doubt that troubling attitudes towards violence against women still exist, and there is a long road ahead to equality.

The good news is that even though young people remain a group on which we need to focus our efforts, there has been some improvement in the attitudes of young people towards violence against women, particularly among young men. Although it is not possible to identify from the survey the factors responsible for this change, young people have been the primary target of efforts supported through the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*. This suggests that prevention efforts may be having a positive impact.

In the early years of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*, substantial infrastructure was established to ensure that Australia is ready to take a coordinated approach to address the root causes of violence against women. This includes the establishment of Our Watch (formerly the Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children) and Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS).

It is important to take advantage of the recent investment in the infrastructure for the prevention of violence against women on a national scale, to turn the tide on the most concerning trends and ensure that progress does not stall. It is time for all of us to build on this positive momentum to reduce and ultimately eliminate violence against women.

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