

STOPPING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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As discussed in my last column, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW57) met in New York in March to reach a commitment on the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls. With over 6000 participants from across the world, the contributions were drawn from a diverse mix of nations, faiths and cultures.

Global issues included the forced labour of men women and children; the trafficking of women and girls; child marriage, women's rights to education and safety, etc.

Other priorities included the impact of climate change, particularly in the Asia Pacific region – including Australia. Incidences of domestic violence have been shown to peak following natural disasters such as droughts, as well as the flooding and burning that is occurring on a more regular basis. The increasing rate of violence is evident across all of the nations of the Pacific.

In Australia

In Australia, domestic violence is one of the most common forms of violence against *young* women and all women *over 55 years of age*, particularly those living in rural and remote locations. The increasing impact of climatic change and natural disasters on rural communities compounds this problem. It does not matter what class, culture or religion, all women in these age groups are particularly at risk. Factors which contribute to this include:

- rural women live within communities with norms and values that do not encourage the use of obtaining assistance outside of the family;
- poor telecommunications, long distances and an absence of support services are significant barriers to escape and/or protection.

Significantly, domestic violence has a ripple effect across families and communities that fragments the wellbeing and resilience of rural life.

Indigenous women are more vulnerable to prolonged and more serious forms of violence, and are ten times more likely to be victims of homicide. While Aboriginal women experience the highest imprisonment rate across Australia, the majority of these women have also been victims of abuse. Indeed 'a violent relationship' now forms part of the expectations for the future, for many of the younger generations of Indigenous women and girls.

Statements by the Anglican Church

During the Commission, the Anglican Delegation developed a statement in response to these issues, which calls for greater leadership by the Church in the prevention of violence against women and girls.

This document highlights the role of the Church as agents of change in an increasingly violent world. Church workers are called by the Gospel to reach out to communities; to regain their prophetic voice on issues of justice, peace and reconciliation. The statement acknowledges the need to partner with men and boys to eradicate violence as well as the need to develop resources that will equip and empower the Church to join with others, as a leader on this issue.

The call to leadership is supported by previous statements from the Anglican Communion, both from Rowan Williams and a letter from the Primates in 2011, which states that:

'the Church must become 'a living witness' to the belief that men and women are made in the image of God....our teaching and preaching must include the significance of peaceful relationships since those clouded by conflict hinder our relationship with Him'

Action required

Indeed, if we continue to support the silence on this issue, by ignoring the violence around us, then we too become part of the problem.

Our churches must advocate on issues of equality for women while accepting responsibility in perpetuating oppressive attitudes and behaviours throughout previous generations. Thus self scrutiny must be a part of moving forward as we live out the transformation we wish to see in the families and communities we serve.

Leadership at every level is required. Such leadership must support the development of resources that equip clergy to raise awareness; to preach and teach on this issue. This is a key component of change. From the curricula at theological colleges to ongoing training across dioceses, the resourcing of clergy and others is vital if we are to be effective in this work. While excellent resources have been developed, more work needs to be done, to assist dioceses and parishes to facilitate safe and inclusive environments. An excellent example of this, are the resources developed and which are now available within the Melbourne Diocese.

Within Australia, domestic violence is increasing. This trend is unlikely to change if the Church, (along with other organisations) fails to lead on this issue; on the sacredness of His Creation. All people need to know that their Church is both relevant and safe and that its priority is the living out of the Gospel.

The Church must acknowledge the pervasiveness of domestic violence; the impact of climate change on the wellbeing of families and communities and the need for justice in relation to the plight of Indigenous women and children.

Indeed, it can no longer be silent - and must become part of the solution!

By **Archdeacon Karen Kime**