

MEDIA RELEASE

This year, Easter in Melbourne was marred by numerous horrifying acts of family violence. The violence was extreme— with a woman and two young girls losing their lives as a result. The matters are yet to be determined in court, however the alleged offenders in both matters are family members – a partner, and a father. Days after Fiona Warzywoda was stabbed to death in a busy shopping strip, thousands of people joined to rally in Melbourne against the epidemic of family violence that continues to unfold both before us, and behind closed doors. These shocking events are now well within public general knowledge. They form part of a tragic narrative in Victoria that has grown with each untimely, unacceptable family violence death.

Meanwhile, in the week that followed Easter in the remote Northern Territory town of Wauchope, a 23-year-old woman was killed; her husband is charged with her murder. The matter was reported by local media in a brief, factual manner, in the space of a few short paragraphs. However outside this remote community that sits just over 100km south of Tennant Creek, there is little obvious public reaction. Whilst the deaths in Melbourne generated palpable public grief and ongoing critical commentary on how to eradicate family violence, in the Northern Territory there remains a heavy silence.

How can this non-response be explained? Desensitisation? Trauma fatigue? A belief that the issue of family violence in Aboriginal communities is simply too complex to face? A lack of public interest in violence against women unless the alleged perpetrator is an ex-AFL player?

In the Northern Territory and beyond, we should be equally outraged by this recent death.

We live in a country where a woman is killed nearly every week by a male partner or ex-partner. This is not about fear mongering or a political blame game— family violence is a serious public issue that the whole community must own. In the Northern Territory and elsewhere, these recent tragic deaths can act as a catalyst for reform, to improve systemic responses and prevent further harm. Media coverage and related commentary that makes reference to these traumatic events must be undertaken responsibly, sensitively and respectfully. It is possible to discuss family violence reform and prevention strategies in a manner that does not homogenise tragedy or detract from the nuances of the individual horror that has occurred. In fact, these broader dialogues on systemic reform are often welcomed by grieving families attempting to make sense of tragedy. The brave, deeply insightful comments recently made by Tom Meagher about the issue of violence against women illustrate this point.

Family violence has become an epidemic, and collective responsibility must be taken for addressing it.

A multi-faceted approach must be taken, and an essential component of this is community education. Family and domestic violence can be perpetrated in many different ways, not always immediately including physical violence. By increasing awareness about the many forms of family and domestic violence, individuals and the general public will be better equipped to identify warning signs. Knowledge about the assistance that can be offered is essential to knowing what to do about these warning signs. The fear, social isolation and feelings of self-blame that can occur alongside an experience of family violence can be an enormous barrier to seeking help. However, with increased public advocacy on the issue victims needing assistance may be fortified and more confident in seeking help, knowing that domestic and family violence will not be tolerated by society.

It is also essential that any further domestic and family violence fatalities be closely examined to identify weaknesses and strengths in systems and processes that operate in response to domestic violence.

The establishment of a domestic homicide review tribunal in the NT would bring the NT in line with virtually every other State and Territory – and could serve to provide insightful in-depth reviews of deaths that occur in a domestic violence context.

These reviews may assist the professional sector as well as the broader community in furthering their understanding of the dynamics of domestic and family violence, by closely examining points of contact between victims/perpetrators and external agencies, and conducting detailed investigation into specific cases.

It is an unfortunate and disturbing reality that women in the Northern Territory are at higher risk of experiencing injury or death due to domestic violence than women in any other State or Territory of Australia. Equally disturbing is the knowledge that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised due to domestic violence related assault than other Australian females.

Whether domestic violence occurs in the open or behind closed doors, in remote communities in the Central desert or in broad daylight on a Melbourne city street, it is an epidemic that requires immediate and collective action. It is not insurmountable and we all have a contribution to make. We must not remain silent on any act of violence that befalls any woman – together we must take responsibility as a community for changing not only how we view but how we address domestic violence.

Central Australian Women's Legal Service

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