

# Elephant in the Living Room



**A think piece on family violence in New Zealand, by Chris Frazer**

‘There’s a phrase, ‘the elephant in the living room’, which purports to describe what it's like to live with a drug addict, an alcoholic, an abuser. People outside such relationships will sometimes ask, ‘How could you let such a business go on for so many years? Didn't you see the elephant in the living room’ And it's so hard for anyone living in a more normal situation to understand the answer that comes closest to the truth: ‘I'm sorry, but it was there when I moved in. I didn't know it was an elephant; I thought it was part of the furniture.’ There comes an aha-moment for some folks - the lucky ones - when they suddenly recognise the difference.’ — Stephen King

## Background

***New Zealand Police attend a family violence situation every seven minutes<sup>1</sup>***

Family violence in all its varied forms is the elephant in the living room of far too many families within Aotearoa New Zealand today and the statistics alone make for chilling reading:

- In 2013, there were 95,080 family violence investigations by NZ Police. There were 59,137 family violence investigations where at least one child aged 0-16 years was linked to these investigations.
- In 2013, 3,803 applications were made for protection orders:
  - 2,705 (91%) were made by women and 207 (7%) by men
  - 2,638 (90%) of respondents were men and 252 (9%) women.
- In 2013, there were 6,749 recorded male assaults female offences and 5,025 recorded offences for breaching a protection order.
- In 2012/13, Women’s Refuges affiliated to the National Collective of Independent Women’s Refuges received 81,720 crisis calls. 7,642 women accessed advocacy services in the community. 2,940 women and children stayed in safe houses.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, far more alarming is the reality that NZ Police estimate only 20% of incidents of violence within the home is actually reported in any given year leaving an estimated 80% of domestic abuse remaining hidden within the private sphere of the family home<sup>3</sup>.

When taking into account these figures, it is essential that we focus on the faces of those who suffer as a result of violence within their homes – for the human cost of death, injury and long-lasting psychological harm and impact is more far reaching, than official statistics reveal.

<sup>1</sup> <https://glenninquiry.org.nz/new-zealands-sad-record>

<sup>2</sup> <https://nzfvc.org.nz/sites/nzfvc.org.nz/files/data-summaries-snapshot-2014.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Report of the expert advisory group on family violence, 21 November 2013 NZ

## Te tapu o te whare tangata me te āhua atua o ngā tamariki mō ngā tāngata katoa

*The sanctity of women and the divinity of children for all humankind<sup>4</sup>*

Family violence leaves long lasting scars on the victim by the perpetrator, yet not all the scars are visible, for family violence is multi-faceted and hidden within the private sphere of a family dwelling. Fear and reluctance on the part of the victim, as well as those close by who are aware of the violence occurring but unwilling or feeling unable to interfere in what is often still seen as no one else's business, continues to contribute to low reporting numbers.

The Domestic Violence Act 1995: The Domestic Violence Act came into effect in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1995 and has since been amended the latest amendment being in 2013. The Domestic Violence Act was made to protect people in many different relationships, including:

- Married couples
- Unmarried couples
- Gay and lesbian couples
- Children
- Family/whanau
- Anyone in a close personal relationship
- Flatmates or other people who share accommodation.

The Justice Department of Aotearoa New Zealand describes domestic violence as 'an abuse of human rights'. They describe domestic violence as:

- **Physical Abuse:** Nobody – including a husband, wife, partner or an adult who looks after children – is allowed to hit, punch, kick or in any way assault another person.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Nobody is allowed to have any sexual contact with another person without that person's permission.
- **Psychological Abuse:** Includes intimidation, threats and harassment. Examples of psychological abuse are damaging property, allowing children to see or hear any domestic violence, controlling someone's contact with friends as a way of having power over him or her.<sup>5</sup>



DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION PROJECT  
202 East Superior Street  
Duluth, Minnesota 55802  
218-722-2781  
www.duluth-model.org

<sup>4</sup> PŪRONGO MĀTĀPONO / Values Statement Te Kupenga - the National Network of Stopping Violence  
<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nnsvs.org.nz/resources/law-your-rights>

## The ripple effect of family violence

In introducing the fourth annual report from the Family Violence Death Review Committee<sup>6</sup>, the chair, Associate Professor Julia Tolmie stated, 'Whilst the deaths from family violence documented in this report are small in number compared to some other types of death ... they are costly and largely preventable deaths. They also represent an undercount of even the most chronic cases of family violence.'

To illustrate this, Professor Tolmie refers to Jacqueline Campbell's report<sup>7</sup> where she makes the point that 'for every intimate partner violence (IPV) homicide that occurs there are approximately eight or nine attempted IPV homicides'.

Professor Tolmie goes on to say that 'captured in this report, although not counted in our core data on family violence deaths, are suicides by victims of family violence. Also to be noted is that the impact of family violence goes well beyond the individual victims involved. For example, the 37 children who were killed by a family member between 2009 and 2012 had 55 siblings and half siblings and there were 21 children of the offenders who were not related to the children who died.

'Over the same four years, 164 children or step-children lost a parent through fatal IPV. These are the children known; the actual number is likely to be higher. These 240 children may well have been victims of abuse and must now grow up having experienced serious loss and trauma at a young age.'

The cost in terms of long-lasting and far-reaching harm continues to be challenging to measure. The financial cost though is clearer. The Glenn Inquiry highlights the reality of the significant cost of both intimate partner violence and child abuse to New Zealand society as a whole.

*NZ domestic violence stats:  
On average, of the women who seek our help, 64% report psychological abuse; 49% report physical abuse; 23% report financial abuse; 21% report harassment and stalking; 12% report spiritual abuse; 12% report sexual abuse and 11% report that weapons were used. 24% of women reported that children witnessed or heard the abuse. (Note most women experience multiple forms of abuse so these figures will not add up to 100%)*

*<https://womensrefuge.org.nz/WR/Get%20help/Stories%20of%20hope.htm>*

**Table 1: Cost Estimates by Scenario**

Scenario	Cost in 2014 (\$NZD billion)	Cost in 2024 (\$NZD billion – 2014 dollars)	Cumulative cost in 2024 (\$NZD billion – 2014 dollars)
Conservative	4.1	5.0	45.7
Moderate	4.5	5.5	50.3
High end	7.0	8.6	78.2

*Source: ECCAIPV framework, Statistics New Zealand population projections, cost projections assume 2% inflation and no other adjustments made*

<sup>6</sup> Health, Quality and Safety Commission NZ, family Violence Death Review Committee's fourth annual report, 2013, Wellington NZ

<sup>7</sup> J. Campbell and A.D. Wolf, 'Guns and Domestic Violence Homicide', unpublished report on the findings of multi city intimate partner Femicide study, John Hopkins University School of Nursing n.d.

## Why doesn't she just up and leave?

*'Leaving a violent situation of abuse can sometimes take time. It's common for women to make four to seven attempts to leave before they are successful'.<sup>8</sup>*

Women's Refuge cites the following reasons for women not leaving a violent home situation:

1. Leaving can be the most dangerous time
2. Lack of money
3. Nowhere to go
4. Fear of losing your children
5. A belief in family values
6. Not being believed
7. I still love him
8. Social isolation
9. Not wanting to be judged by others
10. Isn't being abused normal?

Number one, though, is an overriding factor: fear. Fear for their own safety and those closest to them: their children, other relations, friends and their family pet. The latter has been a subject of research in 2012 resulting from a partnership between the RSPCA and Women's Refuge.

### *Pets as pawns research 2012<sup>9</sup>*

This research results revealed that 50% of women witnessed animal cruelty as part of their own domestic violence experience. A common feature rising out of the literature is the perpetrators' use of both actual harm and overt threats against the family pet to control and ensure compliance from both his partner as well as children.

Cruelty to animals, both during and within the relationship as well as after leaving the relationship, was identified as a significant deterrent for not leaving an abusive situation. Furthermore, harming a cherished pet was commonly reported as a form of punishment for perceived unsatisfactory behaviour and a way of maintaining power and control. It was also a way of sending non-verbal messages as to what could happen to the partner or loved ones if she didn't do as she was told.

Heather Henare, CEO of Women's Refuge, addressing the 2012 RSPCA conference, stated: 'Unless we address these issues of power and control we can never guarantee a woman, her children or her pets will be safe from her partner. Any other measure is simply band aid, short term and unsustainable. Another reason we struggle as a society to keep our most vulnerable safe is that we underestimate how rewarding it is for a person to be violent against their partner.'

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://womensrefuge.org.nz/WR/Domestic-violence/Why-doesnt-she-leave.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Roguski. Michael, 'pets as pawns: the coexistence of animal cruelty and family violence', Wellington NZ 2012

'Because of the power violence creates, it is very hard to change an offender's mind-set. We need to respond to domestic violence, child abuse and animal abuse with punishments and interventions that outweigh the psychological rewards a man gets from being violent towards his partner, his children and animals. So to keep our vulnerable women, children and animals safe, we must have meaningful responses to the perpetrators crime.

'We also have to deal with the society in which these punishments exist. Does society explicitly or implicitly condone violence? When a man beats his partner, emotionally abuses his children or harms the family pet – what do his family and friends say that gives him a clear message his behaviour is unacceptable?'

*'We need to get a whole lot tougher about how we respond to violence against women. It is never ok. There is no excuse. It is not cultural. It is never deserved. It is never because he had too many beers.'*

*Heather Henare CEO Women's Refuge NZ*

### **The elephant in the living room: *what's being done to remove it?***

Governmental focus in the past 10 years has included such steps as strengthening legislation addressing family violence. For example:

- Amendments to the Domestic Violence Act 2013.
- Setting up a task force for action against violence within families, with the first project of the task force being the 'It's not OK' campaign in 2007. The primary focus of the campaign is to change attitudes and behaviours of New Zealanders in relation to family violence. The intensive media messages reached a wide audience and gave considerable prominence to the issue. The campaign is credited with contributing significantly to the increased reporting of violence to agencies such as the NZ Police and social services agencies.
- Two other ethnically-focused national violence prevention campaigns are 'Pasifika Proud' and 'E Tu Whanau'.

In a report prepared for the Auckland Council<sup>10</sup>, the World Health Organisation is cited as saying that media campaigns – combined with other educational opportunities – can change knowledge, attitudes and beliefs related to intimate partner and sexual violence.

So far, though, such campaigns have tended to be fronted by celebrities or other well-known figures, with the voices of those most affected silent. Moving forward, it is essential for those who have been victims to be allowed a voice in their own future wellbeing. They also offer a valuable insight into a crime still largely misunderstood and grossly underreported.

Alongside such campaigns is the urgent need for an increasing focus on greater collaboration between agencies and organisations, more training for frontline staff and a continuing public media campaign highlighting the complexity of issues relating to family violence. These are all essential steps in tackling and reducing the unacceptable levels of family violence and abuse

<sup>10</sup> Woodley, Alex and Palmer, Ally, 'Working together to prevent family and sexual violence in Auckland: An approach, May 2014 Auckland NZ

that sees New Zealand retaining the unenviable status of being a leader among the OECD countries in persistent violence within families and child abuse.

Last, but certainly not least, are the perpetrators of violence. Alongside ensuring such offenders are brought to justice, there is also a need to find more about why so many men choose to inflict such harm on those close to them. In a recent report on research carried out to gather the voices and experiences of former perpetrators of family violence one respondent reflected, 'I wasn't taught how to be a good man. My dad taught me a man is angry, aggressive, abusive, and violent. That's the role model I grew up with.'<sup>11</sup>

Based on this research, the Glenn Inquiry is drawing up a series of recommendations aimed at addressing an underlying culture that supports the ongoing perpetration of violence within the home. The aim is to 'raise awareness to de-normalise violence, create community-based ways to engage perpetrators to break the cycle of violence, put in place peer-based programmes to support them and their families to remain violence free and to ensure mental health professionals are trained to respond to perpetrators.'

In her final address as Governor General for New Zealand (2006), Dame Silvia Cartwright said,

*'New Zealand is praised for many things overseas, including its international peacekeeping, but the country needs to work on achieving peace domestically. We need to focus for a while on the problems at home, and concentrate our world class skills on resolving these issues that are our nightmare in the otherwise beautiful and peace-loving country we live in.'*

---

<sup>11</sup> Roguski. Michael, 'Stopping violence perpetrators voices', the Glenn Inquiry 2014 Wellington NZ