

Deadly menace of family violence must be quelled

EDITORIAL



By **THE AUSTRALIAN EDITORIAL**,
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No legislation, however prescriptive, can entirely eradicate violence and coercion or ensure civilised behaviour behind closed doors. Police, welfare service agencies or the legal system, however proactive their strategies, cannot eliminate domestic violence. That said, our society must do far more to prevent it, reduce its deadly consequences and free its victims from fear and torment. An outpouring of revelations and vigorous discussion since ex-footballer Rowan Baxter, 41, killed wife Hannah Clarke, 31, and their three young children when he ambushed their car, doused them in petrol and set them alight on their way to school in Brisbane 10 days ago have thrown up pointers as to where authorities should start.

The size of the problem needs to be acknowledged, however grim a picture it paints of our society. The latest data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reveals one woman is killed every nine days and one man is killed every 29 days by a partner. One in six women and one in 16 men have experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or previous cohabiting partner. Specialist homeless services assisted 26,500 children aged nine and younger due to domestic violence in 2017-18. Disabled people and Aborigines are among those most at risk of suffering domestic violence. Nor are those in same-sex relationships immune. The problem is universal.

Domestic violence protection orders are effective in many cases, but a more effective system is needed. Authorities should pay closer attention to cases where complainants report abuse by perpetrators with a history of domestic violence.

DVOs are in place in one-third of domestic and family violence killings in Queensland. Baxter had a DVO against him and was facing a charge of breaching it when he murdered Ms Clarke and their children and then killed himself. Her final months were marked by repeated contact with the system that failed to protect her. She had every reason to be frightened of her estranged

husband. As national crime correspondent David Murray revealed last week, Baxter had told her how he had planned to murder a former partner and young son from a previous relationship.

Support services and police resources, being limited, should be applied to help abuse victims when they are at their most vulnerable — at the time they are attempting to break free from perpetrators, or in the months immediately afterwards. White Ribbon Australia, which focuses on preventing men's violence against women, reports women are especially vulnerable to post-separation violence and intimidation, including stalking, threats of murder, abuse of children and sexual assault.

Men's advocates highlight the plight of male victims. Those victims also deserve support. But to put the issue in context, from 2010 to 2014, fewer women (28) killed their male partners than males killed their female partners (121). The majority of women who killed their male partners were domestic violence victims of those men. That was not the case with the vast majority of the male killers.

On Saturday, Sarah Elks focused on the issue of “coercive control” in domestic relationships — threats, intimidation, isolation from friends, family and work, and other demeaning behaviour. Such highly controlling conduct, Women's Legal Service Queensland chief executive Angela Lynch said, was a “red flag for murder”. For that reason, the states have good reason to examine the pros and cons of legislating to create a new domestic violence criminal offence of “coercive control”. As Elks writes on Monday, domestic violence survivors are also set to gain a direct voice to policymakers, with the Palaszczuk government considering a Victorian-style council for victims and survivors. Consultation makes sense.

Those who have endured and survived relationships in which basic human decency is as elusive as gold dust are well placed to advise authorities on how to tackle a dark social issue. But finding solutions to this shameful blight on our society will be complex and difficult.