

## Domestic Violence: Getting the Facts

### Interview with Professor Sarah Wendt

*This episode of Messages of hope is on the topic of family and domestic violence. It contains information that may be distressing. If you need to talk to someone about the issues raised in this program, call 1800RESPECT for free confidential counselling.*

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**Tania:** Hi, I'm Tania Nelson and you're listening to Messages of hope. Today I'm talking to Professor Sarah Wendt, who is a Professor of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, and who has dedicated her life to understanding the impacts of domestic violence, and hearing the stories of victims and survivors in Australia. The topic of domestic and family violence is a really difficult one. But it's something that, as you'll find out today, is incredibly important to discuss as a step towards a society and nation where violence against women and children is eradicated.

So Sarah, maybe just start off by sharing some of your background in this space.

**Sarah:** Well first and foremost, I'm a social worker, and so, as a social worker, I have been employed for what we call, non-government-organisations who are responding to and trying to understand domestic and family violence.

I have a history of working on the domestic violence crisis telephone lines or in, what we know as women's shelters - shelters responding to women fleeing domestic violence. I studied my social work degree and then worked in that area for a little while and then I had the opportunity to do my PhD. And so I studied domestic violence and women's experiences in rural communities on domestic and family violence. And so, for the last 20 years, I've been employed by universities to teach social work, and more in my later years, to research, domestic and family violence.

And when we talk about domestic and family violence, I want to be clear, we're talking about something very different to common couple arguments, common couple conflicts. People who are married or living with their partner or are in a dating relationship know that sometimes we all don't get along and we can have agreements and disagreements. That's all very healthy. What I'm going to talk about is something very different to that. And that's what we call domestic and family violence.

We know that domestic and family violence is the leading cause of women and children's homelessness in this country. We know that domestic and family violence is one of the leading causes to disrupt women's education and employment. So, when women leave violent relationships, it's more often than not, they plummet to poverty.

We also know that domestic and family violence has significant impacts on women and children's mental health and physical health. We now know one in four Australian women

will have experienced domestic violence in their lifetime, and we know that, on average, one to two women a week are murdered at the hands of an intimate partner.

**Tania:** So, Sarah, what are the signs of domestic violence?

**Sarah:** The central core thing of domestic and family violence is what we call coercive control. And unfortunately, the research has shown that when coercive control is present, the majority of those using violence are men and they use it to intimidate, isolate and create fear in their partner and children's lives. So we've got physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological, financial, and social abuse that are all forming an environment of fear, control, intimidation. When we talk about domestic violence, often people think of physical violence. So that is, you know, a man perpetrating physical violence against his female partner. So punching, kicking, slapping, et cetera. We know the awful signs; we can see it on the body when it happens.

But I also want to say the *threat* of violence is enough to cause fear, intimidation and to isolate victims.

**Tania:** Sarah, you've been talking to me about different forms of domestic violence, and you outline what physical violence looks like, but you also mention there's emotional and psychological violence too. Can you explain that?

**Sarah:** If you're perpetuating physical or sexual violence, you're being emotionally, psychologically violent, okay? The two aren't separated. But also, perpetrators can use verbal comments to put down. They can control partners to feel less than. They can demean them, intimidate them. So, these are forms of psychological or what we call emotional abuse. This is also tied up with financial abuse. This is often when the perpetrator does, two things: takes control of the finances of the household, to the point of where they're controlling their partner and their children, how much they can spend, what they can have. And sometimes that can get to serious monitoring, like how much petrol you use, how much so-called 'pocket money' you're given. The other side of financial abuse is when payday comes in, sometimes men will take the whole lot and go and spend it on themselves, whether it's through gambling or their addiction or heading down to the pub with their mates.

Social abuse is another tactic - the isolation from friends. And this often happens over time; it happens subtly. Often a perpetrator can be really difficult around friends and family, 'You don't need them. You just need me.' And it happens over time where a perpetrator can erode people's relationships and family and friends, and a woman might find herself completely isolated. Similarly, perpetrators also socially abuse by controlling everywhere their partner goes. They know where they are, they can track them, they text them, and with all the digital technology these days, we are finding that's getting worse and worse.

I also just want to recognise spiritual abuse is also being formed as a tactic of violence. And that's where a perpetrator stops someone from practising their religion or practising their religious rituals like prayer or going to church. But it can also mean the misuse of scriptural teachings to justify, minimise or excuse violence against women.

**Tania:** What would you say to someone who's listening to this, and perhaps what you've mentioned, well it's ticking some of the boxes for what could be a domestic violence situation, but at the same time that person is thinking, 'oh it's not that bad.'

**Sarah:** If there is something in your gut, that you are worried about, it's there for a reason. And I want to talk about fear. Fear is a wonderful intuition. If you are feeling fearful - you've

got to walk on eggshells, you're fearful of your partner, you're fearful of consequences of your actions, you're fearful for your children - I want you to listen to that gut. And I would encourage you also that you understand your own relationship, you understand your own safety, so back yourself, listen to your gut instinct. And think about 'who might I have a conversation with about that if it's bothering me?' So I would like to encourage you to reach out to trusted people or a number like 1800RESPECT just to have that conversation.

**Tania:** With the area of domestic and family violence, is there any research that it is more prevalent in certain groups in society, in certain, cultural groups, in certain, socioeconomic groups?

**Sarah:** No. No one is immune to domestic and family violence. It happens across the board, no matter how much money you earn or how poor you are. It doesn't matter whether you come from this cultural background or that cultural background. It doesn't matter if you subscribe to this religion or that religion. The only thing that stands out significantly is the perpetration rate. Who is the perpetrator of this?

Research all over the world - the World Health Organization, the United Nations all reaffirm this - gender inequality enables domestic and family violence. The two have a very, very close relationship.

There is debate, some will say, that the perpetration of domestic and family violence is not caused by any of that. It's caused by men who drink too much, or it's caused by those who take drugs. But what what we argue is it doesn't *cause* domestic and family violence, it just makes it worse. So, often women will say, 'he's awful' or 'he's worse when he's been drinking.' And so, a man might say, 'well, if I stop drinking, it won't happen.' But it doesn't change what sits underneath.

So, if we're going to have a conversation about domestic and family violence, we need to have a conversation about how we understand what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman.

**Tania:** So, Sarah, we've been hearing you talk about how domestic violence affects families of all demographics and backgrounds, and hearing some of the facts and research, it all sounds very grim. But where is the hope for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence? Is there hope?

**Sarah:** I think there has to be hope, otherwise, what would they mean if there wasn't?

I've worked in my time across multiple women's shelters in this country responding to women who are fleeing from violence. So that makes me hopeful.

We have research looking at how do we understand men. and who men want to be, what are their values and ethics? How do they want to be as a good husband, a good father? We are now opening up that space about how best to talk to men about that

In our schools, in our young people, I see so much more respect and understanding. I see boys shaking each other's hand and saying, 'I love you, mate.' I see boys hugging each other. I see men taking time off from their work to look after their children and have paternity leave. I see women having leave. This is wonderful. This gives me hope.

**Tania:** I know you hold a Christian faith, Sarah. Is there something within your faith that gives you hope?

**Sarah:** As a woman who has grown up in the Lutheran Church, and part of my identity is Christianity, what gives me hope is that we have church leaders, congregations, the

church community for the very first time in my lifetime of 50 years saying, 'we cannot keep doing this in terms of domestic and family violence. We need to understand it and we need to respond to it. This is a bit nerve wracking, but we need to be part of the solution. And one of the most powerful parts of the solution is the theological leadership that leaders in the church can offer around how we understand love, respect and equality.'

That gives me the biggest hope I could ever ask for. And I want to thank God, and I only pray that that conversation moves forward with respect and safety so that we can all come together to solve this issue.

**Tania:** So how can people best respond if someone they know seems to be in a domestic violence situation?

**Sarah:** If someone discloses or tries to tell you they're experiencing some form of harm or they're fearful for their safety, the best thing you can do is believe them. Be curious and create a safe space where they can tell you what's worrying them. Then refer. It's okay to ring the police if you're feeling really worried. Or it might be saying 'is it okay if we catch up for a cup of coffee in the next couple of days and we think about what we might do together?' 1800RESPECT is one of the best telephone services anyone can call.

I want to encourage people that if you're okay just to believe, be a good listener, hold respect, hold safety, and refer, you're doing exceptionally well.

The research has shown us that if women, particularly women and children, don't get that response and they get the opposite of you do not believe them, you start judging and questioning them, making them feel you. nervous or silly for coming forward that can put back years of someone asking for help. So I just, at that moment, it's really important in being a good human being, be kind, be respectful, because it will have a significant impact on what might happen next.

**Tania:** So what advice would you give to those who are survivors of domestic violence?

**Sarah:** What I've learned from talking to women victims of domestic violence, is women really value their families. Women really value their children. And many women try and stay for the sake of their relationship with the children to the father. So women cope with this for a long time. And so what I want to say is when it gets to crisis point, I want to encourage women to use that crisis point as an opportunity. It's nothing about them. It's nothing about their weakness. It's an opportunity.

**Tania:** And if you had the opportunity to speak to perpetrators of domestic violence, what would you say?

**Sarah:** Violence is not helping you. It will never help you get what you want. It is okay to ask for help. It's okay to say, 'I'm not getting this right.'

So I want men to reach into their values and their ethics. I want them to imagine who they want to be as father, as a husband, as a man. I want them to love themselves.

And it's okay to hope for something different. But be genuine and be ready for that because that is also one of the hardest journeys a man will go on.

And so I wanted to just to encourage women to listen to their gut. But also I want to encourage friends, families, communities that wrap around victims who potentially might

be reaching out, just to be aware of the danger a perpetrator can have. That's often what we underestimate in society, because we often think, 'Nah, I know him, he's alright.' Or, we can often go to 'yeah, but he's really stressed. Oh, we would understand that he might be feeling that way.' 'Oh, but he's got a mental health issue.' 'Oh, but he drinks too much.' As soon as we start to invite these doubts into a domestic and family violence relationship, we are more likely as a society to kind of go, 'he's all right, it's not that bad.' And so what I want to say is, it is that bad. We can see it in the statistics. Women, when they're fearful, they're fearful for a reason. And we should pay attention to the volatile nature of his entitlement, his control, and his power, and understand what that does to people when they feel like they're about to lose it.

**Tania:** So have you got any final messages for those who are listening today to this very difficult topic?

**Sarah:** Perhaps from listening to this, maybe it just gives you an awareness, some knowledge, so that when there is an opportunity that someone perhaps might reach out to you or you see something that makes you uncomfortable, that you feel ready and as an ally to be able to hold that without fear. Listen to it, be curious about it and feel safe to refer it on. That can be one of the most significant things you can do as a member of the community.

*If you're experiencing domestic or family violence, or you're feeling unsafe at all, 1800RESPECT is a helpline for free confidential counselling and support services for whatever situation you're in. Or visit [1800RESPECT.org.au](http://1800RESPECT.org.au) for more resources and information.*

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