

Submission to the
Independent Commission into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence

Molly Dragiewicz

Associate Professor
Criminology and Criminal Justice
Griffith University
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Contact: 07 5552 7040
m.dragiewicz@griffith.edu.au

Who am I?

I am an expert on domestic and family violence. I have 27 years of experience researching gender-based violence and abuse and responses to it. I have published 83 scholarly books, articles, research reports, and book chapters on gender-based violence. The majority of this research is explicitly focused on domestic and family violence, including post-separation abuse which carries heightened risks of lethal violence and other harmful outcomes to women and their children. In addition to my expertise as a researcher, I have been a member of the Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Advisory Board since 2019. This role provides a privileged position to acquire knowledge of the areas where systems responses could be improved to prevent future domestic and family violence-related deaths.

Why am I responding to this call for submissions?

As one of Australia's most experienced domestic and family violence researchers, my remarks are informed by the research evidence on the questions under consideration. I will not duplicate recommendations from the reports and other publications of the Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Advisory Board, as these have already been provided to the Commission.

I address the questions raised in the Terms of Reference Commissions of Inquiry Order (No.2) 2022 below.

a) whether there is, and if so, the extent and nature of, any cultural issues within the Queensland Police Service (QPS) relating to the investigation of domestic and family violence identified in the Report

Publicly available research with QPS staff on culture issues is limited. What is available is subject to the Queensland Police Service Research Policy which limits most discretionary research to studies in support of QPS's Strategic Goals that is supported by the area of QPS that will be affected by the research. Publications and presentations from this research are subject to review by the Queensland Police Service Research Committee Secretariat prior to publication, unless otherwise negotiated with the Chair, QPSRC. In addition, approved research can be terminated at any time by any Senior Executive within the QPS. Research that is not approved by the Queensland Police Service Research Committee must not commence with QPS resources (QPS, 2022). In other words, QPS serves a gatekeeping role in approving and recruiting participants for most discretionary research. When research is approved, QPS engages in assistance such as selecting staff to participate, distributing surveys, and putting participants who have been vetted in touch with researchers.

A handful of studies provide research evidence of the impact of organisational culture on beliefs and attitudes about domestic and family violence in Australia. Maple and Kebbell's (2021) study of changing perceptions of frontline police officers

toward domestic and family violence found that QPS officers self-reported having high DFV awareness. Participants reported having extensive training on DFV and being aware of the complexity and nonphysical aspects of DFV, barriers facing the aggrieved and the respondent, and signs of controlling behaviour (p. 2391).

Participants self-reported what the researchers termed increased “open-mindedness” which participants described as being less judgmental, more objective in their assessment, and fairer to both parties (p. 2386). However, many of the quotations cited in the article also suggest a shift toward abuse-supportive beliefs and attitudes espoused by male domestic and family violence perpetrators.

The examples quoted in the article point to changes over time including:

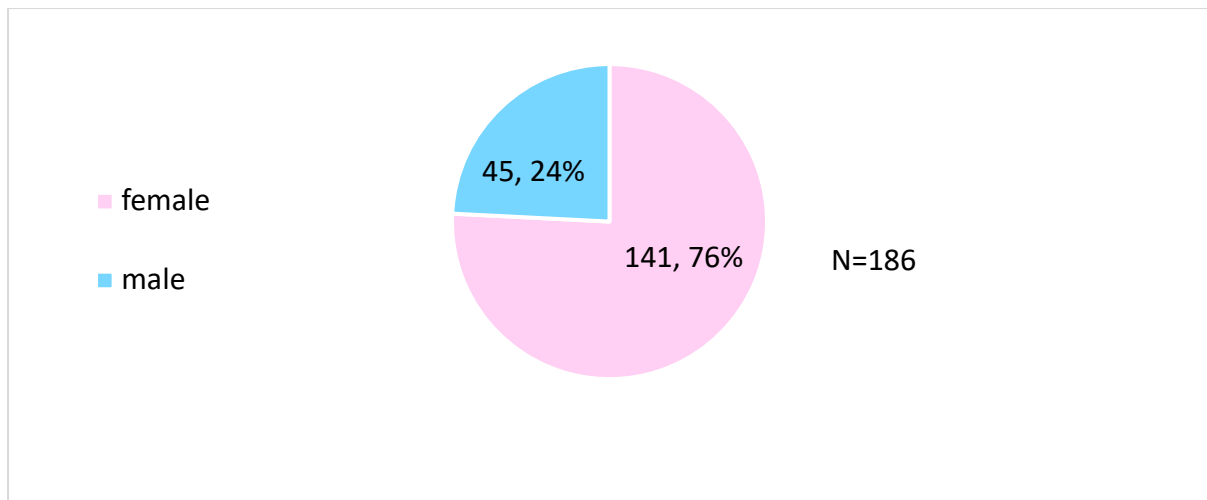
- increased empathy for respondents;
- increased belief that reports of domestic and family violence are mundane or frivolous;
- increased belief that women’s reports of domestic and family violence are false;
- increased beliefs that DFV is mutual;
- decreased empathy for aggrieveds.

While participants perceived these changes as evidence of professional development, these examples are contradicted by the research on the dynamics and distribution of domestic and family violence.

The most comprehensive source of evidence on the dynamics of domestic and family violence and its distribution and risks in Queensland is available from the Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Death Review (DFVDRU). Homicide is the least likely type of DFV to go unreported. Extensive information about DFV cases is available to the DFVDRU. Accordingly, this is a more comprehensive source of information than homicide data from Australian Institute of Criminology, which only include rudimentary contextual information. It also provides a fuller picture of DFV dynamics than self-report data from Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys, which suffer from the widely documented measurement challenges associated with survey research on DFV and necessarily exclude lethal violence.

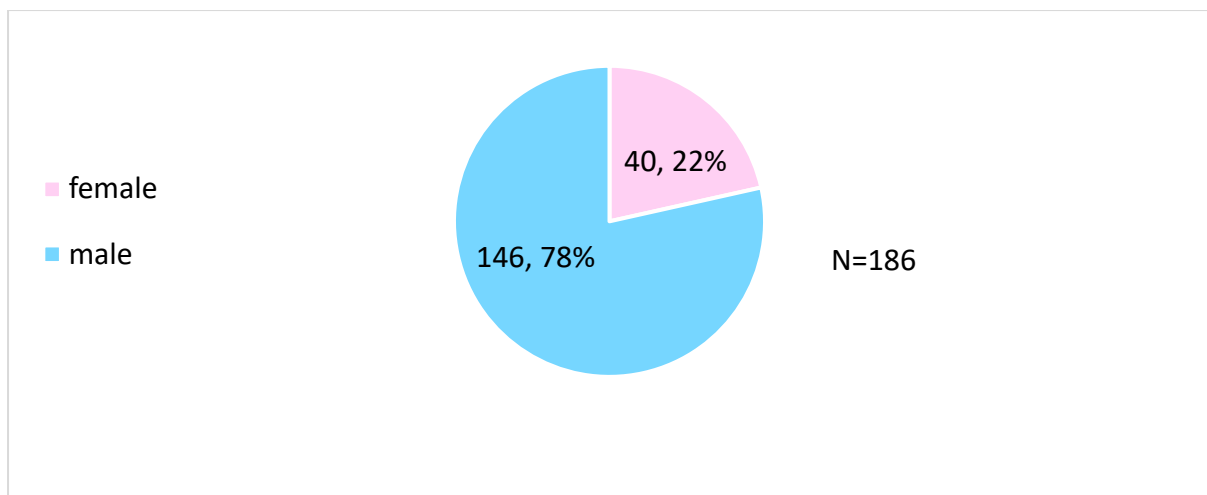
The Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board Report (DFVDRU, 2021) demonstrates that the risks of intimate partner homicide are profoundly gendered. As evidence from the DFVDRU Annual report 2020-2021 (2021, p. 25) shows, intimate partner homicide deceased are overwhelmingly female.

Figure 1. Partner violence deaths in QLD 1 July 2006 - 30 June 2021



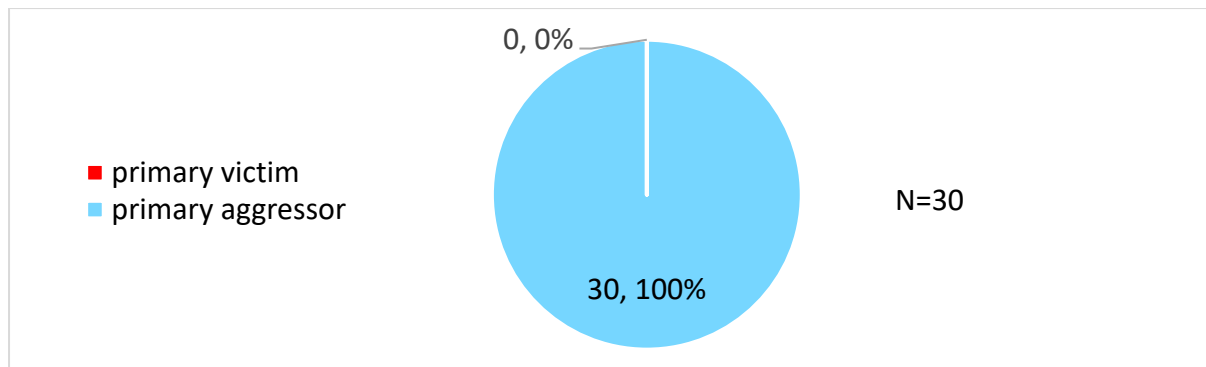
Conversely, perpetrators are overwhelmingly male.

Figure 2. Offenders in partner violence homicides in QLD 1 July 2006 and 30 June 2021



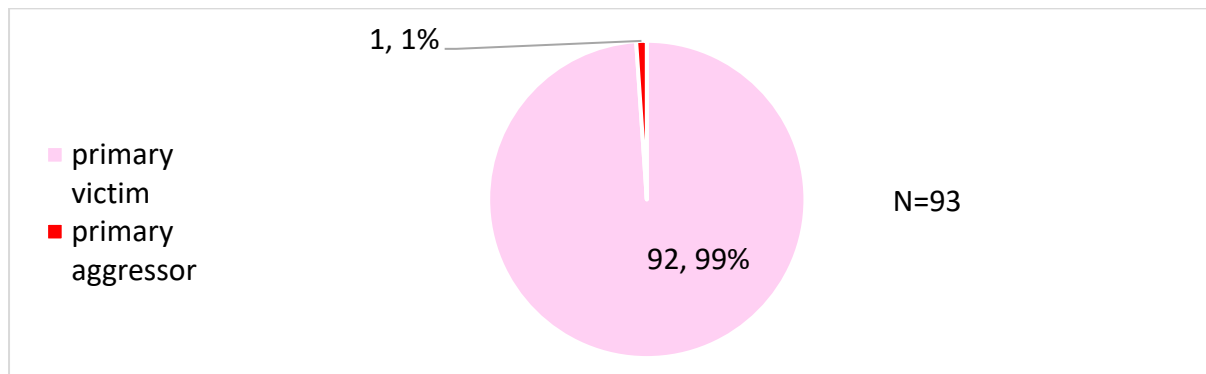
The sex differences in domestic violence dynamics are even greater when we consider that all of the male deceased in intimate partner homicides were primary aggressors in ongoing domestic and family violence in the relationship in the period under review.

Figure 3. Male IPH deaths in QLD 2006-2021



In contrast, all but one of the female deaths in intimate partner homicides were primary victims in a pattern of ongoing domestic and family violence in the relationship.

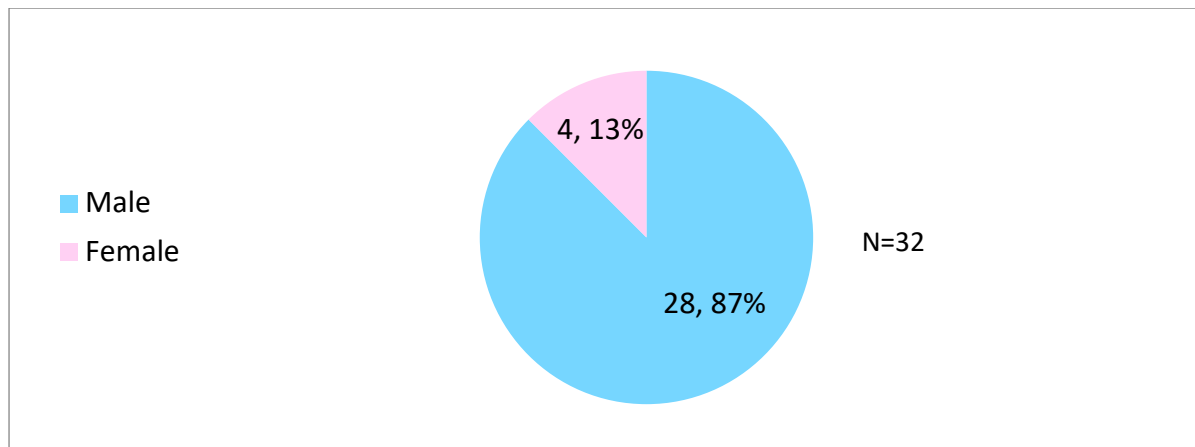
Figure 4. Female IPH deaths in QLD 2006-2021



The conflation of intimate partner and other family and domestic homicides, and the inclusion of collateral deaths in some reporting, make the statistics on DFV deaths difficult for the public to discern, which may account for some of the widespread misinformation in circulation about sex differences in intimate partner violence.

Contrary to widespread misconceptions, the risk of domestic and family violence also shows marked sex differences in same-sex couples (Gannoni & Cussen, 2014, p.3), with the greatest risks to male victims from male perpetrators.

Figure 5. Sex of victims of same-sex intimate partner homicide



In terms of overall risk, intimate partner violence is a significant portion of all lethal and sublethal crimes against women (DeKeseredy et al, 2017). Intimate partner homicide is the most common category of homicides of women and the least common category of homicides of men (Chan & Payne, 2013). Despite this clear evidence of pronounced sex differences in domestic violence risk, research with police officers in Queensland has found that 79% believe that women are just as likely as men to engage in DFV, and 88% believe that men abused by their partners are less likely than abused women to report DV (McPhedran et al., 2017, p. 220). This research suggests widespread misinformation about DFV within QPS. In addition, 65% of QPS officers reported they believe that many DV victims could easily leave their relationships but do not and 90% believe that too many DV calls are for verbal family arguments (McPhedran et al., 2017, p. 220).

These findings align with abuse-supportive ideologies held by male domestic violence perpetrators who research indicates minimise, deny, justify, and excuse their violence against intimate partners (Dragiewicz, 2011, p. 61). Recidivist DFV offenders often see themselves as the real victims, especially if police don't go along with their trivialisation of the incident (Buchbinder & Eisikovits, 2004). Abusers frame their violent acts as routine and marginal conflicts and evaluate police in light of their attitudes toward the incident, seeing "good policem[e]n" as those who are "focused on keeping the batterer out of trouble rather than on confronting him about the allegations of violence" (p. 450). The fact that almost a third (33%) of QPS officers reported that they are less likely to make an arrest if the suspect is cooperative at the scene raises concerns given that many abusers attempt to manipulate police by being friendly and cooperative with them. We saw these dynamics clearly demonstrated in the body-worn camera footage released following the Gabby Petito intimate partner homicide in the United States (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCGsW41aQEw>).

Significantly, such abuse-supportive beliefs are held alongside endorsement of contradictory statements such as "Most DV incidents stem from abusers' need for

power and control over victims” (78%) and “I am more likely to be injured during a DV call than any other type of call” (McPhedran et al., 2017, p. 220). These statements frame DFV as serious and dangerous, indicating the potential for deeper understanding of DFV.

While less than 1/3 of QPS officers agreed with the statement “more training would help me assess DV scenes” (McPhedran et al., 2017, p. 220), it appears that more training is in fact needed to correct prevalent misconceptions and beliefs that can potentially undermine police effectiveness responding to DFV calls.

In the first Australian study to investigate the relationship between police attitudes and behaviour in response to DFV calls, Islam and Mazerolle found that training was important to shaping attitudes which in turn shaped behaviour, noting,

“officers who had proactive attitudes (e.g. proarrest attitudes) were more likely to provide support services and take other actions, while officers who had reactive attitudes (e.g. minimum police involvement attitudes) were less willing to make DVO applications and take other actions. In addition, both training and confidence in handling aspects of a DFV case had robust impacts on a willingness to provide support services, make DVO applications, and willingness to take other actions.” (2022, p. 13)

Islam and Mazerolle found that officers who reported receiving training felt more confident responding to DFV calls (2022, p. 8), which may reduce resistance to engaging proactively with DFV calls. However, low response rates, self-selection into research samples, and gatekeeping of participants in some research with police suggest that research based on self-reports should be triangulated with impartial observation, victim reports, and reports from a broad range of QPS staff as enabled by this Inquiry.

b) how any cultural issues identified within the QPS relating to the investigation of domestic and family violence have contributed to the overrepresentation of First Nations people in the criminal justice system;

Buxton-Namisnyk’s (2021) recent research drawing on domestic and family violence death review data from multiple Australian jurisdictions including Queensland from 2006 and 2016 found that 88% of 68 First Nations women killed by an intimate partner had domestic violence related police contact prior to their deaths (p. 7).

“First Nations women routinely and repeatedly experienced police reluctance and inaction following domestic violence. Police failures to act involved both failures to enforce law and policy, and failures to respond to domestic violence callouts in a timely fashion (or sometimes at all). Such failures suggested systemic police apathy towards First Nations women as victims of violence,

contrary to the helpful, protective response perhaps anticipated by investment in this system.” (Buxton-Namisnyk, 2021 p. 7)

Buxton-Namisnyk found that in 73% of cases reviewed, First Nations women were described with language indicating they were “‘un-cooperative’ or ‘unwilling’ to work with police” even when they were the ones who had called police for help (2021, p. 9). This research suggests culture issues contributing to the overrepresentation of First Nations people in the criminal justice system as well as missed opportunities to prevent future deaths by responding proactively to victim calls for assistance with DFV.

Most salient to over-criminalisation is Buxton-Namisnyk’s finding that almost 1/3 of the First Nations women killed had been previously identified as a domestic violence perpetrator (2021, p. 13). Buxton-Namisnyk observed that,

“Across cases, police records typically did not appear to contextualize or understand the victim’s use of physical violence against her abusive partner, or the circumstances surrounding non-physical violence or arguments.” 2021, p. 13)

15% of the women had been named as defendants in domestic violence orders. While the context of these women’s use of violence was not always clear from available records, Buxton-Namisnyk observed that many of these cases included defensive violence and fights. This highlights the reality that legal definitions of DFV based on relationship status or residence do not align with what we understand as the social problem of DFV or coercive control.

c) the capability, capacity and structure of the QPS to respond to domestic and family violence, having regard to initiatives undertaken by the QPS in responses to previous reports and events.

Given the findings from the limited publicly available research, it appears that the actions already taken have not corrected shortcomings in the QPS response to DFV. QPS staff are likely not in the best position to assess their own progress on these issues. Independent research and evaluation are needed to assess this question. The survey planned by the Independent Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence will be an important source of information on this question, as will submissions to this Inquiry from current and former QPS staff, survivors, and DFV professionals.

d) the adequacy of the current conduct and complaints handling processes against officers to ensure community confidence in the QPS;

Again, this is best spoken to by the QPS officers and others who have made complaints against QPS. I do not know of any independent research on this specific question in Queensland.

e) AND any other matter the Commission considers relevant for consideration to deliver its Report.

Research with other professionals involved in domestic and family violence response tells us that self-reports of behaviour often fail to align with observations of actual behaviour. Professionals' ideologies and personal beliefs heavily shape their behaviour and can facilitate jumping to conclusions about DFV cases rather than gathering evidence to guide decision-making. However, high quality training and education about domestic violence, in combination with systematic procedures for screening for and evaluating DFV appears to be helpful to counter the personal biases that shape behaviour (Saunders et al., 2013; Saunders 2017).

Research has found that QPS recruits who participated in a values education programme did not report improved attitudes towards diversity in the workplace and related issues over time. However, participation did protect participants from the "clear decline in support for diversity associated with the standard recruit training experience" (Platz et al, 2017, p. 263). This study provides evidence of culture issues in QPS that could benefit from improvement. It also indicates the utility of training new recruits in an effort to inoculate them against socialisation into unhelpful organisational attitudes.

Resistance to organisational culture change is common in response to efforts to address systematic and structural gender inequality (VicHealth, 2018) and racism. The systematic use of tools and protocols to improve the consistency of DFV screening, assessment and response in practice has been shown to improve understanding of coercive control as well as professional responses to DFV (Ver Steegh & Davis, 2015). Campbell et al.'s (2018) research in Canada found that officers were generally supportive of using risk assessment tools as part of DFV response. They recommended that training should also address officer frustrations with DFV calls and commonly perceived barriers to using protocols.

Recommendations

1. Independent, evidence based expert domestic and family violence training be funded and provided to QPS
2. Training should address common misconceptions about domestic and family violence and abuse-supportive attitudes counterproductive to effective DFV response
3. Training should acknowledge the negative experiences reported by DFV victims to improve cultural competency
4. Implementation of independent external oversight of complaints about police conduct in response to domestic and family violence cases
5. Implementation of clear protocols and tools to facilitate evidence collection for domestic and family violence calls, such as questions to ask in script form
6. Improved protocols for determining the person most in need of protection

7. Since attitudes and beliefs predict behaviour, officer screening at recruitment should assess suitability for employment in a job where 40% of work is domestic and family violence calls
8. Independent expert research on QPS culture and responses to DFV should be funded in Queensland

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