

Counting Dead Women: Call to end violence against women

1. Summary of the impact

With statistics showing that one woman dies as a result of partner violence every week in Australia, the activist group Destroy The Joint launched the project Counting Dead Women to raise awareness of these numbers and use this data to change this trend.

The campaign, which counts all known reported cases of fatal violence against women, has been regularly referenced nationally, and the various campaigns have made a significant contribution to women's rights issues on a social, corporate, legal and political level.

2. Problem

Data from the Australian Institute of Criminology shows that one woman is killed by her partner or former partner in Australia every week. Between 2002-03 and 2011-12, family and domestic homicides accounted for close to half of all homicides. That equates to one woman dying from intimate partner homicide every seven-to-eight days in 2011-12.

The trend in more recent years remains shockingly similar. In 2015, 80 women across Australia died as a result of violence against them, and a similar figure was recorded in 2016, with 73 victims. According to the Counting Dead Women project led by the anti-sexism group Destroy The Joint, an estimated 80 per cent of these deaths were the result of violence by a partner, or family member of person known to the victim.

Furthermore, a 2015 report commissioned by the federal government finds attitudes of blaming the victim are still "firmly entrenched" in Australian society. "Reducing Violence Against Women and Their Children" surveyed 1000 Australians, finding that too often males escaped blame for domestic violence. The report found young men were taught to blame others for violence, while young women internalised the experience by blaming themselves.

The report also found that Indigenous women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of domestic violence than non-Indigenous women, and women from migrant or refugee communities face particular vulnerabilities when it comes to domestic violence.

Despite the rising public awareness of domestic abuse, there have been cuts in funding to support safe refuges and initiatives that serve to reverse this concerning trend.

3. Beneficiaries

Women in Australia are the key focus group for the Counting Dead Women initiative which launched in 2014. In particular, the project is designed to be a national record of violence against women; to provide information about fatal violence; and to provide information to those women in abusive homes and violent relationships, and those who are at risk of experiencing violence. There is a gap in the information available from government sources. Although each state and territory collects its own data, differing criteria are used. The Counting Dead Women project fills this gap.

The project is led by activist group Destroy The Joint, who have also campaigned specifically against the incarceration of Indigenous women withdrawing charges of domestic violence.

4. Approach to impact

In response to the shocking figures surrounding violence against women, the Destroy The Joint team took a predominantly educational approach. The Counting Dead Women initiative researches and records every reported femicide in Australia and publishes the information across social networks, with a strong focus on Facebook. It is modelled after Counting Dead Women UK, with the advice of its founder Karen Ingala Smith; and which was successful in increasing public awareness of the issue.

While the majority of offenders are men, the initiative also counts homicide cases in which the alleged killer is female because the motives are still often related to internalised misogyny and lateral violence.

Depending on the campaigns, the team uses different techniques to tackle the issue, which may include traditional and social media campaigns, protests and marches, boycotts and petitions. In addition, the group has collaborated with other organisations to achieve the desired change, specifically when targeting business and corporations.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

According to Destroy The Joint cofounder Jenna Price, UTS academic, feminist activist, and Fairfax journalist, fatal violence against women was an issue which attracted little coherent coverage in mainstream media. Coverage of women's issues often focussed on lifestyle rather than the difficult issue of violence.

The Counting Dead Women initiative has contributed to a change in coverage and content, and the information which has been collected and published by the group has been widely referenced in mainstream Australian media, including the Sydney Morning Herald, the Guardian, the Australian, the ABC and SBS. As a result, the Australian public has become more aware of the shocking numbers of victims, and gained an insight into the human stories behind homicide.

In addition, the team has launched targeted campaigns to change corporate and government policy.

The team instigated a campaign against communications giant Telstra which was charging customers to obtain a silent number. Women who sought silent numbers as a way of keeping violent partners away were charged a fee, a charge which many women living in poverty escaping violent partners could not afford. Family breakdown is a leading cause of poverty among women. Thanks to this campaign, women who escaped domestic violence or have an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) against their former partner are able to receive silent numbers free of charge. This was achieved through a persistent email and phone campaign over a two-week period targeting Telstra management, and this initiative made a significant change in the lives of these women by giving them a new sense of security.

Destroy The Joint also supported campaigns to change legislation related to strangulation in Queensland. The team found that statistically, if a woman has had a non-fatal strangulation attack against her, she is eight times more likely to be killed by that same partner. Thanks to combined efforts of many parties, the Queensland government changed legislation to make strangulation a separate offence and not categorise it as general assault. Destroy The Joint is campaigning with others to introduce these laws in other states and territories.

Indigenous affairs have also been on the agenda due to the fact that many Indigenous women were charged with mischievous conduct when they reported an assault and withdrew the charges. However, in actual fact Indigenous women are more likely to withdraw assault charges for cultural reasons, not due to malicious intentions. As a result, the Destroy The Joint team lobbied the NSW Department of Justice in collaboration with Indigenous women from various communities in northern NSW to ensure that the police would no longer raise those mischievous conduct charges.

Destroy The Joint has also campaigned, along with many other groups, for better treatment of women held in refugee camps, including women who are denied or rationed pads and tampons and a pregnant refugee who was denied the medical treatment she needed.

The movement has also enabled women to approach the activist group and seek help on a more individual level. Common enquiries come from women who want to leave their relationships but fear violence, poverty or homelessness if they take this step. The team has been able to direct these women – and family and friends who have sought advice – to organisations and shelters where they can seek help and support.

5.2. Impact

The Counting Dead Women initiative has a clear feminist goal, which is to stop violence against women, and all of the Destroy The Joint efforts are directed towards enabling women to participate fully in society. According to Jenna Price, the ultimate goal is a society in which women can walk home at night – and live in their homes – without fear,

receive equal pay and not be discouraged from taking positions of power in corporate and government roles. Destroy The Joint seeks a coherent national database and consistent national laws protecting women and their children.

The long term desired impact is a longitudinal goal that will no doubt extend beyond the life of this specific program and will only be achieved through collaborative and continued efforts of a broad range of stakeholders. The team behind Destroy The Joint has, however, made an important contribution to the foundational work needed to achieve this goal.

By reaching out to women who are affected by violence, the movement is working towards empowering women to understand and act on their rights to protection.

In addition, the policy changes resulting from their campaigns have set the tone for future legislation and public policy relating to crimes and violence against women, and the group is determined to continue this important work.

Most importantly, by spreading the word through national media, the movement has influenced social and cultural perception of the issue, which has previously been downplayed, and the numbers gathered by Counting Dead Women have been referenced across the nation, including academia.

In the hopes of having a wider social and cultural impact, the movement will continue to collect data, research and publish the stories and numbers of women who have died violently. The campaigns are also incorporated in teaching at UTS with the aim of educating younger generations, who will play an important role in achieving the impact.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

The team consists of six administrators and an average of 20 moderators at any one time, who collaborate to push campaigns and gather ideas. The various team members also take turns in responding to enquiries and populate the site with content. All members are volunteers.

The key domains of expertise comprised within the group include social work, counselling, health science, mental health, medicine, journalism, graphic design and marketing. Team members are academics and teachers, but also activists and professionals who have previously worked in healthcare, trade unions and as public servants.

6.2. External enabling factors

The initiative is heavily reliant on donations from private individuals via social networking sites and volunteers to operate.

Although the project initially attracted a certain level of cross university ambivalence due to the perceived risks to the institution, it has always received strong leadership support.

Having executive level backing from UTS has given the project the space and opportunity to develop over time. As a result, an initiative that began as activism has grown to become a learning opportunity for UTS students and has offered research potential. Most recently the group has collaborated with the School of Health to launch a research project based on the Counting Dead Women initiative, specifically investigating the patterns of domestic abuse, which are very complex.

The UK Counting Dead Women team have also provided guidance and advice on how to launch the movement and manage the process. In addition, the online policy makers at Facebook Australia assisted the team and taught them how their site can protect itself from online trolls, and how to best respond to criticism in a professional manner. The Facebook team has also helped them present the often confronting content while still complying with social networking regulations.

Support was also found on a human level and Jenna Price affirms the importance of kindness. As the movement is often subject to criticism, opposition and trolling, morale can be low and the journey can be frustrating. According to Price, even a kind gesture by a stranger in the hallway can make all the difference in getting a boost and the strength to continue the work.

7. Challenges

The key challenges remain access to resources and support.

While the movement supports an important cause, the Facebook page in particular is a regular target for men's rights activists and other related groups. The site has often had issues posting content without being reported or blocked, and the help from Facebook was an important step towards overcoming this challenge.

In addition, the project is still funded through donations and much more significant impacts could be achieved if funding was made available. For instance, Jenna Price stressed the need of bringing in mental health professionals and counsellors who could help the group better mentor the women who reach out to them. Not only would they be beneficial for the target group, but also for the team as being confronted with stories of abuse, violence and family tragedy can be emotionally straining.

8. Associated research

9. References

<https://www.dss.gov.au/women/publications-articles/reducing-violence-against-women-and-their-children>

<https://www.facebook.com/DestroyTheJoint/>

<http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/news-and-views/news-features/counting-dead-women-and-domestic-violence-in-australia-how-did-we-do-in-2016-20161230-gtjqkf.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/global/ng-interactive/2015/mar/17/these-women-are-not-statistics-deaths-in-australia-in-2015>

<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/11/23/one-death-too-many-calls-reduce-domestic-violence-deaths-white-ribbon-day>