

Violence against women: why higher reporting might be good

TO THE EDITOR: In March 2016, the television program *Foreign Correspondent* aired a story of Rosie Batty — Australian of the Year 2015 — travelling to Sweden to explore why such a progressive country and world leader in gender equality has “a dark and shameful side to [its] story” of family violence.¹ The reporter Sally Sara stated that 46% of Swedish women experienced physical or sexual violence by men. That figure, based on interviews with 42 000 women from 28 member countries of the European Union, showed that Sweden at 46% and Denmark at 52% had the highest rates of women reporting physical or sexual violence, while on the other end of the spectrum, Polish women reported the lowest rate at 19%.² In Australia, 41% of women aged 18 years and over said that they had experienced sexual or physical violence, the most likely perpetrator being a partner or date.³

Such differences may say more about the cultures of reporting in countries than about the real extent of violence (which is a broader term) or rape. For example, does the higher rate of women reporting rape to police in countries such as Sweden, Belgium and the United Kingdom² reflect a higher actual incidence of rape in these countries? Or is the EU report correct in its interpretation that “the higher the recorded figures ... the more this reflects that the system for encouraging reporting, recording and prosecution of rape is working”?²

Rather than calling this “dark and shameful”, the opposite could be said; that this high reporting is an expression of women feeling able to disclose. Regardless of value judgements about Sweden, all countries, including Australia, can do more to prevent and deal with physical and sexual violence. Family or domestic violence is a major concern worldwide and attention has been drawn to the role that general practitioners, health professionals and the broader community can play in prevention and early intervention.^{4,5} However, to draw the conclusion, as was done in the program, that a higher reporting of violence equates to a higher incidence is to ignore the complex and nuanced nature of evidence and interpretation. ■

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doi: 10.5694/mja16.00350

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- 4 World Health Organization. Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. 2013. http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625_eng.pdf?ua=1 (accessed June 2016).
- 5 It's Time to Talk [website]. When she talks to you about the violence. A toolkit for GPs in NSW. Sydney: City of Canterbury—Bankstown Council; 2007. <http://itstimetotalk.net.au/gp-toolkit/> (accessed May 2016). ■