

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S HISTORY NETWORK

The period between 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women) and 10 December (Human Rights Day) is recognised globally as [16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence](#). Since 1991, this campaign has worked to draw attention to and fight the shocking extent of gender-based violence around the world. According to the [United Nations](#), violence against women and girls 'remains the most prevalent and pervasive human rights violation in the world,' with a woman being killed intentionally by a partner or family member every ten minutes. In Australia, two in five women have experienced violence since the age of fifteen, and Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, migrant, disabled, and queer women experience even greater [rates of violence](#). This situation is unacceptable.

During the 16 Days of Activism, the [Australian Women's History Network](#) (AWHN) wishes to draw attention to the fight against gender-based violence from a historical perspective. As a collective of feminist and gender historians, we know that such violence, and efforts to fight it, have a long history.

Individuals and collectives have often taken the matter into their own hands, working to draw attention to this issue of gender-based violence publicly. In the nineteenth century, for instance, women in colonial Australia discussed experiences of [marital rape](#) in their writing as a protest against violence. Since then, feminists and other activists and public figures have continued this work. People like the politician Olive Zakharov have publicly shared their stories of [domestic violence](#). In the 1970s, members of the Women's Liberation Movement took matters into their own hands, establishing places such as [Elsie Women's Refuge](#) and Night Shelter that could be safe havens for people experiencing violence and abuse.

Decades later, demonstrations and rallies are still constantly being held to protest gender-based violence in its many forms. Since 1978, Reclaim the Night has been observed around the country, and Walk Against Family Violence events have been held widely since 2009. The 2021 [March4Justice](#) was a flashpoint, and this year the rallies organised by Aboriginal collectives [NO MORE](#) and [What Were You Wearing Australia](#) have drawn attention to those women killed in instances of gender-based violence since the start of 2024.

The AWHN acknowledges the policy and legislative developments that have unfolded in recent years with the intention to address, reduce, and prevent domestic violence. These include, but are not limited to, new measures in [NSW](#) and [Queensland](#) that criminalise coercive control, the Victorian government's [ten-year Plan for Change](#), and the WA government's [2020–2030 Path to Safety strategy](#). In [September 2024](#), prime minister Anthony Albanese described domestic violence in Australia as a 'national crisis', and declared national cabinet's aim of 'ending family, domestic and sexual violence in a generation'. In the face of these measures, however, violence against women in Australia continues to occur at a horrific and devastating rate. The citizen scientists [Sherele Moody Femicide Watch](#) and [Dangerous Females](#) have been crucial in recording this underreported data. According to their count, [97 women have been killed so far in Australia in 2024](#).

The AWHN expresses its dismay at this state of affairs, and condemns in the strongest terms the ongoing prevalence of gender-based violence. The AWHN has [long been committed to raising awareness](#) about such violence. As the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence wraps up for 2024, we call for sustained engagement from government, NGOs, the not-for-profit sector, and our communities with what is an enduring and increasingly urgent problem. If this devastating level of violence is to be tackled and reduced, we must continue to pay attention, to take action, and to shed light on its ubiquity. The historical perspective provided through the work of our members

highlights not just the prevalence of gender-based violence but also the massive scale of the problem. We add our voices to those of the feminists and women's rights advocates who have been fighting back, and agitating for change, since at least the nineteenth century.

Recommended Reading

Alana Piper and Ana Stevenson, eds., *Gender Violence in Australia: Historical Perspectives* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2019).

Dorothy Scott and Shurlee Swain, *Confronting Cruelty: Historical Perspectives on Child Abuse* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

Elizabeth Nelson, *Homefront Hostilities: The First World War and Domestic Violence* (Kew: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014).

Graham Willett and Yorick Smaal, eds., *Intimacy, Violence and Activism: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives on Australasian History and Society* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013).

Hannah McGlade, *Our Greatest Challenge: Aboriginal Children and Human Rights* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012).

Heather Nancarrow, *Unintended Consequences of Domestic Violence Law: Gendered Aspirations and Racialised Realities* (Cham: Springer, 2019).

Jill Bavin-Mizzi, *Ravished: Sexual Violence in Victorian Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1995).

Jocelyn Scutt, ed., *Even in the Best of Homes: Violence in the Family* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1983).

Judith A. Allen, *Sex & Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women since 1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* (North Geelong: Spinifex Press, 2002).

Kate Fitz-Gibbon, *Our National Shame: Violence against Women* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2021).

Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Lisa Featherstone, *Sexual Violence in Australia, 1970s –1980s: Rape and Child Sexual Abuse* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Michelle Arrow, *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political and the Making Of Modern Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2019).

Robert Mason, ed. *Legacies of Violence: Rendering the Unspeakable Past in Modern Australia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).

Tanya Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Yorick Smaal, Andy Kaladelfos, and Mark Finnane, eds. *The Sexual Abuse of Children: Recognition and Redress* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2016).

The Australian Women's History Network (AWHN) is convened by Chelsea Barnett, Micaela Pattison, Michelle Staff and Ana Stevenson. The AWHN is affiliated with the International Federation for Research in Women's History <http://www.ifrwh.com/index.html>

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The AWHN's journal is *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal* www.auswhn.org.au/lilith/ | Twitter/X: [@LilithJournal](https://twitter.com/LilithJournal)