

MEDIA RELEASE

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Church agencies at the frontline of family violence call for greater whole-of-church response

Australia's largest Catholic social service agencies want more advocacy, education, and collaboration within the institutional Church to improve the response to the scourge of family violence, a new report has found.

Caritas Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia, and Catholic Health Australia worked with experts at Australian Catholic University to study their unique contribution to the prevention of and response to family violence. It is the first time these Church agencies have investigated the response to family violence by their partners and members in Australia and overseas.

A report into the study reveals the overwhelming pressure being felt by Catholic social service agencies responding to family violence crises in Australia, the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa.

The study, facilitated by ACU's Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU) and led by ACU's Professor Susan Broomhall and Dr Mary Noseda, engaged with Catholic agencies that provided family violence services between 2020 and 2021, the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It found the global pandemic not only exacerbated the rates of family violence but forced frontline workers to find innovative ways to communicate with clients, including placing staff in shopping centres, and offering tele-support on encoded platforms like WhatsApp, to ensure their safety.

Professor Broomhall said sadly there weren't enough services to meet the demanding increase of family violence around the world. This was caused by a range of factors including a lack of funding and an ongoing stigma against discussing family violence in public or associating with responding agencies.

"Importantly, the report highlights the significant influence of pro-active support from senior clergy, particularly the local Ordinary, which frontline workers felt was key to providing effective services and especially in reducing the stigma associated with family violence," Prof Broomhall said.

"However, too often workers responding to family violence incidents felt their work was largely reactive to an incident as opposed to establishing initiatives that would alleviate causes of violence in the first place."

ACU's report makes five recommendations to ensure a whole-of-church response to domestic violence that can support and complement the frontline work of Catholic social service agencies.

Dr Noseda said the report highlighted that responding to violence was a pressing and ongoing matter for the Catholic Church.

"The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference's 2022-2023 Social Justice Statement affirmed the work being done by faith communities and organisations, including the social service agencies at the heart of our study, in supporting those who experience domestic and family violence and abuse," Dr Noseda said.

“Nearly two years later, our study reveals that those at the coalface of responding to family violence are faced by increasing challenges and limitations which impacts the impact they have in combatting this scourge.

“These agencies are calling for a whole-of-church approach to put an end to family violence.”

Since 2020, the SESU has matched ACU experts and academics with organisations who support communities experiencing disadvantage or marginalisation. Applications for Community Expression of Interests opens on Monday 5 February and close on Tuesday 12 March.

For more information [visit the SESU website](#) or contact the SESU manager, Vivien Cinque, at sesu@acu.edu.au.

Professor Sue Broomhall and Dr Mary Nosedá are available for interview.