

THE AUSTRALIAN

Fiona Richardson's story fails the gender test

BETTINA ARNDT | THE AUSTRALIAN | MARCH 30, 2016 12:00AM

Daniel Andrews today responds to the report from Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence.

The Victorian Premier will be joined by Australia's first Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence, Fiona Richardson, who exposed her own family's violent history on the ABC's *Australian Story* this week.

Ironically, the program was a classic example of the misleading, distorted way the issue of domestic violence is being dealt with in this country.

It's hard to imagine a more striking illustration of our society's determination to focus only on aggression by men and whitewash the role of women in family violence.

In graphic detail, Richardson revealed her family background at the hands of her violent father.

Almost the entire program focused on this chilling story: her brother hitting the floor "like a bag of spuds" after a punch from the drunken father, the family living in fear of the man's violent attacks.

There was only the briefest mention of the other side of this story, the reason Richardson's mother, Veronica Power, gave for her attraction to such an aggressive man. "I thought beating was normal because my mother always beat me," she said.

That's not all. She mentions in passing that her violent mother, who had five husbands, required her to "spend time" with a man who was her current partner's son, a man 20 years older than Power, who was 14 at the time. He groomed her and took her virginity.

So the violent grandmother sets up her teenage daughter to be groomed for sex by this much older man — a man with whom the grandmother apparently also shared an intimate relationship, and the man who ultimately became Richardson's father.

How come this extraordinary story of the sexual exploitation of a daughter by her violent mother rates only the briefest mention in a program in which the father's behaviour is examined in endless detail?

Here we have a Minister of Family Violence whose own story illustrates the truth about family violence — namely that most families with a history of violence include female as well as male perpetrators. As one of the ministers responsible for implementing changes in

response to the royal commission's recommendations, one might have thought Richardson's family history would prompt more enlightened, less gender-biased consideration.

That seems unlikely. Like almost all the major players in the domestic violence scene, Richardson seems determined to downplay the role of female violence and perpetuate many of the lies and distortions that dominate discussion of this issue in Australia.

"Family violence is the leading contributor to death, injury and disability in Victorian women," reads the leading statistic in a report on a Family Violence Index released under her name last year.

As I pointed out last year in an article on dodgy domestic violence statistics ("Silent Victims"), this claim is totally wrong. Our best source of data on the subject, from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, shows the top five causes of death, disability and illness combined for Australian women aged 15-44 are anxiety and depression, migraine, type-2 diabetes, asthma and schizophrenia.

Domestic violence doesn't even make the list.

Yet the same false statistic is endlessly trotted out by politicians, including Andrews on this week's *Australian Story*. All of the key government bodies working on domestic violence and media sources such as the ABC have been presented with evidence they are using a wrong, misleading statistic — a truth they choose to ignore.

We'll learn today whether the royal commission has been hoodwinked by the constant stream of lies and misinformation promoted in the current cultural dialogue, where the deliberate use of wrong statistics is used to promote men as the only villains. The reality is very different.

More than 1700 articles in peer-reviewed journals conclude domestic violence is not a gender issue; both women and men are actively involved in most violence in the home; women often initiate violence, and it isn't simply self-defence.

Even though physical violence by women causes fewer injuries, it is by no means harmless, with women more likely to use weapons and men sustaining a third of the injuries from partner violence.

As Veronica Power could tell us, most children growing up in violent homes are cowering not just from their fathers, but their mothers as well — all available Australian data clearly shows women are the major abusers of children.

The royal commission was exposed to the truth about such matters by experts keen to correct some of the myths distorting the public debate.

Psychologist Peter Miller, professor of Violence Prevention and Addiction at Deakin University, argues for the need for evidence-based approaches that include addressing

contributing factors such as alcohol, drugs and mental health — issues commonly downplayed by those determined to see domestic violence as simply related to gender inequality.

It was interesting to note that Richardson describes her father as “a good man” with “oodles of charm”. Yet with alcohol that all changed. “When he was drunk, he was a very different man”.

Alcohol-related violence is a factor in a third of domestic violence incidents reported to police and two-thirds in Aboriginal communities, reports Miller, who has encountered enormous resistance to doing proper research into alcohol-related domestic violence: key organisations with access to domestic violence victims have not allowed research to be conducted and he has had constant difficulty attracting research funding.

There's a long way to go before the real causes of violence in the home are properly addressed in this country.

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