

“Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires”: How does the Song of Songs speak to Australia’s problem with intimate partner violence?

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ABSTRACT

The Song of Songs is ripe with fruitful metaphors and lush imagery. It is both an exploration of love and of the bodies making it. The Song is sublimely romantic and suggestively erotic poetry of the highest order. And it is difficult. There is the enigma of meaning: the density of poetic devices, ever so deftly deployed, requires careful consideration. And then there is the complexity of how it makes us, particularly Australians, feel: the Song is not a Christian Kama Sutra and yet it simultaneously elicits avoidance and awkwardness and arouses our interest. The Song of Songs is a sensuous celebration of intoxicating love, and there is much that Australian’s can learn from this rhapsody. Australia has a problem with love and with sex. Or, more accurately, we have a problem with intimate partner violence (IPV). One in six Australian women has experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner and, on average, one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner. This is not sex as it was intended. This is not love as it was intended. The Song of Songs – the God-given example of good love, sex, and relationship – demonstrates how love can and should be. This paper explores how the lover and the beloved model equality, consent, initiating and pursuing a respectful relationship, mutual desire, and love-in-community for all of us, especially Australians, to emulate.

To quote former Australian of the Year, Rosie Batty, domestic violence in Australia is an “epidemic” and it is gendered.¹ Since age fifteen, one in six Australian women (some agencies report one in four) have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner. One in four have experienced emotional abuse from an intimate partner. Intimate partner violence is the greatest health risk factor for women aged 25–44.² One woman a

¹ <https://www.news.com.au/national/politics/rosie-batty-says-domestic-violence-should-be-seen-as-akin-to-terrorism/news-story/8f1472e3ad60549edda0115f1122d35d> cf. The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 – 2022. Accessed: <https://www.dss.gov.au/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/the-national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children-2010-2022>

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia 2018* (Canberra: AIHW, 2018, Cat. no. FDV 2.), xi.

week is killed as a result of violence from a current or previous partner.³ Let's let that sink in: one woman a week. And, as I researched this paragraph, it was State of Origin Wednesday, which means a 40.7% increase in domestic violence for women and children.⁴ Of course, this phenomenon is not unique to Australia. When the football (that's soccer to us here in Australia) World Cup is on, domestic abuse rates increase by 38% when England lose.⁵ What is uniquely Australian, is the lack of recognition that this epidemic constitutes a national emergency. "A woman gets killed by her male partner every single week, and somehow that doesn't qualify as a tools-down national crisis even though if a man got killed by a shark every week we'd probably arrange to have the ocean drained."⁶ It is October and, as I finalise this article, 10 women have been murdered in the last 22 days.⁷ What can Australian society do, and what can the church in Australia do, to address this seemingly insurmountable culture of violence against women?

Firstly, it must be clarified that there are discrepancies in the research and statistics on family, domestic, sexual and intimate partner violence in Australia. Reported rates vary from study to study and year to year due to a number of factors: There is no common or consistent set of definitions; There is no consistent identification method (meaning full names and other personal data and ethnographic details are not provided); There are limited data about specific at-risk groups (such as Indigenous Australians, people with disability, and LGBTQIA people).⁸ Finally, there is no national oversight, so the data are fragmented due to having multiple organisations and sectors involved.⁹ These data gaps, along with, of course, the embarrassment, trauma and stigma surrounding reporting, means it is highly likely that family, domestic and sexual violence is under-reported.¹⁰ In this paper I will be citing the most recent Australian Government statistics, reported in the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia 2018*, except for when their data have

³ *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia 2018*, ix. Citing Willow Bryant & Samantha Bricknell, Homicide in Australia 2012–13 to 2013–14: National Homicide Monitoring Program report (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2017), 19.

⁴ <http://fare.org.au/domestic-violence-surge-state-of-origin-game-leaves-women-and-children-battered-and-bruised/>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/jul/01/blaming-football-for-domestic-violence-is-only-half-the-story-eva-wiseman>

⁶ Annabel Crabb, <http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/annabel-crabb-why-im-proud-to-be-a-bad-feminist-20150307-13y41c.html>

⁷ <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/we-despair-10-women-murdered-in-22-days/>

⁸ Issues of Family Violence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be discussed below. Outside the scope of this paper are issues of Domestic Violence unique to people with disability. For this discussion see Women With Disabilities Australia: <http://wwda.org.au/issues/viol/viol2001/odds/> Also outside the scope of this paper is Domestic Violence for LGBTQIA people. For this discussion see Australian Institute of Family Studies: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/intimate-partner-violence-lgbtq-communities>

⁹ *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia 2018*, 101.

The national data collection and recording framework will not be operational until 2022.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/Domestic_Violence/Report

¹⁰ The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence said the greatest problem limiting the data on family violence was the widespread under-reporting, as well as failure to identify the issues and gaps in recorded data on particular groups. Since the Royal Commission, AIHW has gone some way to addressing the data gaps. http://www.rcfv.com.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Reports/RCFV_Full_Report_Interactive.pdf

been superseded.¹¹ When discussing primary prevention strategies, I will be referring to the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*.¹²

Secondly, it would be wise to provide some definitions and engage in some necessary scope narrowing.

Family violence refers to violence between family members, typically where the perpetrator exercises power and control over another person. The most common and pervasive instances occur in intimate (current or former) partner relationships and are usually referred to as domestic violence. Sexual violence refers to behaviours of a sexual nature carried out against a person's will. It can be perpetrated by a current or former partner, other people known to the victim, or strangers.¹³

This paper focuses on intimate partner sexual violence, but necessarily discusses other types of domestic and family violence. An integral part of understanding any complex social problem like intimate partner violence, and how we might go about preventing it, is working to understand what causes it. Previously, much of the research had focused on a variety of single causes, such as evolution, physiology and neurophysiology, alcoholism, psychopathology and personality traits.¹⁴ More recent research recognises that causation is complex, and with multiple causes, and analyses the historical, sociocultural and social factors which contribute to the occurrence of intimate partner violence.¹⁵ Research into intimate partner violence explores prevention strategies, deterrents such as law reform, and responses like community services. This paper utilises social research compiled by the Australian Government, and is concerned with primary prevention strategies. This research shows that “key predictors of violence against women relate to how individuals, communities and society as a whole view the roles of men and women. Some of the strongest predictors for holding violence-supportive attitudes at the individual level are low levels of support for gender equality and following traditional gender stereotypes.”¹⁶ The government's *National Plan* “focuses on preventing violence by raising awareness and building respectful relationships” with an aim to foster “attitudinal and behavioural change at the cultural, institutional and individual levels.”¹⁷

¹¹ For example, Our Watch's facts and figures (<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/Understanding-Violence/Facts-and-figures>) on intimate partner violence resulting in death, are more up-to-date than AIHW's.

¹² *The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 – 2022* Accessed: <https://www.dss.gov.au/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/the-national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children-2010-2022> The National Plan is a bipartisan commitment of all Australian governments and was initiated by the Gillard government in 2010. This plan is in place until 2022.

¹³ *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia 2018*, ix.

¹⁴ For extensive examples of single-cause research, see National Research Council, *Understanding Violence Against Women*, (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 1996), 51-58. Accessed: <https://doi.org/10.17226/5127>

¹⁵ For example, *Change the Story* (<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/getmedia/0aa0109b-6b03-43f2-85fe-a9f5ec92ae4e/Change-the-story-framework-prevent-violence-women-children-AA-new.pdf.aspx>) is a national framework for preventing violence against women and their children and contributes to the *National Plan*. Both *Change the Story* and the *National Plan* investigated and cited evidence-based social research from reputable Australian and international organisations.

¹⁶ *National Plan*, 14 (Based on the research of VicHealth, 2009, National survey on community attitudes to violence against women 2009, Changing cultures, changing attitudes—preventing violence against women, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Carlton.)

¹⁷ *National Plan*, 10.

And this is where, I think, looking to the Song of Songs as God's given example – celebration, even – of love, sex, sexuality and relationship, can help men and women understand love and sexuality as they were intended. This paper will explore how the lover and the beloved, the woman and the man, exemplify primary prevention strategies – that is, how they model equality, consent, initiating and pursuing a respectful relationship, mutual desire, and love-in-community – since “primary prevention strategies have successfully reduced other complex social or health problems such as drink-driving and smoking.”¹⁸ I will be demonstrating this from an examination of Song of Songs 1:1-6, and an excursus through the adjuration refrain at 2:7; 3:5; and 8:4, and encouraging each of us, especially church-going Australians, to follow the example of the lover and the beloved, which will aid in the prevention of intimate partner violence.

Thirdly, I must acknowledge the rich tapestry of feminist scholarship that has gone before me and draw attention to the methodological frameworks which have influenced my own. The strands to this tapestry are many: feminist interpretation is diverse in its approach (interdisciplinary, literary, social), its focus (poetics, sexual ethics, characterisation), identity (Evangelical, Baptist), and its conclusions. A feminist interpretation is just like “most biblical studies and indeed like most academic disciplines... any single definition of what constitutes a “feminist reading” is necessarily reified.”¹⁹ As much as this discussion of intimate partner violence is located within social research which outlines primary prevention strategies, the exploration of the first six verses of Song of Songs and the adjuration refrain is located within a tradition which asserts that in Song of Songs “there is no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex.”²⁰ Hence, this paper is less of a survey of statistics on intimate partner violence, or feminist thinking on the Song, and more an exegetical study of linguistic and literary devices and how they show equality, attitudes to sexuality, and mutuality and how we may *apply* this to the prevention of intimate partner violence in an Australian context.

Surely the starting point for Song of Songs “must be to recognize that what lies before us on the page is love poetry”²¹ and “love poetry of the highest art.”²² And while the Song bears all the hallmarks of Hebrew poetry – it is terse, evocative and plentiful in its parallelism – the nature and force of the metaphors, imagery and figurative language will not always be clear or agreed upon. An important overarching point to consider as we examine the lover and the

¹⁸ *National Plan*, 14.

¹⁹ Amy-Jill Levine, “Introduction”, in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 14.

²⁰ Phyllis Trible, “Love’s Lyrics Redeemed,” in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Phyllis Trible (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 161.

²¹ Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on The Song of Son, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000) 17.

²² Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 1.

beloved's encounter is that, as Cheryl Exum puts it, "there are no real women in this text."²³ And, so it follows, there are no real men either. We must remember that this God-given example of love and relationship is a poetic creation. However, this does not mean their humanity and equality is not to be emulated. "The level of equality across our society as well as within individual relationships can have a significant impact on reducing violence against women."²⁴ The unequal distribution of power and the adherence to rigid or hierarchical gender roles reflects gendered patterns in the prevalence and perpetration of violence. "What is extraordinary in the Song is precisely the absence of structural and systemic hierarchy, sovereignty, authority, control, superiority, [and] submission, in the relation of the lovers."²⁵ In the Song we have a female protagonist who is assertive and determined, in love poetry which waxes rhapsodic over the good gift of human sexuality.

Unfortunately, the Song has not always been interpreted thus. A quick look to the Jewish history of interpretation will immediately yield an allegorical interpretation. And a cursory glance to the history of Christian interpretation shows predominantly allegorical interpretations stretch all the way back to Hippolytus and Origen and persist until the middle of the nineteenth century.²⁶ And once the tide of Christian interpretation turned to accepting the Song of Songs as exactly that – a collection of sublimely poetic songs – the discussion quickly devolved into imputations of pornography. In 1986, Michael Goulder worried that his "thoroughly sexual translations and interpretations reveal the Sublime Song to be nothing more"²⁷ "than a piece of high-class pornography."²⁸ By 1995, David Clines is able to claim that the lover of Song of Songs is a male fantasy, written by men and for men: "She has been the victim of male violence and anger (1.6), and she bears the marks of it on her face; and now the poet invites his readers to share his sight of the woman's humiliation. That is the very stuff of pornography."²⁹ It is solely men who have come to this conclusion. As we shall see in the detailed discussion of this verse below, the majority of commentators – women and men and myself included – interpret this verse from a different perspective.

For now, it is enough to say that perspective is key. Pornography is only pornography if it is *intended* to stimulate sexual excitement. Eliciting sexual arousal is not the *purpose* of this verse or of Song of Songs. Tremper Longman implicitly takes aim at those who argue for a

²³ J. Cheryl Exum, "Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know about the Song of Songs." In *The Song of Songs*, edited by Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, Feminist Companion to the Bible, 2nd ser. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 27-29.

²⁴ *National Plan*, 4.

²⁵ Alicia Ostriker, "A Holy of Holies: The Song of Songs as Countertext," in *The Song of Songs* edited by Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, Feminist Companion to the Bible, 6, 2nd ser. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 49.

²⁶ Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 29.

²⁷ Virginia Burrus and Stephen D Moore, "Unsafe Sex: Feminism, Pornography and the Song of Songs" *Biblical Interpretation* Vol. 11 (Brill: Leiden, 2003), 31.

²⁸ Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs* (JSOTSup, 36; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 79.

²⁹ David J.A. Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" in David J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Gender, Culture, Theory, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 117-19.

pornographic interpretation: “The discussions of the gender of the author of the Song reveals more about us as commentators than it does about the Song.”³⁰ And F.Scott Spencer goes further, skewering Clines by saying that he has constructed “a perfectly designed love doll with pull-string cueing the perfectly scripted pillow talk delivered in the sexiest voice.”³¹ Pornography not only “demeans and objectifies men and women and belittles the gift of human sexuality,”³² but it is also widely acknowledged that pornography contributes to the culture of violence against women.³³ A book that debases women, men and human sexuality, for the purposes of cheap and violent titillation has no place in Scripture. But a Song which consecrates carousing lovers for the purpose of upholding God’s good gift of sexuality does. Let me state it plainly: Songs of Songs and pornography are incompatible. So, as the lovers themselves explore, let us turn to an exploration of the first few short poems in Song of Songs, and how they may be used in the prevention of intimate partner violence.

Though the Song opens in *medias res*, that is, in the middle of the action,³⁴ it does begin with what should be the starting place of any sexual encounter: consent – “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (יִשְׁקֶנִי מִנְּשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוֹ). What I mean by consent is: “to agree to do or allow something; to give permission for something to happen or be done.” Make no mistake, for a woman to give consent was a revolutionary concept in its original Ancient Near Eastern context and, while it shouldn’t be, the concept is *still* radical for Australians today. Earlier this year, the NSW Attorney-General called for a review of sexual consent laws following the overturning of a rape conviction on this basis: it could be proved that the woman did not consent; it could not be proved that the man understood that she had not consented.³⁵ The NSW Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault stated: “If it’s not an enthusiastic ‘yes’, then it’s a ‘no’.”³⁶ Ancient laws, including the family laws in Deuteronomy – though not primarily concerned with sexuality *per se* – seem to indicate that a woman’s sexuality was not her own:³⁷ It was first her father’s (and her brothers’) and then her husband’s.³⁸ And even if consent was a consideration in the formulation of the family laws,³⁹ it is still defined in terms of another man’s rights.⁴⁰ So, it would appear that consent was not

³⁰ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 9.

³¹ F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, xlix.

³² Andrew Sloane, “Aberrant Textuality? The Case of Ezekiel the (Porno) Prophet” in *Tamar’s Tears*, edited by Andrew Sloane (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 205.

³³ Laura McNally, Pornography, Violence and Sexual Entitlement: An Unspeakable Truth:

<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/pornography-violence-and-sexual-entitlement-an-unspeakable-truth/10098248>

³⁴ F.Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs, Wisdom Commentary*, Vol.25, (ed. Barbara E. Reid) (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 5.

³⁵ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-08/nsw-attorney-general-calls-for-review-of-sexual-consent-laws/9734988>

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ See, for example, Deut 22:13-30, which is concerned with community, family, progeny and paternity (encompassing sexuality). For a discussion of the laws and human sexuality see: Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Law and Philosophy” in *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 239-54.

³⁸ Carolyn Pressler, *The View of Women Found in the Deuteronomical Family Laws* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993], 113).

³⁹ Pressler maintains consent is not a consideration in the laws. *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁰ Jenni Williams discusses consent, via Pressler and Frymer-Kensky, coming to the conclusion that consent must inform the family laws since a man “cannot gratify his own desires with a woman who cannot (betrothed) or does not (single) consent and expect to walk away scot free” (“Adding Insult to Injury? The Family Laws of Deuteronomy” in

hers to give. And yet, here in the Song we have an example of a woman who has her own agency and is in control of her own sexuality, in a subversion of patriarchal cultural norms.⁴¹

Recent Australian social research shows that Australian parents do not know how to talk to their children about consent.⁴² A primary prevention strategy for intimate partner violence, including sexual coercion, harassment, abuse and rape, is to talk – especially with young people – about clear and enthusiastic consent. It is imperative that we are talking about consent in our churches, and we have a biblical example from which to teach. The opening verse of Song of Songs, in fact, the very first word the lover speaks, gives consent. It is a verb-phrase translated as “let him kiss me” (יִשָּׁקֵנִי), since the jussive is the mood used to express wish, desire and permission. Longman states that this is an “invitation for intimacy expressed in the form of a wish.”⁴³ I would add that it is *permission* for intimacy intentionally and enthusiastically expressed in a grammatical mood used for that very purpose.⁴⁴ The lover is both consenting and inviting her beloved to consent. The implicit eroticism is clear, even confronting; but then, if you can’t find a way to make consent sexy, you are quite literally doing it wrong.

The next thing to note, is the female lover both initiates this encounter and she continues to pursue the relationship. We have already seen that she is the first to speak: “Let him kiss me...” but she also has the last word: “Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices” (בָּרַח דְּדוֹדִי, וְדַמְה-לֶךָ לְצִבִּי אוֹ לְעֵפֶר הָאֵילִים--עַל, הַרִי) (בְּשִׂמִּים). And in the eight chapters in between her voice is clear, strong, passionate, enthusiastic and intimate. There might be plenty of walls and plenty of flowers in the Song but the lover is no wallflower.⁴⁵ “She knows what she wants and is not afraid to say it.” In this Ancient Near Eastern context, a woman taking the initiative is subversive and it is, unfortunately but perhaps unsurprisingly, still counter-cultural to “Christian contexts where females are expected to keep their proper place in life and romance.”⁴⁶

Tamar's Tears, edited by Andrew Sloane, (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 105. But this is still ‘consent’ on male terms.

⁴¹ Mary J. Evans, when she was in Australia in May this year, provided examples of times Yahweh has treated, seen and represented women as people when their culture has failed to do so: Samson’s mother in Judges 13, Hagar in Genesis, even Tamar in 2 Samuel. <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/in-depth/the-church-should-be-sorry-for-what-we-tell-women-about-the-old-testament-scholar/>

⁴² <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/parenting/teens/talking-consent-where-were-going-wrong-with-our-boys/news-story/cadb7492df87ebcd4c28bdd0f58d0003>

⁴³ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 91.

⁴⁴ And while I am careful in the importation of arguably modern concepts, like consent, on to ancient texts, it is clear that Hebrew Bible uses the jussive in other instances of permission. For example, in Genesis 1:3 God permits that there be light.

⁴⁵ F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, xlv.

⁴⁶ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 89. Here, I think, Yahweh is once again, being subversive and I’m not the first to make the argument. Both Bergant (“My Beloved Is Mine and I Am His (Song 2:16): The Song of Songs and Honor and Shame,” *Semeia* 68 [1996]: 23-41) and Longman, conclude that the text would have been subversive in its ancient context.

Australian women, especially Christians, have long been instructed to leave men to the initiating and pursuing of relationships.⁴⁷ Yet in Song of Songs we have a woman whose assertiveness “undermines our stereotypes of ancient gender roles and instructs those today who look to the Bible for guidance in matters of relationships.”⁴⁸ The research into intimate partner violence is clear: expecting men and women to conform to a narrow gender stereotype or rigid, hierarchical gender norms – such as men should do the wooing and pursuing – is a contributing factor to the incidence of domestic violence.⁴⁹ In order to aid in the prevention of intimate partner violence, churches can demonstrate that women are active not passive; subjects not objects. We have our own agency and can make our own decisions about how, when and with whom we initiate and pursue a relationship. In the Song we have an example of a woman who enthusiastically and respectfully initiates a relationship. She then continues to pursue the relationship “draw me after you, let us make haste” (מְשַׁכְנֵי, אַחֲרַיִךְ) (נְרוּצָה (v.4) and, in turn, her beloved pursues her: “Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me” (קוּמִי לִךְ רַעֲיָתִי יִפְתִּי, וּלְכִי-לִךְ) (2:10).⁵⁰

The language of the lover, in this opening verse and throughout the song, merits special attention. She shifts back and forth between addressing her beloved in the second and third person, making use of a literary device common to Hebrew poetry, the so-called ‘PNG shift’. Switching between grammatical persons occurs in other ANE poetry, and of course, in poetry more generally.⁵¹ Immediately after “let *him* kiss me...”, she exclaims in the same verse “for *your* love is more delightful than wine” (כִּי-טוֹבִים דְּדִיךְ מֵיַיִן) (v.2). What is important for us to understand here is that addressing her beloved in the third person imports a respectful tone. Through its indirectness, the use of the third-person conveys the awe and respect with which the lovers interact.⁵² And, as much as their pursuance is mutual, so is their respect, for the beloved states: “As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens” (כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחוּחִים,) (כִּן רַעֲיָתִי בֵּין הַבָּנוֹת (2:2). “The lovers... are at once respectful and intimate.”⁵³ In the Song, we have an expression of female desire with joy and in mutual respect. Which leads to two very pertinent factors in preventing intimate partner violence: firstly, respect for women and secondly an understanding of female sexual desire.

⁴⁷ Following conservative US advice: “Men initiate; women respond” (Scott Croft, “Biblical Dating: Men Initiate, Women Respond”, *Focus on the Family*, <https://www.boundless.org/relationships/biblical-dating-men-initiate-women-respond/>) And Australian scholar Alistair Ian Haines has proposed that even the Song “urges men to take romantic initiative”! (*Gender in Solomon’s Song of Songs* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016). I disagree: clearly the woman *initiates* an encounter, later encouraging the man in the *mutual pursuing* of the relationship. This is not the man initiating the relationship. Neither is it encouraging all men to take romantic initiative.

⁴⁸ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 91.

⁴⁹ Common Grace, *Safer*: https://www.saferresource.org.au/gender_drivers

⁵⁰ “She pursues him, but he also pursues her (2:8-14; 5:2-4)” Longman, *Song of Songs*, 16.

⁵¹ A shift in grammatical person is more broadly known as enallage. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 297.

⁵² Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and The Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 266.

⁵³ *Ibid* (1:12; 2:1-3; 4:6; 6:9; 7:11).

To begin to prevent violence, we need to understand the cycle of violence: “Not all disrespect towards women results in violence. But all violence against women starts with disrespectful behavior.”⁵⁴ Developing respectful relationships “will have long term impacts on the level of violence against women.”⁵⁵ If the church is to help stop intimate partner violence at the start, we must model respectful relationships. Understanding how the Song models respect is one way we can do this. The Song couples enallage with figuration and metaphor to emphasize respect and desire. The lover figuratively calls the beloved “the king” (הַמֶּלֶךְ), in verse 4 and, in verse 7 likens him to a shepherd (שֹׁמֵר), thus endowing him with “metaphorical roles that express her respect and desire for him.”⁵⁶ And, in turn, the beloved frequently refers to his lover, in the third person, with his favourite epithet for her: “my love” (רַעְיָתִי), which very cleverly evokes multiple meanings in Hebrew, expressing his respect and desire for her.⁵⁷ The Song shows us that “passionate desire and considerate respect go hand in hand in the bedroom.”⁵⁸ So, in the *double entendre* of the late, great Aretha Franklin: “Respect... Give it to me when you get home.”

Which brings us to the next factor in preventing intimate partner violence: an informed and healthy understanding of female sexual desire. In Song of Songs, “without any introduction of characters or context, we glimpse a bald declaration of sexual want as the book’s opening.”⁵⁹ And yet discussions in the Australian church, and Australian society more generally, around female desire and sexuality have been paltry. Australia has a problem with the false dichotomies of prudes/sluts or Madonnas/whores. We misunderstand female sexuality and then impugn women who do not conform to our narrow conceptions of how a woman should behave.⁶⁰ Within the church, women are expected to ‘switch off’ their desire before marriage (with the onus of ‘purity’ often placed squarely on women, and with little to no discussion of the experience of desire) and then to ‘turn it on like a tap’ after marriage whenever their husband wants sex (with little to no discussion of what happens when the wife does or does not want sex).⁶¹ This kind of thinking is exemplified in a recent Australian article which argues,

⁵⁴ Australian Government, *Respect*: <https://www.respect.gov.au/>

⁵⁵ *National Plan*, 4; “National Outcome 2 – Relationships are respectful.” (18-20).

⁵⁶ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 16.

⁵⁷ F. Scott Spencer points to ‘love’ (rayah) being the beloved’s favourite epithet (22) and Fox explores the three meanings that the root word evokes: desire and will; friendship and companionship; and eating/enjoying sexual pleasure (103).

⁵⁸ F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 5, fn.1.

⁵⁹ Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 1.

⁶⁰ See, for example, the reaction to the recent sexist slurs made by Senator David Leyonhjelm against Senator Sarah Hanson-Young: <https://theconversation.com/madonna-or-whore-frigid-or-a-slut-why-women-are-still-bearing-the-brunt-of-sexual-slurs-99292> For a fuller treatment and historic exploration of the uniquely Australian experience of the Madonna/whore phenomenon, see: Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia*, (Ringwood: Penguin, 1975), esp.267-317.

⁶¹ This same anecdotal evidence is referred to by Ministry of Sex co-founder, Philippa Lowe, in: Anne Lim, “The one subject Christians don’t talk about, *Eternity*: <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/culture/the-one-subject-christians-dont-talk-about/> The popular but problematic *Every Man’s Battle* (Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker, Colorado Springs, WaterBrook Press, 2000) indicates: men are more susceptible to ‘sexual sin’ than women (23); men want sex more than women (40). Cf. *Every Woman’s Battle* (Shannon Ethridge, Colorado Springs, WaterBrook Press, 2003): men lust with the eyes and women with their mind (1). These unhelpful generalisations are false: see, for example,

from 1 Corinthians 7 (especially verse 1-6), that “the Bible is clear: frequent sex is a duty for both husband and wife” and that “the biblical rule is this: sexlessness in marriage is sinfulness.”⁶² Research into the prevalence of domestic violence within our churches has shown that this kind of thinking is dangerous for women.⁶³ Sex is not an obligation.⁶⁴ Women do not owe men sex. This is not what Songs of Songs exemplifies. From the very first line, the Song holds up as an example “a woman who insists on her right to initiate love, to feel, to enjoy and to explore the power of her sexuality.”⁶⁵ Educating women and men about sexuality, opening the bedroom door to understanding female anatomy, arousal and desire, is key in the prevention of intimate partner violence.

So let us turn, more explicitly (pun intended), to an exploration of female desire in the Song, because a culture which seeks to understand female desire is one which can promote healthy, passionate and respectful intimate relationships. Firstly, the phrase “your love” (יְדִידְךָ) – which forms an *inclusio*, framing the segment from verses 2–4 – connotes the act of physical love making and caressing rather than feeling of being in love.⁶⁶ The lover plunges headlong into expressing her deep desire for her beloved that cannot wait. The exuberance, enthusiasm and urgency of “let us make haste; let us run!” (מְשַׁכְנֵי, אַחֲרַיךָ נָרוּצָה) (v.4) attests to this. She wants him and she wants him now! Her use of synaesthesia shows that she is unashamedly sensual, both in terms of her erotic longing and her “somatic engagement of all five senses.”⁶⁷ The five senses “all contribute to sexual arousal and to the sexual response cycle.”⁶⁸ Through her evoking of the taste and headiness of wine, the fragrance of oils, and the feel of embraces, “the woman conveys her passionate delight in bodily sensations in vivid language and imagery with no trace of prudery.”⁶⁹ Her desire for her beloved is palpable and likewise his desire for her. Perhaps if female desire – including God’s given example in Song

Wednesday Martin, *Untrue: why nearly everything we believe about women and lust and infidelity is untrue*, (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2018).

⁶² Darren Middleton, *When Abstinence is Sinful*: <https://apmagonline.org/2015/08/19/when-abstinence-is-sinful/#prettyPhoto/0/> Firstly, this is not a rule. Secondly, the Bible is not clear: interpretation of this particular passage varies and it does not clearly equate sexlessness in marriage with sinfulness. Thirdly, this passage is far more concerned with addressing the false teaching of asceticism and abstinence than our 21st century misunderstanding of mismatched sex drives. Cf. Lisa Bartelt “The Good News About Sex After Marriage: You Can Still say ‘No’,” *CBE International*: <https://www.cbeinternational.org/blogs/good-news-about-sex-after-marriage-you-can-still-say-no>

⁶³ See Julia Baird with Hayley Gleeson, ‘Submit to your husbands’: women told to endure domestic violence in the name of God: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028>

⁶⁴ From 1 Corinthians 7 we know that sex should be a healthy expectation within marriage for both men and women. However, in a culture which assumes men want sex more than women and in a culture which assumes women should give in to men’s sexual needs, it must be stated: a woman is no more obliged to have sex than a man.

⁶⁵ Renita J Weems “Song of Songs” in *Women’s Bible Commentary* (Extended Edition), ed. Carol Ann Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 166.

⁶⁶ F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 7. Cf. Fox, 97; Exum, *Song of Songs, OTL* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 91; William J. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1971), 68; D A Garrett, “Song of Songs” in *Song of Songs/Lamentations* (ed. D Garrett and P House, WBC 23b, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 385.

⁶⁷ F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 6.

⁶⁸ Tina S. Miracle, Andrew W. Miracle, Roy F. Baumeister, *Human Sexuality: Meeting Your Basic Needs*, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2003), 77.

⁶⁹ F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 7.

of Songs – weren't taboo, and we discussed mutually desirous relationships in our churches, we might begin to see a reduction in the rates of intimate partner violence.

There is a shift in tone and mood from verse 4 to verses 5-6, and communal exultation gives way to the woman's experience of being gazed at because she has dark skin.⁷⁰ As a Semitic woman, she would have had relatively dark skin, but it has been made darker due to working in the sun. It is likely here that the "daughters of Jerusalem" (בנות ירושלים) are classist rather than racist, but the issue of being judged on skin colour remains. Yet again, Song of Songs is subversive: in a patriarchal culture where women could be forced to labour in a vineyard, and in a culture that would have prized fair skin, she stands up for herself and says: "I am black but I am beautiful" (שחורה אני ונאווה). And she does not mean beautiful in appearance only.⁷¹ Her inner loveliness; those qualities which make her a beautiful human – the way she cares deeply for her beloved and the way she asserts herself – are also on display.

And as the Song gives voice to the lover's degrading experiences – being forced to toil outside and being judged on the colour of her skin, here is where feminism must become intersectional. In an Australia where Indigenous women are twice as likely to be killed by a current or former partner than non-Indigenous women, we need to listen to the voices of women of colour, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and we must understand that "violence against women does not occur in isolation from other issues faced by individuals and communities."⁷² So, we see that the Song exhibits an attitude which pervades Australian society: sections of the community looking down on people – particularly women – for the colour of their skin. But, we can learn from the lover herself and from women of colour who faithfully exegete her words. And here I quote female African American scholar, Laurens Wilkins Laurence, who states that "the message of Song 1:5 is transformed into good news for black women... 'I am black but [contrary to the so-called beauty myth and the centuries-old racist ideologies of colonialism and slavery, 'black' is] beautiful!"⁷³ Furthermore, given the fact that unshaded work deepens the shade of the woman's skin—work that is required of those 'lower' in the social and economic hierarchy in a culture such as Israel's—the Song here also raises matters of social dis/advantage. Turning to an Australian context, it is clear that "family violence within Indigenous communities needs to be understood as both a

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 9.

⁷¹ In Psalm 45 – known for its similarity to Song of Songs – it is clear that the description of the bride's outward appearance symbolises her inner worth and integrity. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50 (Vol. 1 Word Biblical Commentary, 2nd ed.)* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 340.

⁷² *National Plan*, 7. It must be said that a common misconception about family violence against Indigenous women is that it is always perpetrated by Indigenous men. This is not true. "Perpetration patterns vary geographically, with this data suggesting violence against women in remote areas more likely to be perpetrated by Indigenous men, and violence in urban areas more likely to be perpetrated by non-Indigenous men." Our Watch, *Changing the Picture*: <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/getmedia/ab55d7a6-8c07-45ac-a80f-dbb9e593cbf6/Changing-the-picture-AA-3.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>

⁷³ Laurens Wilkins Laurence, "Beautiful Black Women and the Power of Love (Song 1:5)" in F.Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 10-14. See also: Jerusha Moses, "You Are Black, therefore Beautiful: The Un-"Fairness" of Skin Color" in F.Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 15-16.

cause and effect of social disadvantage and intergenerational trauma.”⁷⁴ As a primary prevention strategy for domestic violence, we can listen to the voices of women and elders in the indigenous community and partner with them “to develop innovative approaches... [and]... community led initiatives that heal trauma and change attitudes, and improve the coordination of services.”⁷⁵ And I look forward to the day when we can include an Indigenous woman’s voice on the Song of Songs.

In verses 5-6 not only do we see the lover speak up for herself, but we also learn about whom and to whom she speaks. The lover and the beloved are not isolated, their love exists in community. Once again, it should be stated that the community – her mother, brothers, the “daughters of Jerusalem” (בָּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם) and the beloved’s companions – are less actual people and more literary figures. However, this does not mean they do not provide an example to be followed or warnings that illustrate community failings. Her “mother’s sons” (בְּנֵי אִמִּי) – either a way to describe full brothers, a distancing term, or a matrilineal nod in a patriarchal society – were angry with her.⁷⁶ The inference is that they are angry over a perceived stepping out of line, probably sexually given the context, but we cannot know for sure. It may also have been economically; perhaps her relationship means her brothers perceive her as shirking her agricultural duties? What we do know is “the way they treat her scarcely befits brotherly love;”⁷⁷ their anger is boiling,⁷⁸ they exert control over her and they compel her to toil until she is sunburnt. In today’s terms we may describe this as family violence.⁷⁹ Cultural and “social norms, attitudes and beliefs contribute to all forms of violence against women, whether it is emotional, psychological, economic, physical or sexual violence. These beliefs can result in violence being justified, excused or hidden from view.”⁸⁰ The lover relays her experience of violence to the daughters of Jerusalem. And though they seem to judge the lover on her appearance – compounding the ill-treatment she has already received from her brothers – they remain her associates, perhaps even her friends, and function as her sounding board throughout the Song.⁸¹

⁷⁴ ABS 2016 in *National Plan*: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-in-australia-2018/contents/summary> It is important to state here that the *National Plan* fails to mention, when it speaks broadly of ‘intergenerational trauma’, the effects of government policies of ‘assimilation’, the Stolen Generations and colonial violence.

⁷⁵ *National Plan*, 8; “National Outcome 3 – Indigenous communities are strengthened”, 21-23.

⁷⁶ Chana and Ariel Bloch (*The Song of Songs: The World’s First Great Love Poem* [New York: Modern Library, 1995], 141) argue for full brothers, implying closeness. Longman, and later Robert Alter (*Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel: A Translation with Commentary* [New York: Norton, 2015], 9), believe it is a distancing term. I suggest, on the basis of other subversions in the text, that the lover is acknowledging her mother where she can.

⁷⁷ F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 19. n.33.

⁷⁸ The verb connotes a burning. Poetically, the result of her punishment (sunburn) matches her brothers’ anger.

⁷⁹ “Family violence is a broader term that refers to violence between family members, as well as violence between intimate partners” *National Plan*, 2.

⁸⁰ *National Plan*, 14 (Based on the research of Flood, M. & Pease, B., *The Factors Influencing Community Attitudes in Relation to Violence Against Women: A Critical Review of the Literature*, [Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2006]).

⁸¹ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 97.

In fact, the daughters of Jerusalem are so important that the lover charges them three times: “Do not arouse or awaken love before it so desires” (אִם-תִּעִירוּ וְאִם-תַּעֲרָרוּ אֶת-הָאֲהָבָה, עַד) (שְׁתִּתְּחַפְּזוּ) (2:7; 3:5; 8:4; see 5:8). But what exactly is the lover asking the daughters – and by extension us – not to do? And how may we apply this to Australia’s problem with intimate partner violence? This refrain has long been a *crux interpretum* for commentators, with a veritable smorgasbord of interpretive options. Brian P Gault examines eight such options put forward by scholars over the last two centuries: 1. The lover beseeches the daughters of Jerusalem not to force a relationship into love prematurely, but to let it develop naturally; 2. The lover adjures the daughters of Jerusalem not to try to draw her affection away (from one love to another); 3. Either the lover or the beloved exhorts the daughters not to awaken the other until they please; 4. The lover directs the daughters not to awaken love artificially; 5. The lover or the beloved warns the daughters not to arouse 'Love' until it desires, that is, becomes erect; 6. The lover charges the daughters of Jerusalem not to awaken love until they are ready for its strong, negative effects; 7. The lover alerts the daughters not to “awaken sexual passion, that is, to become sexually active, until the proper time”; and 8. The lover instructs the daughters of Jerusalem not to impede their lovemaking as long as it desires.⁸²

It would be all too convenient for us as Christians to simply cherry pick the seventh interpretive option, but in light of Australia’s rampant intimate partner violence, “care must be taken not to allow one’s interpretation of this passage to be shaped by cultural needs. Application should flow out of interpretation, not vice versa.”⁸³ And so, we must do due diligence. The first option – to patiently wait for love – popular among those who interpret the Song as a narrative, may be unlikely due to the immediate contexts, of physical lovemaking, around the repeated refrain. And, remembering the opening verse of the Song, “if she declares that his loving is better than wine (1:2), we may reasonably conclude that she has tasted it.”⁸⁴ The second, third and fourth options are all improbable due to ambiguous translation and questions of context.⁸⁵ The fifth alternative, while deemed implausible by Gault and neglected by Spencer, has a stiff case.⁸⁶ The uniqueness of this interpretation is that it eschews the choice between abstract and concrete, preferring double entendre. Given

⁸² Brian P Gault, “An Admonition against ‘Rousing Love’: The Meaning of the Enigmatic Refrain in Song of Songs,” *BBR* 20 (2010), 163-4.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 162.

⁸⁴ Chana Bloch, “Translating Eros,” in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs* (ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg; New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 151.

⁸⁵ The second requires adding to the Hebrew for it to make sense. In the third option, the rendering of the verb doesn’t suit the context. Further, it should not be translated as the beloved speaking since the lover speaks in the surrounding verses, and the beloved does not address the Daughters of Jerusalem elsewhere in the Song. In the fourth option, it doesn’t make sense for the lover to ask for aphrodisiacs mere verses earlier, only to instruct the daughters of Jerusalem not to do the same (Gault, “An Admonition”, 165-7).

⁸⁶ Gault, “An Admonition”, 168-9; F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 38.

the Song's predilection for double meaning⁸⁷ and Grossberg's careful case for the verb 'arouse' שִׁתְּחַפֵּץ being homonymic to the verb חָפַצ meaning "to extend down stiffly"⁸⁸ and for 'love' אֶת-הָאֵהָבָה to mean both love and penis,⁸⁹ this secondary meaning rises to the occasion. The sixth interpretation is *sui generis* in its negative portrayal of love. This perspective – largely based on the final repetition of the refrain's proximity to "Love is as strong as death..." (כִּי-עֲזָה כְמוֹת אֵהָבָה) (8:6-7)⁹⁰ – is difficult to refute. The seventh argument's popularity persists among Evangelicals since it exhorts the lovers to "avoid promiscuity and save their virginity for marriage."⁹¹ The strength of this assertion lies in the common rendering of the verb עוֹרָה.⁹² The final view has been extensively and convincingly argued for by Gault on the grounds of "contextual and thematic continuity, literary structure, genre parallels, and grammar."⁹³ And so we see that some interpretations can be reasonably dispensed with and others not so.

F. Scott Spencer distils these eight arguments into two broad, but antithetical, concerns. Either: 'don't rush into love prematurely' [options 1, 6 and 7] or 'don't interrupt love before it's ready to stop' [option 8],⁹⁴ and I would add the potential for a secondary meaning and some playful punning [option 5]. Whichever of these two categories of interpretation we choose, there are applications for the Australian church to aid in the prevention of intimate partner violence. The application of the first category is the sound advice not to rush into a relationship prematurely. Take the time to assess if you have observed any of the following indicators of violence: jealousy and possessiveness; controlling, isolating or intimidating behaviour; not taking responsibility for their actions; constant comparisons and criticisms; extreme moods; and threats.⁹⁵ It is imperative that a person's (church) community also looks out for these (early) warning signs. If a person or their community does not pick up on these warning signs: do not victim-blame. The fault never lies with the victim; always the perpetrator. Particularly relevant to young people before embarking upon a relationship, is to carefully consider if you and your potential partner are ready. One of "the most consistent factors [worldwide] associated with a man's increased likelihood of committing violence

⁸⁷ See J. Cheryl Exum, "In the Eye of the Beholder Wishing, Dreaming, and Double-Entendre in Song of Songs," in *The Labour of Reading Desire, Alienation, and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. F C Black, R Boer, and E Runions, Atlanta Scholars Press, 1999), 78-80.

⁸⁸ Daniel Grossberg, "Sexual Desire Abstract and Concrete," *HS* 22 (1981), 59-60. (HALOT, 340).

⁸⁹ Grossberg argues from Fox's work examining the double meaning of 'Love' in ANE literature: Michael V Fox, "'Love' in the Love Songs," *JEA* 67 (1981), 182.

⁹⁰ Longman, *Song of Songs*, 115-6. Cf. George M Schwab, "The Song of Songs' Cautionary Message Concerning Human Love" (*Studies in Biblical Literature* 41, New York Peter Lang, 2002), 64. There is only two instances in the Hebrew Bible of 'love' appearing with the article (אֶת-הָאֵהָבָה): in the refrain and in 8:7; this association adding to the strength of the argument.

⁹¹ Garrett, "Song of Songs", 154.

⁹² Koehler, Baumgartner and Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT), 802-3.

⁹³ Brian P Gault, "A 'Do Not Disturb' Sign? Reexamining the Adjuration Refrain in Song of Songs" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 36.1 (2011), 93. Cf. Gault, "An admonition", 176-181.

⁹⁴ F.Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 38.

⁹⁵ Domestic Violence Prevention Centre, *Warning Signs of Dating Violence*:

<http://www.domesticviolence.com.au/pages/warning-signs-of-dating-violence.php> Cf.

<https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/understand-domestic-violence/what-is-domestic-violence/signs-abusive-relationship/>

against his partner... [is] young age.”⁹⁶ Since the adjuration refrain is spoken to the lover’s community, perhaps advice for our church community should be: do not pressure young couples into premature marriage because we’re concerned they might not be chaste. We must also be aware that people who have been exposed to family violence often “enter marriage or a relationship early to escape the family home.”⁹⁷ Let us not be a part of the cycle of violence.

Application of the second category is relevant for those already in a sexual relationship, and their community. While the relationship between the lover and the beloved is transparently one of equality and mutuality, the research from Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson shines a light on the relationships in our churches which are not.⁹⁸ It seems plain enough that when two consenting adults are enjoying being intimate; don’t interrupt them! However, it must be stated that ‘coercive sex’, sexual abuse and marital rape are not sex. They are not ‘love’ as it appears in Song of Songs. Once again, our communities, especially church communities, have a responsibility to recognise intimate partner violence and to interrupt it. Overarching each and any of these interpretations of the adjuration refrain, is the broader picture of a young woman looking to her community and imploring them to listen to what she has to say, and to take her advice seriously. The lovers model for us ‘love-in-community’ – examples and warnings. Imperative in preventing intimate partner violence is listening to women and believing women.⁹⁹ Churches *must* listen to the all-too-often-silenced voices of women. Violence against women is a community problem and it requires a community response. The *National Plan* encourages “strong and committed local and organisational leadership” for primary prevention strategies to be successful.¹⁰⁰ Once again, both the Song and the *National Plan* prompt churches to take responsibility, as community members and leaders, in preventing violence against women.

In conclusion, since we know that there are no real women in Song of Songs, the lover is not a particular woman but stands for all women. The very first words she speaks model enthusiastic consent: she is both consenting and she invites consent. She initiates and pursues a passionate relationship: she is assertive and exuberant and her beloved also pursues her. Their relationship is respectful: she calls him a king and a shepherd and he calls her love. She is at once respectful and sensual; filled with an unabashed longing and an

⁹⁶ World Health Organisation, *Intimate Partner Violence*: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77432/WHO_RHR_12.36_eng.pdf;jsessionid=377B430E285FB07326806D4383FAFD73?sequence=1 It should be noted that these figures are affected by country, region, socioeconomics, level of education, etc. More research needs to be done on the Christian culture of marrying young and the correlation to domestic violence.

⁹⁷ Domestic Violence Prevention Centre, *Impact of Domestic Violence on Children and Young People*: <http://www.domesticviolence.com.au/pages/impact-of-domestic-violence-children-and-young-people.php>

⁹⁸ Baird with Gleeson: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028>

⁹⁹ Julia Baird, *Domestic violence in the church: When women are believed, change will happen*: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-23/when-women-are-believed-the-church-will-change/9782184>

¹⁰⁰ *National Plan*, 14.

arousing intermingling of the senses. She speaks up for herself even though her brothers have failed in their responsibility to care for her, and her contemporaries – the daughters of Jerusalem – turn their gaze upon her because of her dark complexion. And even though her position in the community is uncertain, she implores her community to listen to her and to heed her advice. The social research behind Australia's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children* highlights equality, consent, respect, that violence is not unrelated to attitudes about female desire and sexuality, and community responsibility as strategies for the prevention of domestic violence. And as much as the psalms encourage us to imagine ourselves in the place of the psalmist, the Song invites us to step into the delight of the lover and the beloved: to celebrate rather than distort, God's good gift of sex.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic and family violence or sexual assault, get help by calling:

- 000 if you, a child, or another person is in immediate danger
- 1800 RESPECT – 1800 737 732
- Relationships Australia – 1300 364 277
- Mensline – 1300 789 978

About the Author

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