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The Daily Advertiser

weekender.



HER SAY: Emily Cross. Picture: Les Smith

HEART OF THE ISSUE

Five women open up about the epidemic of violence against women.

Full story: Pages 26-27 | By: Annie Lewis

COVER STORY

weekender.

IN LOVING MEMORY:

Courtney Herron's family has visited the Melbourne park where she was killed.



THE VOICES OF OUR WOMEN

Twenty women. According to the Counting Dead Women tally kept by the Destroy the Joint group, that's how many women have been killed by violence in Australia so far this year.

A 25-YEAR-OLD woman, Courtney Herron, was found dumped in a park last weekend. Devastatingly, her death is the latest in a string of not dissimilar occurrences. Remember Eurydice Dixon, 22, who was killed last year on her way home from a comedy performance? How about Aiiia Maasarwe, 21, who was killed earlier this year on her way home from an event, or Natalina Angok, 32, who was allegedly killed by her boyfriend a month ago?

The biggest question is why. Why are these women still dying violently? In recent years, the Wagga Women's Health Centre conducted a study into the city's attitudes towards women and found one-in-four men believe men should be dominant in relationships and that eight-in-10 victims of domestic violence are female and nine-in-10

offenders are male. Often in the wake of tragedies or studies, news organisations will talk to experts in the field, but what do women in Wagga think about these figures and do they feel safe in their own town?

Wagga resident Charlotte, who is in her late 20s and preferred leave her last name out, said at night she sticks to well-lit areas and walks faster. She used to live in Melbourne and finds the stories of murders heartbreaking.

"It doesn't heighten my nervousness living in Wagga, but if I was still living in Brunswick I would be more scared," Charlotte said. "Women do walk in well-lit areas, we don't stay out late, we do wear covered clothing and it still happens. We take precautions, sadly I think that is necessary. Society needs to do better."

In the discourse around violence against

women, a common response is the use of #notallmen, a shortened hashtag version of the phrase not all men are like that. Charlotte said although it might not be all men, it is every woman.

"From my mum to my sister to my friends to my colleagues, all of them have experienced sexual harassment at the very least," she said. "Personally, I think the focus needs to shift from the victim to the perpetrator. Men are largely responsible for perpetrating, whether against women or men. It is a gendered issue."

Charlotte said women know that it is not all men, but by having that argument it shifts the focus away from the real issue.

"They are so upset at the thought of being accused of doing something wrong they are diminishing the impact of what is done to women," she said.

Razia Shaik is a researcher and mother to two daughters, aged nine and six, and generally feels safe in Wagga. She said she teaches her daughters to be mindful of the danger in public places.

"It may sound sexist to say that men don't have to take as many precautions, but I have

to be honest, if you look at the history and the numbers of incidents, it is apparent that women are almost always the victims," she said. "I advocate that women be aware of the time, place and their ability to assess the situation."

Mrs Shaik said we can't change the world as it is right now overnight and flexibility is knowing there are some aspects of society that need to be worked on but still being aware of personal safety.

"One of the root causes of the issue, I think, is the attitudes of men towards women as being inferior," she said.

Mrs Shaik said getting rid of violence against women or any form of violence is something that we cannot compromise on as a society. Mrs Shaik said collecting data, improving street lighting, installing cameras, self-defence classes in schools and providing courtesy buses at night are all measures that could be taken.

"I have been nervous about talking about sensitive topics," she said. "But I said to myself 'I have to be brave, I have to talk about this, and if everyone thinks that they can't, then who will?'."

weekender.



Wagga resident Emily Cross, 23, said she is frustrated by the victim-blaming that follows horrific tragedies.

"Unfortunately this is the world we live in and I want to fix it, but I think women do need to take steps to minimise danger," she said. "I have friends who will call me because they feel safer to be walking and talking. I will often put my keys in my fist when walking home and some friends have a personal alarm they will carry around."

Ms Cross said at her work in Sydney she would feel singled out by older men who would ask inappropriate questions.

"They would never do it to my male coworkers," she said. "I always felt like I could never tell anyone."

Ms Cross said in the media she sees people getting up in arms, but there are so few suggestions of how to tackle the issue of violence against women.

"When I hear of these murders, I wonder if it could happen to me," she said. "I sometimes wish some men could understand what it is like to be in our shoes sometimes because then I feel that we could tackle this issue. Men are part of the solution, but we



RECLAIM HAIG PARK: People are invited to write messages at the vigil for Eurydice Dixon in 2018. Picture: Dion Georgopoulos

LEFT: Razia Shaik says Wagga cannot compromise when it comes to violence against women.

RECLAIM THE NIGHT: Women march in solidarity to protest and highlight violence against women in October. Picture: Marina Neil



need to listen to all women."

Alexandra, who is 28 and preferred to leave out her last name, works in Wagga and doesn't feel the need to take any particular safety precautions.

"The only thing I really worry about in Wagga is stuff being taken from my car or my car being stolen," she said. "The murders like the one in Melbourne recently are heart-breaking but I think sometimes the news coverage obscures the real problems."

Alexandra said the news coverage of these tragic events obscures the real issues and rape and assault are symptoms of a lack of respect towards women in society.

"Men's attitudes toward women can come out in a destructive way in the home," she said. "People think it's a couple of disgusting men who are in the alleyways as you're walking home, but it's a problem in the hearts and minds of a lot of men."

"The way you safeguard yourself when walking home won't protect you against the way so many men think it is OK to be violent whether in an emotional or physical sense."

Alexandra said it isn't all men but it's not the men who are doing the right thing that

whip out the argument.

Tess Geaghan, 30, said she feels safe living in Wagga, especially compared to living in the Inner West in Sydney.

"I have lived here for three years and can confidently say I have never had an unpleasant experience," she said.

Ms Geaghan said in her circle of friends and family attitudes to women are positive, but she does see the broader issues outside her own experiences.

"I think some men need to be re-educated on how they should be treating women, such as touches that are unwelcome," she said. "But I do think that women should always be aware of their own safety."

"It's devastating to hear of the women who have had their lives cut short, but I wouldn't say it has changed my behaviour."

Comments that the world is going mad for political correctness infuriate Ms Geaghan.

"It makes me really angry," she said.

Ms Geaghan said in the discussion around violence against women, a lot of the discourse can be negative, but she has been seeing a positive shift. "We should always be striving to be better," she said.