



HITTING HOME

WITH SARAH FERGUSON

TUESDAY 24
& WEDNESDAY 25
NOVEMBER 8.30PM

ABC | **iVIEW**



EVERY WEEK
IN AUSTRALIA, TWO
WOMEN ARE MURDERED
BY A PARTNER OR
FAMILY MEMBER

HITTING HOME

In a year dominated by headline stories of domestic violence and the murder of nearly 70 women, award-winning journalist Sarah Ferguson has spent six months on the frontline of our national crisis.

With unprecedented access to forensic doctors, specialised police officers, prisons, courts and their 'safe rooms' where victims shelter from their abusers, Sarah goes in search of answers to some of the most important questions of our time.

How does domestic violence begin? How does it escalate from control to violence and even death? Why do the perpetrators do it, and why do their victims stay?

Moving into a refuge in a secret location, Sarah lives alongside women and children running from violent homes. Those women and their children speak with heartbreaking honesty about the lives they have fled – sometimes with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Some men have even fitted tracking devices to their partner's car.

Sarah also meets perpetrators of domestic violence currently serving time in prison. At the correctional centre in Nowra, men guilty of assaulting their partners follow a program designed to change their behaviour before they get out. At first, Sarah is met with denial and frustration. The system, these men say, is designed to work against them. Some feel that they are the real victims. But when we track down their partners, she hears a different story of violence and terror.

Visiting the men over several months until their release is imminent, it's clear that effective prison programs are a must. Will this one deliver?

And is there a way out for the women we meet? The injuries are healed, their cases complete, can they rebuild their lives?

This unflinching documentary series will air over two nights, culminating on the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Episode 2 will be immediately followed by a special edition of **Q&A** hosted by Virginia Trioli.

EPISODE 1

TUESDAY 24 NOVEMBER, 8.30PM

Sarah starts her journey with Genelle Warne, a domestic violence liaison officer with the NSW Police, and her busy unit as they prepare for 'domestic violence' day at the nearby Local Court. There is a pile of 50 case files in front of her. "I think the most we've ever had at court on one occasion was a hundred," says Genelle. At court, Genelle takes us into the 'safe room', where victims are secure from their partner's intimidation. Cameras have never been allowed in here before. One victim tells Sarah she is happy not having to be near her perpetrator. "I get very nervous and scared and shaky," she confides.

We see the no-nonsense attitude with which the magistrate deals with case after case. "Too often people try and pass off violence as something they can't control," he tells one defendant. "Almost as if 'well, it's not really me.' Well that's just a bit too easy." Last year, he and his colleagues around the state issued 27,000 Apprehended Violence Orders, or AVOs. Nationwide, over a 100,000 were taken out.

Sarah meets a victim who is so scared of her ex-partner she and her daughter live with a lockable 'panic room' in their house. She carries a GPS enabled distress alarm at all times – if she presses SOS the police will be with her in minutes.

In Lake Macquarie, Sarah meets Isabella whose husband is out on bail awaiting trial. Despite an AVO in place, she worries he will come to the house as his court date nears. The day Sarah arrives, security cameras are being installed in her house.

But as Sarah says: "For some women staying at home isn't possible. And turning every victim's home into a fortress isn't an option either." On the next stage of her journey, Sarah moves into a women's refuge – a last resort for some women. She meets Wendy, who discloses the ordeal that caused her to run from home with her two children. After a brutal assault she jumped out of a moving car to get away from her ex-partner. She is recovering from a skull fracture but she doesn't regret what she did. "I needed to escape. I needed to get out." Sarah welcomes a newborn baby to the refuge, speaks with a young boy traumatised by the bashing of his mum, and meets a young woman whose husband tried to run her over. All of them are relieved by the safety that the refuge offers.

Sarah is on patrol with a specialised domestic violence officer as they pick up 'Rachael' and bring her to see Dr Nittis. Dr Nittis runs the only specialised forensic service for domestic violence in Australia; her photos become crucial evidence in court and provide a grim catalogue of Australia's crisis. Young Rachael tells the doctor it's the fourth time she's been assaulted – but it's the first time she has involved police.

Back in Lake Macquarie our cameras join Isabella inside court and witness the adversarial nature of the criminal justice system. Will her husband be found guilty of assaulting her?



EPISODE 2

WEDNESDAY 25 NOVEMBER, 8.30PM

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED BY A SPECIAL EDITION OF Q&A

A woman is assaulted by her husband in their car; Sarah goes to the scene with police. Seated in the car, her bruised face caught in the strobing police lights, the beaten woman pleads for the community to take the problem of domestic violence in hand.

The final episode of **Hitting Home** examines how an abusive relationship escalates to violence, even to murder. What are the warning signs? What can be done to intervene? And how effective is a revolutionary change in policing that targets people at risk?

In an idyllic coastal town near Wollongong, NSW, Sarah meets a young pregnant mother. Her partner is now in prison but she is reeling from the incident that sent him there, an assault during a terrifying car journey. "We were just going up the mountain... no idea where we were going. I'm thinking, 'f*** this is getting less and less residential, I got to get out of here, I got to get out of this car.'"

Sarah gains access to the prison where her partner is being held. He is following a program aimed at preventing him from re-offending. He gets out in December – but will he have changed? Sarah joins him and other inmates during the program as they open up about their attitudes to women. Even amongst inmates, domestic violence carries a stigma "just above paedophiles" according to the prison governor. Annie Grenfell, who runs the program, also observes: "Domestic violence is not something that is spoken about openly. If they were in a gang or armed robbers they'll talk to each other, but you don't hear them openly saying 'well, I bashed my missus.'"

In prison, Sarah meets another inmate on the program. He was arrested for an assault on his girlfriend in which he put her in a headlock until she passed out. He calls it "putting her to sleep." In police footage obtained by the production, we hear the gripping testimony from his victim in the aftermath of the attack. Her throat is so damaged, she can barely talk.

Many of the prisoners speak of being provoked by their partners - resulting in an equally strong response from the police. As Inspector Sean McDermott says:

"Provoked to do what? To commit an assault, to terrorise somebody in their own home, to terrorise somebody in their own home in front of their children? Provocation? Rubbish."

Inside NSW Police's special Domestic Violence Unit, a group of dedicated officers is changing the way they deal with domestic violence. Sarah heads out with them as they trial new methods – and police around the country, overwhelmed with the task of policing domestic violence, are closely monitoring their efforts.

The new focus is risk assessment and how to prevent harassment, control or common assault from escalating into more violent crimes – even murder.

Sarah returns to the office of forensic doctor Maria Nittis as she examines a young woman strangled by her former partner on the stairs of her home. It reveals the dangers women face after a relationship ends.

In Sydney, Sarah meets the mother of murder victim Kate Malonyay. Wendy is using her experience to train young detectives; she also wants her family's tragedy to warn others of the dangers inherent in all domestic violence relationships. Kate was a young professional woman murdered by her ex-partner, Naval Analyst Elliot Coulson. We meet Kate's friends and family, speaking out for the first time about how none of them saw it coming. "I just had no idea of what this guy was capable of," one of her closest friends tells Sarah through her tears of regret.

We return to the young mum in the Illawarra who has now had her baby. She is starting out on a new life. She wants to put the violent incidents of domestic violence in the past. Her partner is to be released from prison in a few weeks... What will he do? Is the ordeal truly behind her?



PRODUCTION DETAILS:

2 X 60 MINUTES

PRODUCED BY IN FILMS

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