

Australian feminists deny mental health crisis behind Margaret River murder-suicide

Cheryl Crisp
26 May 2018

In the early hours of May 11, Peter Miles, 61, allegedly shot his wife Cynda 58, his daughter Katrina, 35 and his four grandchildren, Taye, 13, Rylan, 11, Arye, 10, and Kadya Cockman, 8. At around 5.00 a.m., he reportedly rang the police to inform them and then turned the gun on himself. It is said to be the worst mass shooting in Australia since the Port Arthur massacre of 1996, when 35 people were killed.

The family of seven had lived on the 12-hectare property in the hamlet of Osmington for three years, after Peter and Cynda Miles moved there from the nearby small town of Margaret River—a surfing and tourist area in southwest Western Australia renowned for its wineries.

Peter Miles had worked as a farm manager at Margaret River Senior High School for 20 years and had a farm maintenance and repair business. Reports indicate the couple had bought the property and moved there with their daughter and her children following her marriage breakdown. The four autistic children had briefly attended the local primary school but were withdrawn to be homeschooled.

Interviews with the family's friends and neighbours reveal a community desperately seeking to probe and understand the social and personal crises that led to such an outcome. They indicate that the family was experiencing financial hardship, prompting Peter, in the days before the tragedy, to seek casual "vineyard and farm work."

According to people who knew the family, Peter had suffered depression "for some years" following the suicide death of one son and news that another required an organ transplant. Just hours before her death, Cynda, who was becoming increasingly concerned about her husband's mental health, said on Facebook that his depression was getting "worse and worse" and he was becoming less rational. She told a close friend he had been prescribed anti-depressants in the previous few

weeks. There are suggestions that the medication was "not working," which could explain his violent transformation.

But an interview conducted with the children's father, Aaron Cockman, a local carpenter and builder, provoked outrage among a layer of feminist writers in the mass media. His statements were condemned because they highlighted mental health problems and social pressures as the source of the tragedy—rebuffing the feminist narrative that violence against women is caused by "dominant white men," "male privilege" or "misogyny."

The grieving and traumatised father appealed to those listening to his comments not to be angry. "I don't feel angry," he said. "I feel tremendous sadness for my kids. I don't want anyone to feel angry." He said he thought his estranged father-in-law had been "struggling to hold it together" and appeared to have planned to "fix" all his family's problems by "taking out everyone."

"Peter didn't snap," Cockman said. "He's thought this through. I think he's been thinking this through for a long time."

Cockman described his love and respect for his father-in-law prior to the bitter separation with Katrina and his restricted access to his children. He said Miles was "an awesome man, before this all blew up. He was like my best friend ... The reason I'm standing up here is so that people everywhere, not just those who knew Katrina and myself, Peter and Cynda, don't feel hatred."

Feminist columnists writing for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Fairfax publications and the *Guardian* reacted with fury to his statements.

Sydney Morning Herald journalist Clementine Ford declared: "While Cynda Miles was a well-known figure in the town ... less was known about [Peter] Miles. Despite this, the narrative of the 'Good Bloke Under Pressure' has risen up in the wake of the homicide. As is typical in cases like this, 'mental health' is being blamed."

At the *Guardian*, Van Badham went further: “We must know that what domestic murderers have mostly in common isn’t the ‘heartache’ that’s been speculated within Peter Miles. It isn’t tragic childhoods, substance abuse problems, persistent criminal behaviour or mental illness, either.

“Whatever may have transpired in Margaret River that morning, the narrative of the “good bloke” who “snaps” and kills his family is myth, whether it’s “what people thought of him” or not...”

On the ABC panel show “The Drum,” Badham outlined the position of identity politics adherents. “He is a white man who looks familiar in terms of the way he is depicted. People don’t want to believe that white men who are in positions of domination in the society we live in ... can be capable of committing acts of violence... we understand these perpetrators for what they are—possessive, controlling murderers.”

Supposedly, the only reason men are violent is because of patriarchy and entrenched misogyny. According to these journalists, social conditions do not explain why men—and women—carry out terrible and shocking acts against their families or others. Any examination of the impact of unemployment, poverty, medical problems and mental illness is callously denounced as apologising for, and even encouraging, male violence.

Their utter indifference to the social crises that afflict much of the population reflects the attitude of a privileged middle-class layer that has exploited gender-based identity politics to pursue position, income and wealth.

Statistics shed light on the terrible situation that faces millions of people, especially in regional areas of Australia.

A Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health report noted: “In 2016, the number of suicides per 100,000 people in rural and remote Australia was 50 percent higher than in the cities. This rate gets higher as areas become more remote and has been growing more rapidly than in the cities. Mental health problems were experienced by 21.1 percent of males and 22.1 percent of females with weekly household incomes of less than \$580, compared to 8.9 percent of males and 9.1 percent of females living in households with a weekly income of more than \$1,030.”

The report noted that within rural and remote populations, men, young people, farmers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were at increased risk of suicide.

Exacerbating this dire situation is reduced access to

mental health care in rural and remote areas. In 2015, the number of psychiatrists per 100,000 people stood at 13 in major cities but only five in remote areas and just two in very remote parts of the country.

The number of mental health nurses, 53 per 100,000 people in remote areas and 29 in very remote areas, was 64 percent and 35 percent respectively of those available in major cities.

The number of psychologists was even lower. Access to these professionals in remote and very remote areas was 34 percent and 24.5 percent of those in metropolitan cities.

When compared with major cities, per capita Medicare expenditure on mental health services in 2015–16 was 74 percent in rural regions and 21 percent in remote areas.

The report noted: “In many respects, mental illness is like physical illness: given appropriate and timely intervention and treatment, mental illness can be successfully managed.”

The continual slashing of health budgets by state and federal Coalition and Labor governments, however, has left the poorer sections of population and those in outlying and isolated areas without the facilities to treat the results of the growing stresses and problems of their lives.

Whatever the specific trigger that resulted in the horrifying death toll at the Forever Dreaming farm in Osmington, Peter Miles evidently did not see a way to resolve the issues he and his family faced. The proponents of feminist identity politics sheet home the responsibility for his desperate and terrible decision to gender and skin colour. In doing so, they provide a cover for the social conditions, and economic system, that led to the situation.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact