

Living Well

A group of women from the West Heidelberg community who have experienced, or, are experiencing family violence.

**Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence
May 2015**

Contents

1. Overview	2
2. Prevention, awareness and education	3
3. Policing, intervention orders and the courts	4
4. The Women.....	5
5. The perpetrators	5
6. Conclusion.....	6

1. Overview

The *Living Well* group has been operating for the past three years and is facilitated by staff from Banyule Community Health. *Living Well* comprises women living in the West Heidelberg community who have experienced family violence, or, are currently living in a family violence situation. *Living Well* is a safe and nurturing environment providing a range of interventions to women within the group as well as individually with the facilitators.

The *Living Well* group wanted to contribute to the Royal Commission into Family Violence as they felt they have a 'real' experience that should be heard.

The following information captures thoughts, ideas and reflections of women who have lived through violence – some in the past, some currently. What is clear is that their experiences are real and have shaped their future. Notes were taken over a series of sessions to contribute to the submission – they are raw and reflect observations shaped by their experiences of police response, court proceedings, and support services, as well as the views they have come to form on prevention of violence and systemic flaws.

The *Living Well* group is a brave and tenacious collective who want improvements for today and the future. The group do not connect with a particular framework, nor do they act as a lobby for a particular service. They call it as they see it and don't always agree.

Banyule Community Health has a 40 year history of working with vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. Its primary site is in the 1956 Olympic Village in West Heidelberg, in Melbourne's north east. The service includes a wide array of health and welfare services and programs, including GPs, Counsellors, Early Years Services, Aboriginal Health and Legal Services. Family violence is part of the work of Banyule Community Health on a daily basis. The *Living Well* group was established as a response to local women wanting an opportunity to reflect, support and build self esteem in response to family violence issues. The group has helped guide Banyule Community Health on an agency wide response and to be in tune with issues of family violence from response to prevention.

This submission is the work of the *Living Well* group and has not been influenced by the staff at Banyule Community Health. The group were informed of the questions raised by the Commission. The Commissioners are welcome to meet directly with the *Living Well* group if they require a more personalised response. The responses are written in direct bullet points as they were raised.

2. Prevention, awareness and education

- We need to challenge what is accepted as normal in our community. The women loved seeing young girls more active and given opportunities. One woman suggested that's "*girls should be encouraged and celebrated*" when performing positive and healthy activities such as sport.
- Women described the need to challenge what is for boys and what is for girls. That this early shaping impacted people's lives later on.
- The women strongly supported the need for national campaigning about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. One woman referred to her years of abuse from her partner and said "*it would have been nice for a neighbour to knock on my door to see if me and the kids were ok. They would have heard what was going on. It never happened..... not once.*" One woman suggested an "*it's not ok*" or "*everybody's business*" style campaign that challenged old outdated norms of it's not my business. Another woman commented "*we should be out in the streets with pots and pans*". Another suggested a "*hit the phone, not your own*" campaign for violent men.
- Women went on to discuss the possibility of a confidential phone line to ring if someone suspected family violence was occurring in a household. The possible consequences were identified by other women; however the need to know who to report your fears to for someone at risk was foremost for the group.
- Women described constant verbal abuse and economic abuse as normal and an underlying issue that needed challenging. One woman commented, "*my daughter and son watched this happen for 10 years.....it's not right*".
- The women discussed how we educate kids about family violence, and the need to be respectful to women and girls. It was identified that schools, clubs and communities have a big role in this. One woman commented that "*it needs to be more than a session here or there. It needs to be everywhere and all the time.*" The women suggested this approach needs to be established in schools at every level from primary through to secondary.
- The women commented on 'Love Control', a video created by Women's Health in the North based on a controlling and violent relationship between a young woman and a young man. This was seen as an important education tool for young men, however the women commented on the need to ensure young boys understood respect and sharing from a much earlier age. It was commented that this understanding about respect starts early and is shaped by the people, the media and the systems around us all.

3. Policing, intervention orders and the courts

- The *Living Well* group identified Police as the frontline response to many family violence episodes and experiences differed from group member to group member. The group did acknowledge that at times they felt police appeared to not take the family violence situations raised by women seriously enough.
- Police need to have a better understanding of the impact of family violence particularly on women and children. One woman commented *“when I call police I am so vulnerable and expose myself to unimaginable risk”*. Each episode further exposes women to increasing risk and they should feel safe and not judged by police.
- Some women suggested at times that they might appear to others as confused and erratic. This is as a result of the violence.
- The women clearly identified the issue of time – that a poor response from police or the delays in issuing Intervention Orders just allows, as one woman suggested, *“men time to reassert their power as dominant and entitled”*. It was suggested that police could have powers to place Intervention Orders on perpetrators immediately, particularly if Police have witnessed the family violence. It was stated that the time taken to serve an Intervention Order just allows more time for men to reassert their power.
- Women suggested the Intervention Order process, that included being in court, created *“anxiety, fear, feelings of guilt, being vulnerable and unsafe”* throughout the process.
- Another woman felt that intervention orders were *“too easy to get”* and this had led to them *“not being taken seriously by police, authorities and the perpetrators”*. If the very process that is meant to make women safe and protected isn’t taken seriously, then we have a real problem.
- Women in the group felt strongly that police required stronger partnerships with support agencies and social work expertise within Victoria Police. One woman suggested, *“when we go to the health centre we have different staff with different skills to support us, but when we call police we just get the police.”* The women explored the opportunity to have family violence staff working alongside of police, rather than referrals and phone numbers. The time between an incident and the support gives men time to reassert power. The women could see the danger of police *“making their own judgement calls”* and not respecting women and understanding the complexity of their situation.
- The women felt Magistrates required ongoing education, particularly so victims of violence did not feel further victimised and traumatised. One woman commented *“I feel so small in a court room.”*

4. The women

- The *Living Well* group reflected on the need for stronger supports to rebuild their lives. The women identified that this looks different – financial aid, safe houses, access to income, good friends and support groups (like *Living Well*). The group said that it was unfair that women (the victims of violence) had to do the relocating and rebuilding. Without these good supports in the community it is very difficult and often leads to women returning to violent relationships. This takes understanding and it's frustrating when services and systems make it difficult to rebuild and there are constant blocks in place.
- Women commented that the main reason for 'not leaving' family violence as the costs of starting over after leaving, fear for children and the challenges of obtaining support beyond the initial crisis response. Women in West Heidelberg experience financial hardship and don't always have options to allow an easy escape from an unsafe situation.
- Some women raised the issue of women's refuges not accepting families if they have sons aged 14 years old or over. A range of options in the crisis response system needs to acknowledge that whilst families may differ they still require safety.
- One woman in the group suggested that some women may need education and support about breaching intervention orders and the possible consequences.

5. The perpetrators

- The *Living Well* group commented on the difficulty between education and / or punishment for perpetrators of family violence. In many situations the men are either the father of their children, their current partner or their son. This places women in an unwinnable situation.
- The women commented on the need for men to be able to access more supports to prevent violence. Too often men don't get support when they need it. This support needs to include education, housing, health and income.
- The women agreed that perpetrators need to be removed from households. Women and children shouldn't have to leave the family home when the partner is violent. The women also commented on how difficult this reality is.
- Some members of the group felt that there should be mandatory sentences for those breaching Intervention Orders.

6. Conclusion

The Living Well group thank the Royal Commission into Family Violence for the opportunity to be heard. Though the women of this group have been impacted deeply by their negative and traumatising experiences with family violence, they remain brave and strong and unbroken. The experiences of this group also offer a wealth of knowledge and learning of a system that often does not work well to protect the most vulnerable.

We will watch closely the future steps of the Royal Commission and hope the thoughts, ideas and reflections of our experiences help shape a healthier and happier future for women and girls in Victoria and beyond.