

RCFV - ANONYMOUS

SUBMISSION TO ROYAL COMMISSION ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

While I'm aware there are no length limits on this submission, I am grateful for the chance to submit and asked my former FV support worker for some guidelines as to key areas to address. She suggested – "tell your story – but let them know .." the 3 points below. I have chosen not to foreground my story, though it emerges in places in what follows. I want my words to count and would prefer to try to be as targeted as possible. Am happy to share more personal detail if it's required/helpful but otherwise am happy to leave it as is.

Briefly: I am a [REDACTED] year old woman whose husband observed and experienced violence from childhood onwards, from his [REDACTED] father chiefly directed towards his mother, but equally, on occasions, to himself and his brothers. My husband then was physically violent with me in the first decade of our marriage. When physical violence ceased, other problems remained. I left the marriage in [REDACTED] after [REDACTED] years of marriage. I have made a good transition but remain affected by the experience as do my now adult children.

1. What would have helped me to take positive action at an earlier stage?
2. What barriers did I encounter in getting help I needed?
3. What was a) helpful? b) unhelpful?

1. What would have helped ?**Believing that I had a right to care about my own wellbeing.**

For me, family, cultural and religious factors had combined to suggest that the issues I confronted should be relegated to lesser priority in a worthwhile life. Commonly I encounter a 'diplomatic' (cowardly?) choice in society at large, to side-step the issue of negative impact of religion but this is an intricate and inescapable part of my experience. In an apparently harmless context of shiny, rosy religious faith, learning at a very young age to sing songs such as :

*J-O-Y, J-O-Y,
This must surely mean:
Jesus first, yourself last,
And others in between*

– is part of the conditioning that undermines people's capacity to resist harms such as controlling behaviours, varying forms of abuse, and specifically, family violence. I could unpack this further but for the sake of brevity will leave it to you to realise likely effects of this and similar enculturation. I feel that when such religious messages intersect with gender constructions, the mix is particularly harmful and cause for serious consideration.

Similarly, being told by my well-meaning mother, in my early 20s when I protested some of my experience of marriage, that "you have no rights my dear, Jesus gave up all his rights for you" further undermined my capacity to resist what felt very wrong in my lived experience.

1. What would have helped?

Believing that I had a right to care about my own wellbeing.

Weekly I was hearing at church, messages of the need to forgive, to be 'tender-hearted one to another' (and I was supposed to read/hear and apply my own lines, I was told. The fact that my partner may have been ignoring such admonitions was irrelevant.) If assumptions are made that this was a particularly extreme and damaging form of religion, then a serious point will be missed. The point is that pervasively and continuously, religion serves to reinforce submission in *our* society too – not just in extremist Islaamic communities.

Today I recognize that without a capacity to effectively protest and resist harm, a woman stands a lesser chance of protecting her children from the cyclical harm that FV so often represents. I also realize that in many sections of our society, even where religion is no longer actively practised, there is an unthinking acceptance of received ideas from past belief structures that in many instances *ought* to be challenged and critiqued carefully if we hope to build healthier societies into the future.

Better legal services/accessibility/info re likely styles, fee structures, pitfalls, 'choices'.

Navigating separation, property settlement and divorce are major tasks and many who might find their way out of abusive situations as I observe, deterred by the obstacles on the pathway. A booklet with 'real' info perhaps from FV support workers including voices of women who've walked this path would be a real asset. I found a relatively low cost solicitor whose office was a (managed) shambles and having little experience or basis for comparison I fretted at times regarding whether she was on the ball. If the state of the office indicated the state of her head I possibly should have been concerned. I visited a few other solicitors. Sometimes fee structures were so different as to make comparison tricky and in the case of another, highly recommended by a friend with legal connections, I paid some hefty fees but then found myself wasting my charged time correcting their typist's bungles and necessitating more hyper-alertness to every detail. The solicitor was it seemed, over the few visits I undertook with him, fairly competent, but his office staff were not. More lost time and stress. People really need help in this area. In the end, my messy solicitor and my own efforts pulled the show together, but God help anyone out there who is not game and resourced enough for this lion's den. I am well educated, as are a number of my friends who've made their way, painstakingly through this morass. What of those whose educational background leaves them feeling less well equipped to effectively wade through the formidable paper work load that this part of the process entails?!

1. What would have helped?

A more solid work history – more superannuation and more long-term engagement with financial decisions within the family.

My own career development had always been secondary to family needs and indeed less than six months before leaving the marriage, I had retired, at my husband's request, despite having earlier indicated a preference to continue my sessional work, which I enjoyed. My work was always only 'tolerated' provided it did not interfere with my 'duties' as a wife and mother. While it may not be a keen area of interest, young women would be well advised to insist on informed, active and equally participatory engagement with family finances. This should especially be negotiated /maintained along with any chosen change of roles/ income yielding work when children are planned. Lesser income does not legitimately mean lesser voice when the choice has been made together for one to support early childhood development in the home.

Better education about the complexity of life and decision-making processes.

Examples of lives and decision-making in the face of multiple competing values. Stories that illustrate that life is not always a clear either/or choice between black and white, good people and bad people, but that choices around values often involve weighing conflicting and simultaneously meritorious demands. Wisdom traditions often suggest that there is A best pathway through challenges if only one was skilled or persistent or courageous or worthy enough to find it. Such interpretations only increase the burden of life-path choosing in difficult times. Frequently one 'simply' needs to choose the best course of action one can, after seeking the best available advice/information. Making one's own choices and then remaining open to evidence regarding the impact of those choices on one's own and others' lives and being willing to adjust if necessary, may be entirely adequate goals. Often *any* path forward involves disruption, discomfort or harm of some sort and the available information for guiding decision making is often limited. See comment on values as barriers below.

2. What barriers did I encounter ... ?

Some of the barriers were in my own thinking due to my upbringing; others were more external to me. (Though some of the externals I discuss here can become internalised, which blurs this divide.)

The consciously taught **belief that God and the community of faith held all the answers to all life needs and problems** was a hindrance and cost me many wasted years. There are ample scriptures that alert people to be 'in the world but not of the world' which can be mobilised to encourage the idea that the church will and should look after its own and to discourage seeking external help (which is sometimes essential). Even standard institutional reporting practices beyond the church, aim to address issues/conflicts at the lowest and closest levels first, before referring them further. This is sometimes (not infrequently)

2. What barriers did I encounter ... ?

counter productive: a source of wasted time, loss of momentum and hope. It also enables forces that have more interest in self-preservation than in uncovering and addressing harm, to take cover-up action that may decrease the likelihood of later accountability.

The energy required to see through the 'fog of battle' sufficiently to define a problem and articulate it clearly enough to be heard, when other competing values are being strongly promoted should not be under-estimated. If one has devotion and loyalty to cultural, institutional or religious values that militate against protest and speaking out, it is not hard for that investment of energy to be crushed, sidelined or silenced in a range of ways.

Values ... (cultural and religious)

The belief that love and marriage are paramount – regardless of what the below-the-surface reality may be – as well as the popular concept of loyalty and sticking by one's mates/clan/people/partner can both act against people finding pathways beyond abuse and violence. Romantic notions of redemption through love and persistence are cultural ideals often promoted powerfully in film and sometimes necessitating the presence of a 'disposable' sacrificial 'victim'/candidate/volunteer whose fate/reduced quality of life is rationalised, minimised or ignored.

Perhaps as established religion is increasingly less influential in gaining adherents, popular song and film now play increasingly important roles in promoting values. And when one is hit from multiple directions by the values of a society, with little or no attempt to recognize that assumed cultural 'goods' can simultaneously involve cultural 'evils' one can be powerfully and subtly manipulated to behave in ways that obscure harm and maintain a status quo of abuse and violence. I believe that it is the obscuring of harm, this apparent acceptance from those that they trust, which does the most damage to children and can lead to the ongoing cyclical, intergenerational violence that so much characterises this sector.

Ignorance

A well-meaning GP whose response to my situation was definitely concerned, proactive and sympathetic could have benefited from **more input from workers with experience in the FV area**. She referred me to a psychotherapist she had used with children and who had allegedly achieved good results.

This particular psychotherapist had a manner that I found disturbing and distressing. I attended at considerable expense, one session with her and was so profoundly upset that I realised I would not be able to line up for another. Again the loss of a sense of pathway forward (in a situation where I already felt I was tentatively stumbling in the dark and experiencing a fair degree of anxiety in the adjustment phase after leaving an abusive

2. What barriers did I encounter ... ?

Ignorance

marriage) was devastating. I was very fortunate in that a FV support worker from the shire in which I'd lived during my marriage phoned me as I drove away from that appointment. I had also previously reached out to this shire facility but had had a relatively 'fob-off' first connection with that centre. (They were over-stretched and since I was not currently living in a situation of maximum threat, I was not rated eligible for the form of support for which I'd initially contacted, on advice from an agency. The worker I spoke to did not offer any other form of help. This is now ■ years past and I no longer recall the pathway that led to me actually being contacted by the shire's FV support worker who was then able to offer counselling support. This connection became a powerful tool for change. More of that below.)

One of the principles by which I believe workers in the area of FV tend to operate is to avoid any repetition of the type of controlling behaviours that may have been experienced in the context of the experience of violence. It seems fairly obvious that such behaviours would likely compound rather than alleviate harm. Coldly authoritative control was precisely what I encountered in the initial psychotherapy session I attended. My GP appeared to lack any understanding of the likely impact of this style of management. I have maintained a fairly good working relationship with this GP but feel her ignorance of this specific area is symptomatic of a difficulty people confront in emerging from situations of FV. The very fact that doctors are intelligent and medically informed practitioners in the healthcare system tends to give them greater authority and confidence and perhaps therefore, more potential to damage by failing to accurately perceive needs and streamline avenues to assistance. Keeping them well informed seems a critical part of the puzzle. There need to be links from workers at the coalface to keep medical personnel informed of relevant issues and best practice and openness from medicos to the potential of such a connection.

3a What was helpful?

Absolutely, the experience of finding my way to a **FV support worker** was helpful. She supported me with regular counselling at 2 or 3 weekly intervals. She also attended mediation for property settlement with me at Relationships Australia, when I needed to encounter my angry ex-husband who at various points made it very clear that he was not interested in negotiation. She provided key resources, so that I could read in key areas where I lacked information/understanding; put me in touch with an **Anglicare budgeting service** to help me think my way through the unfamiliar and initially stressful task of managing my own finances (this made an enormous difference to my sense of coping with the demands of my new life); and invited me to join two different **recovery groups**, the second of which included some art therapy; as well as being available for individual sessions where we thrashed out whatever was troubling me at the time. Each of these inputs was extremely useful to me and made an enormous difference to my initially non-existent, then

3a What was helpful?

gradually emerging, fragile and returning sense of competence. I cannot stress enough the pivotal role that this support worker played. The continuity and dependability of care I received from her and the calming effect of having a qualified and skilled worker with real knowledge of this area made an immense difference to my recovery.

Additionally my own efforts in various areas were a help. Seeking and choosing, at the right time, progressively increasing hours of **meaningful and fulfilling work** gave me both pleasure and confidence. Increasing my knowledge and skill to equip me for my work – again – *in areas of my own choice*, not in the form of recognized qualifications, of which I felt I mostly had sufficient, but in the form of self-education: improving knowledge and understandings, as well as capacity to explain and communicate what I knew.

I also made consistent efforts to rebuild a strong support **network of friends** – friends whose company in some cases, I'd had to forego while my husband's support demands had limited my options for connection. In multiple ways these friends made a big difference.

Another area I organised for myself was **physical activity** – choosing to walk (despite some new disabilities over this time, I was able to do 20 – 30 minute walks and often in pleasant surroundings) and to join a gym to maintain flexibility, balance and strength. The social exposure of aqua exercise classes was highly beneficial and has enabled me to find new work opportunities too. My FV worker was able to access some funding from a charitable foundation for me early on for a series of strength building classes at a local community house at a critical time for me when I was feeling isolated. **She very much worked WITH me by listening, to discover what might be useful and then making suggestions, as opposed to seeking to impose solutions upon me.** I also reached out to a local labour exchange trading group (LETS) and assisted with some gardening activities for members and offered my work skills too through the group. This provided one more social outlet and the potential of practical assistance at a time when uncertainty and social isolation could be disturbing.

In the early days when I considered leaving my marriage and was trying to figure many things, **WIRE (Women's Information and Referral Exchange)** proved highly useful alerting me to the shire facility as an avenue for help and a few other opportunities. I attended a helpful **financial literacy course** they ran in a nearby suburb in the midst of packing up my belongings to leave home.

Public libraries too were essential to me throughout this time. Not only did I **research** everything from knowing when to leave a relationship, to buying a home and managing money/anxiety and much between, I also used library computers as my first **home office** when I had little or no equipment of my own. When I had no home of my own and couch surfed between friends' homes, the library was my **substitute lounge room and shelter** and when I attended talks there, it became a source of **interest, ideas and company.**

3a What was helpful?

Externally, another avenue of help was a **mental health plan and psychologist support (bulk-billed – and therefore accessible for me)**. During [REDACTED] when I identified an issue with anxiety as I adjusted to the multiple shocks of life and re-adjustment, this proved a real asset and I was extremely grateful to be able to access such a service which would otherwise have been beyond me at this point of my life.

I was fortunate to have a referral to a good, basic, honest **accountant** who again allayed concerns and made life doable for me at a confusing and sometimes alarming stage. I would imagine that this would be a vital area for any woman in a similar position unless she already had strong financial/accounting skills.

Practical assistance for unfamiliar tasks is key to getting one's life going again and to a sense that one is coping. I took a short practical course in home handyperson skills at a local community house where a local tradesperson demonstrated various procedures. Knowing that such learning opportunities are available at low cost can be essential. If local FV support workers were supplied with periodically updated resource booklets for their areas, it would be a key resource.

3b What was unhelpful?

This has been indicated already. In addition ...

Many **community attitudes** I encountered where some acquaintances responded to my news of separation by 'wondering' aloud as to whether I could not somehow rebuild, reconstruct, remain within my marriage, were deflating. The long years already spent on those attempts and the underlying abuse were not visible to them. Friends often do not realise that perpetrators of FV who may present as charming or likable in certain social situations may display quite another side in the home.

I found that group recovery sessions that permitted participants to ramble about their issues were less productive for me than those where facilitators more or less stuck to their session plans. This may not be the case for all participants, but it seemed to me that some of the **unpacking of personal stories at length** might have been better suited to individual sessions and at times, prevented us from completing other activities that I felt would have been beneficial. Naturally there was plenty of time and scope for personal responses to material presented, and the links with other participants were valuable as well as insights into their struggles and journeys.

An **early set of sessions on work readiness** provided at a city agency was not particularly helpful to me in that it was so general that I lost any sense of my own personal pathway to work and of the things that bring meaning and purpose to my experience of life and work. I was taking long bus trips to get there and eventually skipped the last two sessions. The

3b What was unhelpful?

increased sense of loss of self through this supposedly helpful intervention at a time when rebuilding some sense of self was vital, was ultimately too negative.

IN CONCLUSION

*After my first unhelpful GP experience/psychotherapy experience mentioned earlier, I eventually found my way to a mediocre bulk billing GP service with access to the very good, (also bulk-billed) psychologist mentioned above. Today as I write, these frightening days are receding – but at the time I had some real concerns about my state of mind. Mine is so far, a story of relatively successful recovery over a period of three years, made possible by some good support, alongside my own energetic efforts. I recall well, the hazards of the journey though and recognize that it might easily have been a very different outcome and that at various points the success of my efforts to find external assistance seemed more a matter of fortunate circumstance than of clear pathway. After my first tentative approach to the shire service for assistance and the initial rebuff, **I would not have tried that avenue again**, had I not been contacted by the FV support worker whose interventions over a period of probably two years, made such an immense difference to me. I recently farewelled her with a quiet sense of my own readiness to tackle the journey ahead, independently now.*

*Mine is a largely successful tale of recovery. It might so easily have ended differently! And with a university degree behind me I naturally have some confidence (however battered that may have been at times) regarding researching and accessing resources. As I wonder what the story might have been for a person with fewer such advantages, I hope that some outcomes of this commission's work will be **more clearly defined pathways to assistance, the development of more resources to guide travellers out of abusive relationships and greater support for the excellent work of trained and skilled workers in this area.***

And perhaps too, I'd hope there could be a message to women on their way out of harmful relationships, to keep trying. When doors appear to be closing, when people are either not responding or responding inappropriately – to not lose hope. To believe in themselves and the legitimacy of their own needs and to draw hope from others who have found a way out, through the confusing morass; to listen to the voice within, that seeks, however uncertainly or tentatively, to define its own needs; to honour that voice, as one would honour one's own child and to keep seeking until a place of safety, a better day, can be found. For oneself, for one's children, for our whole society, this journey is of paramount importance.

Thank you for the opportunity to 'speak'.