

GAPS IN THE SYSTEM

- Hearings for breaches of orders taking up to 6 months to be heard in court
- Orders getting backed up in fax machines from court houses to police stations
- Police not having access to a centralised record system.
- Having to contact specific officers at specific stations to get information, or get hold of a statement that was made
- Notes and statements taking up to 3 days to go through the internal police system from one station to another
- People who commit violence responding to allegations of assault with 'no comment' meaning charges cannot be laid without additional witnesses or photo/ audio evidence – this is how they get away with it.
- Support services having strict assistance zones – leaving vulnerable women and children unable to move from one area to another namely from regional Victoria to Metropolitan Melbourne
- Supports offered to women are only very short term too, there needs to be longer support offered. Effectively what ends up happening is because only short term support can be offered women end up going from service to service, which would end up costing more long term. It's almost the equivalent of 'dr shopping' for a drug addict. Often the work is doubled up.
- Men not being forced to attend mandatory Mens behavioural change programs if they live outside the area of the court hearing
- Victims and perpetrators sitting within the same vicinity of each other in the court waiting room
- A distinct lack of PSO / security officers present at the lunchtime break in court waiting rooms leaving the victims vulnerable
- Duty lawyers being overstretched with their case load and not able to give adequate time and support to victims on hearing dates.
- Duty lawyers yelling at the victims telling them to represent themselves as they are too busy
- Registrars writing up applications for a hearing of an IVO from the perpetrator claiming false allegations of abuse
- Victims being forced back into areas where violence took place to attend court hearings
- No consideration given for the needs of a child when a court hearing is scheduled, especially one with special needs
- No provision for a victim to receive support / representation at a court without their physical presence due to extenuating circumstances
- Victims of Crime lawyers with limited awareness of the impact of violence on babies / children or people with special needs
- Case managers need to create exit plans with clients and not simply announce that this is the last meeting and our file is now being closed. This comes as a big shock and can often be traumatic.
- Only one officer rostered on at a station which means any victim has to make a statement in a reception area
- Some men are skilled at manipulating the system and appear to have a Teflon coating. They are effectively grooming the system.

MY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Men should be forced to attend mandatory Men's behavioural change programs and repeat them if they are not showing any level of understanding / change of attitude. In addition they should be forced to attend 1:1 counselling
- All police records should be centralised for access to all police members as appropriate
- Guidelines given to people attending court regarding what happens, how to behave when entering a court room etc
- There should be provision for women to feel safe outside a court house waiting for the doors to open and also once inside. This is particularly bad in country court houses.
- Police follow through on what they say they will do eg; Not saying they will log a statement onto the system and then changing their mind and notifying the perpetrator first
- A centralised list of perpetrators and victims for police to access
- All police to be given specific training in dealing with victims – not making them feel they are wasting police time, not them feel intimidated and certainly not belittling their experience for any delay in reporting an incident
- All women feeling a family violence situation should have access to a case manager for support. **This should be for a minimum of 6 – 12 months** as follows: 3 month intense support helping link them with other professional services and supports, eg; Medical services, housing, schools, counselling, financial aid – meeting or containing them each week or fortnight. This should then be spaced out to fortnightly and then monthly, before a gradual exit plan is worked out and agreed upon. The ending of such support should be gradual and not instant without warning.
- It is important that at the initial meeting, the terms of the support are laid out clearly, what help can be given, what form this will take, how long the support is available for, how the support will be reduced, how it will eventually end and other supports that can be accessed afterwards if required.
- This support period should be for 12 months where a woman has a child / children with special needs as their needs are more complex. Again with a gradual exit plan.
- Access for women to receive financial assistance in the form of food vouchers, petrol vouchers, linked up with a financial counsellor. In addition toiletries , nappies, clothes or toys for their children as appropriate
- Support and advice should be given to make applications to CSA. Women should be informed that claims are not backdated and need to be put in immediately.
- Counselling support for all children or play therapy sessions should be available
- Crisis phone lines need to be answered quicker. It can be up to 2 hours before a call is returned on 1800 respect
- Funding needs to be available to provide assistance for women and children leaving violence for longer. It can't simply 'dry up' once they have left – this exposes the woman making them even more vulnerable
- Police should always take a statement from a victim in private – they should not have to do this in a public arena of a reception area
- Consideration needs to be given to women who have children with special needs regarding court hearings
- Men should not be allowed to apply for orders or threaten defamation against a women for speaking out about the violence because she doesn't have witnesses to back up her experience

- Women should be advised to inform the local police if they have moved into a new area, so they are aware of any calls that come from that new address
- Additional support and priority should be given to women who have a child with special needs. This includes helping them link up with medical / early intervention, respite and other support services as they are already under immense additional stress caring for their child.
- Stop glorifying the THUGS! – sports men who have been violent are soon forgotten and forgiven due to their status eg; Grant Hackett and Wayne Carey
- Women need emotional support AFTER a court hearing. It is often such a stressful and emotional experience that they need someone to talk to afterwards to reassure them or debrief with
- The terminology of no charges laid needs addressing as these thugs are using it as a way of suggesting that no violence took place. No charges does NOT equal no violence took place – it simply means they got away with it.
- Guidelines / a checklist needs to be created for a woman to access of what to do next, who to contact, what supports and assistance is available for them – and it needs to be available – real support in real terms.

WHAT IS WORKING

- Women's support workers at court are essential and a great source of support
- Family violence workers who run men's behavioural change programs linking with the partners is essential
- The DHS / Family violence dept that provides immediate support to women and children fleeing violence where one of them has a disability.

THE REALITY OF LIFE FOR A WOMAN AND CHILD LIVING IN A DOMESTIC VIOLENT SITUATION

- The best description I can give is that of a hostage situation. The front door may be unlocked, by the psychological terror they live under is what prevents them from leaving. It can be likened to the Lindt café siege, where Man Monas did not have the gun pointing on everyone, yet all were too frightened to leave
- They are usually systematically isolated from their family and friends. The Perpetrator won't like their family or friends – and the feeling is usually mutual, so there would be conflict if contact was made. To avoid the conflict, the woman withdraws from being around them.
- Often no one is allowed or welcomed into the home, or the woman is too scared of how the perpetrator will behave in front of them, or ashamed at their living conditions.
- The fear of getting the police involved is often sufficient deterrent to prevent the woman from contacting them. They are scared that things will be taken out of their hands, that they are making the situation worse, that it might kill the 'relationship', of the ramifications
- Often the woman has emotional feelings for the perpetrator. They don't want them to leave their lives, they just want the behaviour to stop.
- Often the woman is living under significant financial strain and abuse, with no money available to squirrel away for an escape.

- It is very difficult to make contact with support services for fear of letting someone know what is going on, or of knowing who to contact.
- If there are children involved, the woman tries to protect them and keep continuity in their lives, they don't want to have to leave and uproot them, move them from their friends, their school, their bedroom. They try to keep things as normal as possible. They are also fearful that in notifying authorities of the violence that they risk their children being taken into care.
- When there is a child with special needs additional stresses are placed on the situation. The child's additional needs can be a source of conflict or frustration to the perpetrator and can certainly put the mother under additional strain. In addition, they are usually linked in with external support / developmental or medical services and supports and these also need to be continued. This makes moving twice as hard, as these supports need to be either continued or re-established in a new area, often with waiting lists.,
- A child may be nonverbal or have an intellectual disability making it harder to get them to understand what is going on. A sudden change to their routine can cause havoc for them for months adding to their trauma
- The child's disability can make it hard to leave suddenly, they may have a physical disability which requires additional supports or appliances that have to be taken too, so leaving in a hurry is often not an option.
- A mother is often incredibly protective of her children, and even more so when there are vulnerable because of their additional needs. This means they will often not tell people what is going on – especially the extent of the situation for fear that their child will be taken into care.
- Often by the time a woman leaves, their self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth is on the ground. They need practical and emotional support, and often financial support. They need to be linked in with a support service immediately and allocated a case manager to guide them.
- Anytime any mention of family violence is on the TV or radio, be it a talk show, or a news reel, this is often a cause for the woman to experience abuse as the man feels it is directed at him personally. It is not possible for the woman to watch anything that might help her. (I often had to quickly switch channel if I saw or heard him approaching the room)
- Families often stick together to 'protect' the perpetrator, isolating the woman further and giving the thug more power as he feels the families backing.
- There are never any witnesses, medical evidence or recordings, making it hard for charges to go through as the police don't have sufficient 'evidence'
- The woman will often back down after contacting the police, due to pressure from their partner / ex partner or fear of repercussions
- There is nothing more frustrating for a woman to hear either a person who has not lived the experience telling them how they understand or what it's like and how abusers work, especially workers in the field with little experience.
- The other frustrating comment is people stating that they can't understand why they don't 'stand up for themselves' or just leave. It is totally ignorance and incredibly insulting