

Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

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This isn't so much around my personal experience – It's more around my work here at Project Respect, doing outreach and working with women in the sex industry.

We gather stats. Consistently for the last 10 years the average age of women in the sex industry is 27-32. I believe this is borne largely out of women leaving family violence situations. A lot of women have been in violent relationships, had kids. But then by the time they get to this age, the kids are in school, they have time to think about getting out. I have had a lot of women, while their husband is at work they will drop the kids off at school and go and work in a brothel to raise enough money for a bond, a months' rent, and they end up getting stuck in the industry.

And then there are the group of women who have left family violence situations and are working in the sex industry because they're not getting support from their partners.

There are women in the sex industry who are still in their relationship and their partners are forcing them to work in the sex industry

I remember a woman whose partner was made redundant, together they made a decision that she would go and work in the industry. It was meant to be a short fix while he found a job. He realised the amount of money she made, and thought 'no, I'm not going to get a job, you can just stay there'.

Then there are the women who are supporting their own and their partner's drug addictions. Or just their partner's addictions, but often it's both.

Women in family violence relationships – there are often threats. Men will say "don't you dare leave because I will tell child protection you're in the sex industry".

In my experience working with women, intervention orders are a big problem. We [at Project Respect] educate women on how to use intervention orders well. I think it was a big step when it became law (women used to have to take an order out themselves) that police could take out the intervention order. It needs to go further. So many women call me and tell me "I've called the police about a breach, they won't do anything". They have to be half-dead before the police do anything.

The police need to have a better understanding of something like a text message – the fear that this instils in people. The fear that it's starting again. I'd like to see the stats on the number of people who have actually gone to jail for breaches. You never hear of it. It would make it busy for police but it's better than a woman dying.

Where they took the intervention order out of her hands, they need to take the breaches out of her hands, start taking it seriously. It's out of her control – he's committed a crime, it should be out of her hands

Women just stop ringing. They say the police don't care if he just texts me, or drives past my house. I tell women that it's their right, they should be saying "no – it's my right, take my statement". There's no point having intervention orders if they're not taken seriously. There needs to be more public information about how to use intervention orders.

There could be a pamphlet – teaching women about taking contemporaneous notes so they can be used in court. When women go to court, there should be a point where the judge explains the breaches that have occurred. When women are granted an intervention order they should be told

how to use it. It wouldn't be hard to put together a pamphlet – 'what to do if your intervention order is breached'. It should go with the intervention order when they go to the counter to pick it up.

The police need to start taking it seriously. If they text someone, the next minute the cops are around at their house charging them with breach. Every time a guy breaches an order, no matter how small, lock them up the minute the breach occurs. And word will get around the male community.

But people are innocent until proven guilty. If they charge him with breach, he might not go to court for 3-4 months. What happens to the woman? This is why I say that it needs to be taken out of her hands, so she doesn't have an option to go in there and say 'oh, he only texted me, it's okay'.

Most women will laugh at you when you mention intervention orders, it's just a piece of paper, it's not going to stop him from doing anything. But if there were serious charges, it wouldn't just be a bit of paper anymore.

I think the police have come a long way, even from 10 years ago. There are police who get it and police who don't, but it needs to be across the board. There's a lack of understanding in police, how much something as simple as a text message can be threatening. How that's the beginning, then he drives past, then he smashes a window, then he kills her

I had a woman at a brothel, her partner had bashed her and she left the house. I told her to get in a cab and come to me. I encouraged her to call the police and the guy was great. The cop said "no matter what you do for a job, you shouldn't be treated like that". He came past the brothel later that week to check if she was okay.

We refer women to the DV crisis line. We can only make referrals. Often with women in the sex industry unless they're being physically beaten they often don't realise they are in an abusive relationship, not when it's emotional and psychological abuse.

Women in the sex industry are often linked in with mental health services, alcohol and drug services, CASA workers – who may or may not be working with them on the family violence issues. By the time I make a referral to Safe Steps they're at the point where they've been beaten so much and they can't go home and they're just desperate.

There is a fear of stigma and discrimination because they work in the industry. Women seeing counsellors often don't want to tell them, but it's important for the counsellors to see the whole picture.

Another woman, she had three children and her partner was beating her. She'd wanted to leave for a long time. He didn't work, and he would never let her leave the house with all three kids at the one time. We have a weekend away a couple of times a year, a retreat. I had a colleague of hers call up and tell me she's black and blue one day, and I decided I wanted her to come away on the retreat.

She ended up coming away on the weekend, she was safe there. But come Sunday night and she had nowhere to go. I told her "first thing Monday we will go to court and get your kids back" and in the meantime I rang Safe Steps. They were asking a lot of questions. They asked why they were fighting, she said because I work in the sex industry and the women from Safe Steps said "well that's not a very nice thing – why did you go and do that?" It was a really negative experience. She did go to a refuge that night, I went to court the next morning, the court said they can't be with the father they should be with the mother. We rang [REDACTED] police and told them and they said "oh yeah next

time we're out that way we'll drop in and pick them up". This woman sat at the police station for 3 hours thinking that he was going to kill her kids.

When the police had got to her house, he had picked up a bag that had her work clothes in it and dumped it on the kitchen counter, saying "I just found out she's in the sex industry".

The police woman said to me, in front of her: 'I hope now that she's got her kids back she won't be doing that any more'. I said that actually, now she wouldn't have to, now that he wasn't forcing her to any more.

At one point she'd left him and moved to her father's in [REDACTED]. She recorded him calling her up and threatening to kill her – he actually said he was going to bury her alive. She played it to her lawyer, and her lawyer played it to his lawyer, and the case never went to court.

I got her all set up, got a house, a part time job, kids were in school. Three months later he found her, she went back to him, he moved her to [REDACTED] and that's the last I heard of her. She's probably dead.

Family violence services need to be able to keep their personal views out of it and just look at her situation.

END

Note:

Project Respect run training a couple of times a year, looking at how to work with women in the sex industry and trafficked women.