

Introduction

I offer this submission because I have developed a genuine passion to help reduce violence against women and children and to improve gender equality across all social and professional settings – workplaces, communities, sporting clubs, associations etc. I have attended formal training programs and conducted my own research in this area over the last 12 months to develop a strong understanding of the key issues associated with this problem.

Having witnessed the impact of family violence on people close to me, I am compelled to dedicate my personal and professional energies into making a difference to this national emergency that is the problem of domestic violence. I am particularly shamed by the lack of accountability among male perpetrators and the governing legal and police systems that allow them to maintain domestic abuse towards their intimate partner.

In my personal experience, I knew of a domestic violence situation that continued for several years. At times I tried to intervene albeit, in hindsight, my help was ineffective. I was perhaps like thousands of people around the country today, someone who didn't really understand the nature of the abuse, and someone who didn't feel empowered to do what was really needed to help the situation. I may not have solved the problem but I may be living with myself a little easier today had I understood the situation better and helped in a more constructive manner.

I now know there are many things that can be done. I know that each situation is different and most often complex. I know that it often requires a team of skilled practitioners across counselling, police, legal, financial, welfare and other services to address and case manage each different situation, and that it may only be resolved to a point. I now know that any step forward may be countered by two steps backwards. I now know that progress is possible but it can be slow.

Any individual considering or offering to help or intervene in some way needs to tread carefully, particularly if there are safety issues affecting the female victim, any children involved, or relatives or friends who may be disaffected by such an intervention. Sometimes it is best that individuals like myself recognise that such complex situations need to be referred to specialist services.

It may then be a matter of intervening by offering to help the victim get proper help for their situation. In some cases, an offer of help may be refused, but wouldn't our communities be better served if people felt empowered to at least have a conversation with female victims to offer top help and be there if needed. Victorian communities need to band together to help protect the vulnerable.

Today, I carry some guilt that I did not do enough to help constructively. But today I am committed to helping make a difference in a professional and personal capacity. That is why I take this opportunity to recommend three key solution-oriented

recommendations to address what I consider to be three key areas where a difference can be made.

I am proud to be a White Ribbon Ambassador having represented this male-led campaign publicly and raised funds for it on several occasions. I also volunteer for three other organisations, each working to prevent violence against women, children and families in general.

Recommendations

While I am encouraged by the increased attention in the media around this topic, I believe there has been an underwhelming response from Government and the Justice system in providing the necessary assistance to victims and their families. I know from all the media and reporting on this topic, that most, if not, all the issues will be represented across the breadth and depth of submissions, however, I would like to focus on three solution-oriented recommendations that address key issues associated with this problem. They are the empowerment of two key groups that I think can make a substantial difference; i.e. communities and families, and the increased accountability of male perpetrators.

While my recommendations do not address services to directly assist female victims, I acknowledge the required increase in services needed to directly help victims and feel sure that this area will be the primary focus of many submissions. That is why I am focussing my submission on other areas.

1. Support for families and friends of victims

If I look at the problem of gambling, I see that a behaviour change program has evolved over some years to the point where the value of empowering the family to intervene and help in a constructive way is recognised and promoted. A special 1800 is also in place for families impacted by the problems associated with gambling.

Many female victims of domestic violence do not report or even speak about the abuse they are subjected to for various reasons, one of which is that they fear they will not be believed or that they are ashamed. It is these types of situations where a family member or members or even a group of family and friends could intervene and provide some level of support to help the victim. In hindsight, I feel that I could have done more to help the people I know who experienced domestic abuse. I didn't feel empowered then but I now know that there were many things I could have done and wish I had been empowered to do. I'm certain there are thousands of people now facing a similar situation to mine.

So, my first recommendation is to provide support to empower families and close friends to intervene – to be active bystanders. The solution would include but not be limited to the following:

- Development of services and tools to assist family members and close friends of victims of domestic violence. Services would include specific counselling or helpline services, while tools would include online resources covering referral services, helpful hints for active bystanders, and educational resources for families and friends to better understand the nature of the problems being experienced by the victim. It is particularly important that any material for this group of families and friends promote intervention practises that are safe for the person offering help as well as the victim.
- An awareness campaign using multiple media channels to promote the relevant services for families.
- A methodology to measure the impact of the strategy on addressing the problem. This would include, awareness and recognition of the services, take-up, how the services are perceived and valued etc.

2. Mobilising communities to support victims

My second recommendation is around mobilising the community. Just like Neighbourhood Watch provided the community with greater comfort and security against intruders and robbers, I believe a similar solution could empower communities as a whole to build capability to watch over the families in their neighbourhood. It could also help to build a greater sense of community in areas where this might be lacking or non-existent.

Such a solution would include but not be limited to the following:

- Recruitment and training of community representatives into voluntary roles that serve to provide a 'community' support service for families where there is a level of or a possibility of domestic abuse. White Ribbon Ambassadors such as myself are under-utilised and often prepared to do more to help the cause and make a difference. As such, they could be a good recruiting ground.
- A means of generating greater awareness of local services that could assist victims or potential victims of domestic violence.
- Aligning the community support representatives with the local council efforts to address the specific nature of domestic violence in their particular community.
- Again, a methodology to measure the impact of the strategy on addressing the problem in each community.

3. Increased resources to change male behaviour

My third recommendation is around increasing the opportunities for men to change their behaviour. As a male who wants to make a difference by helping to change men's behaviour, I am astonished at the lack of resources and funding available for men's programs. I read recently that "there were about 700 men just waiting to be assessed for one of the state's 35 men's behaviour change programs, and 300 waiting for a place." It's horrifying to think of the danger that this situation represents for women.

Obviously, funding to deal with male perpetrators has been insufficient and simply, men are not being held accountable. I imagine men who are mandated by a Court to attend a behaviour change program, only to find they have to go on a waiting list, must think our justice system is a joke. Where is the accountability? And what are the chances they reoffend?

Moreover, having attended court to witness several family violence cases, I am appalled by the lightness of the punishment for male perpetrators and feel for the female victims who attend court hoping for some relief from the situation only to walk away confused, let down and probably more fearful. Tougher treatment of male perpetrators is needed and I would welcome consideration of US strategies such as stricter consequences for intervention order breaches and shock incarceration of perpetrators who represent serious risk to women.

No amount of advocacy by celebrities and Ambassadors is going to make men more accountable. Such perpetrators are often incapable of feeling shame for their behaviours, and to the contrary, many believe they are the victim. They must complete a formal program to make them understand the impact of their behaviours, make them remorseful, and make them change their attitudes and behaviours.

Therefore, my third recommendation is to make males more accountable through:

- Funding for increased resources to effectively deal with male perpetrators so we don't just let them believe their actions are OK.
- Through tougher laws for male perpetrators, particularly around sentencing, mandating behaviour change programs, consequences for breaches of Court Orders and monitoring their progress until they no longer pose a threat to their female partner; and
- Awareness and education on active bystander strategies, particularly for men to stand up against poor male behaviour.

Thank you for considering my submission and please do not hesitate to contact me for any further information.

Peter Coburn