

Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

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Introduction and context

I am a member of the Victorian parliament, having been elected to the Legislative Assembly in a by-election in June 2008 and re-elected in November 2010 and 2014. I represent the electoral District of Kororoit which covers 205 square kilometres and is located approximately 13km to the west of Melbourne's central business district. Kororoit includes residential and industrial areas within the municipalities of Brimbank and Melton; with rapid development occurring around the suburb of Caroline Springs.

Of a population of almost 74,000 people in Kororoit in 2011, more than half of these were born overseas. Countries of origin of significant numbers of Kororoit residents include Vietnam, the Philippines, Malta, India and New Zealand (ABS 2011). Less than one half of one per cent of Kororoit residents identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islanders. Pockets of extreme disadvantage exist within my electorate: on the SEIFA index of social disadvantage, Brimbank is ranked third of all municipalities in Victoria, while Melton is ranked at 50. Unemployment continues to be higher than the Victorian average across my electorate. In the four years from December 2010, unemployment in Brimbank rose from 8 per cent to 9.9 per cent. For the same period, unemployment in Melton increased from 5.4 per cent to 7.5 per cent. These figures compare with the Victorian unemployment rate of 6.8 per cent as at December 2014.

I write this submission on behalf of the many women in my electorate who as yet have not found their own voice to speak out against family violence. I hope that my contribution assists the Commission in their work and that following on from that work, we will be ever closer to eradicating family violence in this country.

I note that while family violence is a huge problem in Australia, other advanced countries face the issue in similar proportions. I would therefore submit that those seeking solutions should not be limited to reviewing the Australian context alone.

Please note further that I do not wish to give a formal presentation to the commission.

Socio economic status and family violence

Some studies suggest that women of lower socio economic status are more likely to be victims of family violence than wealthier women (e.g. Centre for Problem-Oriented Policing 2015). Renzetti (2011) states that studies consistently found that as the financial status of a family increases, the likelihood of domestic violence decreases. She quotes further studies that suggest that the relationship between family violence and hardship is reciprocal i.e. "...while economic stress and hardship may increase the risk of domestic violence, domestic violence may also cause financial problems for DV survivors and entrap them in poverty and an abusive relationship". Others report strong links between socio economic status and violence more generally, including domestic homicide (including Devery 1992); while other research findings suggest that family (or domestic

violence) occurs in all parts of society, regardless of geographic location, socio-economic status, age, cultural and ethnic background, or religious belief (e.g. American Psychological Association 2015; White Ribbon Australia n.d.)

What is also clear is that some groups of women experience significantly higher rates of violence than others; for example Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, and women who are pregnant or have recently given birth. Further, some women are especially vulnerable due to isolation, whether by language, geography, disability, mental health issues, or if they are concerned about their residency rights in Australia (Victoria Police 2014). Women with disabilities are said to be 'Triple disadvantaged' and are more likely to be subjected to abuse or violence than are other women (DVIRC 2003).

While the nexus between socio economic status and family violence is not clear, it is clear that economic dependency or a lack of financial resources makes escaping domestic violence extremely difficult. This is a major issue in my electorate. For those victims with English as a second language, seeking help is even more difficult. What is clear is that when women do escape family violence, they are likely to '... end up poor' (AHURI 2003).

Prevalence of family violence in Kororoit

In Australia, up to one in six women have experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner (ANROW n.d; Women's Forum Australia 2012). Further, almost one in four has not sought advice or help (ANROW n.d). Anecdotally, family violence is also a serious issue in my electorate. While crime statistics are difficult to 'unpack' to determine the exact nature of each crime, crimes such as stalking, harassment and threatening behaviour have steadily increased in each calendar year from 93 offences in December 2010 to 218 offences in December 2013. Assaults and related offences have increased year on year and from 531 offences to 758 offences over the three years to December 2013; an increase of over 140 per cent. In Melton, the number of stalking, harassment and threatening behaviour offences has increased from 37 offences to the year ending December 2010 to 201 offences for the year ending December 2013. Assaults and related offences have increased year on year and from 133 offences to 479 offences over the three years to December 2013; an increase of over 360 per cent (Victoria Police Statistics). It is safe to assume that many of the offences behind these crime statistics relate to family violence. It would be difficult to ascertain how much—if at all—increases in these crime statistics are related to increased reporting of family violence in response to high levels of media reporting.

In addition, anecdotal evidence obtained through my engagement in the community suggests that many instances of abuse are unreported. From this interaction with my local community— including constituent visits to my electorate office— I understand there are many barriers to women not only speaking up, but actually leaving abusive relationships. This concurs with the literature which suggests that women who experience family violence do not seek out services to assist them to leave abusive relationships because of fear, shame, guilt, embarrassment and a lack of knowledge of such services. Women also report concern about seeking the safety of a women's refuge due to the rules and communal living that often apply. These issues are compounded for women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities due to language barriers and cultural differences. Further, women can also be reluctant to leave their homes because of fear of economic loss and severing of supportive relationships and support networks. The Australian Domestic and Family Violence

Clearinghouse cites Patton who claims that “...ending a violent relationship is a process rather than a single step” and that “...the process could take a matter of weeks for some and years for others”. In the United States, statistics compiled by the National Domestic Violence suggest that on average, it takes a victim seven times to leave before staying away for good.

Systemic responses to family violence

Over the past decade or so, a number of initiatives have seen improvements to the approach to family violence in Victoria; by governments, the police and the service system. These improvements include the implementation of the Victorian Police *Code of Practice for the investigation of Family Violence* (launched in 2005 and most recently updated in December 2014). This Code has sought to strengthen the way that perpetrators are held accountable and increase the safety of victims. In addition, the introduction of initiatives such as police powers to issue Family Violence Safety Notices the introduction of Family Violence Court Divisions; the introduction of the Integrated Family Violence Service program including common risk assessment tools, protocols, and accreditation and funding for specialist family violence services according to a Code of Practice; and, the introduction of the *Family Violence Protection Act* have all contributed to improved responses to family violence in Victoria.

Nonetheless, women and children have continued to suffer at the hands of perpetrators of family violence including a number of high profile and tragic homicides.

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One of the major issues for women who report family violence is being able to secure safe and stable accommodation for her and her family at the point of reporting the violence. Often such accommodation is either unavailable or unsuitable; for example, she may have children and the particular refuge may have rules that exclude one or more of her children. For women of limited means, securing accommodation in the private rental market will be difficult if not possible. Often, women have little choice but to return to the family home, whether that home is safe or not. According to Taft (2003), “For women, refuges often represent an escape from abuse but into the trap of homelessness and poverty, from which it is difficult to escape”.

Possible solutions requiring investigation include removal of the perpetrator from the family home, rather than the victim, though it is acknowledged that this may create further issues in relation to ongoing security of the victim.

Attitudes to family violence

While much progress has been made in raising the issue of family violence in the community—particularly with programs such as *white ribbon*—I believe that leadership is required at the national level that sends a strong message that violence against women is un-Australian and is the antithesis of the Australian ‘fair go’. The *white ribbon* program is a wonderful initiative and does a great job in raising awareness and encouraging men to actively work towards eradicating violence against women. According to its CEO Libby Davies however,

...the issue of men's violence against women is one which is still considered by some as a social taboo not to be discussed in public. White Ribbon's challenge is to break the silence around this insidious issue and to engage the whole community in the prevention of men's violence against women (White Ribbon Australia 2012).

I believe we need to engage all Australians, regardless of culture, ethnicity, economic status or social strata. Information about family violence and where to get help should be as ubiquitous as the saturation television advertising for brands of soft drink and the like. Millions of dollars spent in advertising matters such as the 'intergenerational report' with 'Doctor Karl' could instead be applied to sending the message into every home that family violence is unacceptable and that there are places where victims can get help. We need to enculturate the whole Australian community that family violence has no place in our society.

Engaging with diverse communities

As indicated earlier in this submission, more than half of the people in my electorate were born overseas. We know that many Australian born women often struggle to report family violence: one can only imagine how hard it would be for migrants women with limited English language skills and/or social networks—as well as cultural differences. For people with limited social networks, family violence events could leave such people feeling trapped and without a way out. Any community education program needs to be cognisant of reaching all of our diverse communities.

The economic cost of family violence

There exists a strong economic case for change. According to the Women's Forum Australia (2012), family violence costs the Australia economy some 13.6 billion per year. This is expected to rise to 165.6 billion by 2021.

Clearing the service 'bottleneck'

Our reforms in policing—along with media reporting of high family violence incidents— have led to increased reporting of family violence incidents. As a result, access to accommodation to escape family violence is increasingly limited. Rental affordability is out of the reach of many women escaping family violence: recent analysis by the Council to Homeless Persons and widely reported by Melbourne media outlets reported that there was only one suburb in Melbourne where a single woman on an average wage could rent a two-bedroom house without experiencing financial stress.

Conclusion

Victoria has been a leader in family violence reforms. We cannot deliver the required outcomes alone however. Empty rhetoric alone won't change the attitudes of perpetrators; nor will it give women the strength to leave abusive relationships. And it won't solve the vexed issue of the provision of decent, safe and affordable accommodation for victims of family violence. What is needed is leadership at the national level to bring together the Commonwealth, states, community and private sectors in a spirit of genuine cooperation.

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