

Submission to Royal Commission into Family Violence**May 2015****Crystal Bruton (B.A (Hons), PhD (under examination))**

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence and its investigation into gaps and deficiencies in current system responses to family violence.

I have seven years experience working in non-for-profit organisations, government agencies and academic institutions on projects and programs related to the primary prevention and early intervention of family violence, along with advocacy and research on violence against women and children.

Most recently (early April 2015), I submitted a doctoral thesis titled 'Stories of strength, survival and the family violence system: Women's experiences of separating from an abusive, intimate male partner'¹. This thesis draws upon in-depth interviews with 12 women who have separated from a violent male partner in Victoria and interviews and focus groups with 19 support workers from domestic violence crisis and outreach services, legal services, children's support, and/or housing support services within Victoria. The findings of this thesis have significant implications for policy and practice in relation to the impact of service system responses on women seeking to leave a violent relationship.

Using these findings as a basis, I wish to make a number of comments and recommendations to the Royal Commission regarding the gaps and deficiencies in current system responses to family violence.

UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC/FAMILY VIOLENCE AS COERCIVE CONTROL

- An understanding of the gendered nature of family violence and the dynamics of coercive control in an abusive relationship across the system is crucial.

¹ This thesis will be available for review by the Royal Commission into Family Violence following examination. I will make this available to the RCFV at this time.

- Such an understanding recognises the ongoing and systematic pattern of abusive behaviours (physical violence, intimidation, control and isolation) that violent men use to control, instil fear and subjugate women within intimate relationships.
- Understanding the dynamics of coercive control is important in recognising the profound barriers that women face when seeking to safely leave a violent partner. These experiences significantly limit the degree to which women can exercise agency in their decision-making when separating from an abusive partner.
- Misunderstandings about the dynamics of violence in an abusive relationship underpinning system responses limits women's ability to receive adequate and timely support when separating from an abusive partner.

MANAGING SAFETY AND SURVIVAL IS PARAMOUNT

- A woman's decision-making when seeking to separate from a coercively controlling partner is complex. Many women seek to gain a degree of control in a context where they have no control by managing safety and survival via individual, calculated and strategic measures in their moves and plans to leave, the act of leaving and following separation.
- Many women experience an escalation of violence from abusive partners who seek to retaliate for their leave-taking, to prevent separation or force a return to the relationship. Measures to manage safety and survival are adopted in an effort to reduce the risk of escalating violence associated with separation.
- Women must be regarded as best placed to determine how to be agents for themselves and their children as it relates to managing safety and survival in the context of separation. Their experiences of violence and interpretations of risk matter.
- Women's interactions with specialist and mainstream services across the system must be characterised by respect for their decision-making and support for measures adopted to manage safety. This is critical to empowering women to exercise a degree of agency when leaving a violent partner.

THE NEED FOR SPECIALIST GENDERED DOMESTIC/FAMILY VIOLENCE SERVICES AND TRAINED PERSONNEL ACROSS THE SYSTEM

- To foster a clear and comprehensive understanding of women's experiences of coercive control within the system, there is a need to further resource specialist domestic/family violence services to ensure that women receive appropriate support that places their safety as paramount.
- Mainstream services and the legal system often fail to understand the dynamics of gendered power and coercive control and, as such, do not recognise the significant risks to the lives of women when separating from a violent partner. Such misunderstandings often underpin a failure to support women's agency and decision-making particularly as it relates to managing safety and survival, placing further barriers on women seeking to leave.
- Personnel working throughout the system (in particular, police, magistrates and legal personnel) must be trained and skilled in understanding the nature and impacts of coercive control on women and children.

INVESTMENT IN A CONTINUUM OF CARE INCLUDING CRISIS, SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM RESPONSES

- Specialist domestic/family services must be resourced to provide support on an ongoing and long-term basis to women, rather than based on limited case management timeframes.
- Many women feel abandoned, betrayed or pressured to re-establish their lives in a short time when support workers are only able to offer support for a limited timeframe. Service support of this nature also places constraints on women seeking help to take moves to leave or to recover emotionally from their experiences of violence.
- The provision of ongoing and long-term support is important in recognising that separation from an abusive relationship and seeking to re-establish one's life after

separation occurs over time. This is particularly important as many women experience ongoing and often escalating violence after separating.

INTEGRATION, COORDINATION AND CONSISTENCY ACROSS SECTORS WITHIN THE FAMILY VIOLENCE SYSTEM

- Despite a decade of reform to establish an integrated family violence system encompassing specialist family violence, legal and mainstream services, there remains an ongoing failure of sectors to effectively collaborate, communicate and share information.
- The disjointed nature of the system is a source of frustration for women seeking to leave a violent partner, but also for support workers who are trying to provide adequate support.
- There also remains a need to ensure that a consistent level of care is provided to women at all entry points and across all regions. This is particularly important because there is a significant disparity in service availability and provision between metropolitan and rural areas.
- The unpredictable nature of police responses leaves women feeling unsupported and vulnerable to further violence. There must be consistency in police responses to women seeking support to safely leave a violent partner and following separation.

It is important that in developing appropriate system responses to family violence that the realities and stories of family violence are reflected and given due recognition. Thus, I conclude this submission by presenting a sample of stories shared with me by women who have separated from a violent partner as part of my doctoral research². These stories reflect the significant barriers that women experience when seeking to safely leave a coercively controlling partner along with the difficulties in gaining adequate support from services and/or police, exemplifying many of the issues noted above.

² Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the women who participated in my doctoral research.

Helen

Helen, 44, was verbally abused, controlled financially and frequently threatened with, and experienced instances of, physical violence throughout her [REDACTED] year marriage. During the marriage, Helen knew that her and her husband were not going to 'make it' because of his abusive and controlling behaviour. Helen made the decision to separate when she realised that her husband's abuse and 'disconnection' from the family was impacting on her children. Helen persuaded her husband to move out and started having discussions with him over the next six months about permanently separating. Helen did this over a period of six months as she was concerned about him reacting violently to her decision to leave.

After separating, Helen was immediately 'cut off' financially by her husband and had difficulties meeting the basic costs of her home and caring for her children, Helen's husband 'tried everything' to get her to return to the relationship. When he realised that Helen had formed a new relationship and would not be returning, he threatened Helen with a [REDACTED]. Helen also experienced an escalation in other forms of abuse including abusive emails, threats of violence and harassment. Helen felt this was her husband's revenge and punishment for her forming a new relationship.

As the violence escalated, Helen contacted a domestic violence outreach service for help to obtain an Intervention Order. Helen also called police on several occasions during this time when she was threatened and because she was scared about what her husband would do. Some police were supportive, while others dismissed Helen's fears for safety and even chastised her for calling. The unpredictable nature of police responses has left Helen feeling even more vulnerable to violence. As a result, Helen has sought to increase security at her home because she is afraid of what her husband will do.

Anne

Anne, 59, was emotionally and financially abused and threatened with physical violence throughout her [REDACTED] year marriage. Anne's husband also isolated her from family and friends in the small rural town in which she resided. Anne contemplated leaving her husband when she realised that her two children were also physically abused. She thought about separating from her husband for three or four years and made attempts to leave on several occasions. However, these attempts were met with pressure to stay by her husband and his family and

friends. Anne stayed on these instances based on several conditions including that her husband would attend counselling and stop abusing their children, while she began financially preparing to leave her husband.

A short time later, Anne decided to leave because her husband's abuse toward her children escalated and she was worried about their emotional wellbeing. She also knew she had to take an opportunity to leave when she had access to some inherited money before her husband regained total control over her finances. After leaving, Anne's husband made threats to harm her children as a way to hurt her for leaving. Anne was terrified and consulted with her children about their safety when having contact with their father ('[if] they were afraid, to trust that and to get themselves...out of there').

Anne sought support from counselling and domestic violence support groups after separating, but she felt that these did not assist her to deal with the issues stemming from her experiences because she was only able to access this support for a period of ten weeks. Anne felt that the limited timeframe in which she could access service support ignored the impacts of violence on her emotional wellbeing – the scars and wounds. Anne was only able to gain support on a more long-term basis after discovering online peer support groups for domestic violence.

Vicki

Vicki, 42, experienced controlling and physically violent behaviours throughout her ■■■ year marriage. As her husband became increasingly abusive, Vicki separated from him for a period of time. Vicki persuaded her husband to leave, but he began 'terrorising' her and her children during the time in an effort to return to the home. After he returned to the home, Vicki experienced increased control and monitoring from her husband including tighter control over finances and secretly tape recording her. This made it difficult for Vicki to plan to leave and to discuss preparations with her children.

During this time, Vicki was able to call a domestic violence crisis service a few times to get advice about planning to leave and they helped her to recognise her experiences as abuse. However, at the same time, Vicki felt unsupported when she called police for support when planning ahead to leave. Vicki felt police did not see the importance of planning ahead to

leave when separating from an abusive partner because they did not put provisions in place to make her feel safer at this time.

Vicki was concerned about leaving, even though she knew it had to happen at some point, because she did not believe that she could financially manage caring for her children. Vicki made the decision to leave when her husband verbally abused and degraded her in front of the children. Leaving was 'quick' in the end and Vicki was left homeless and broke. She was offered a place to stay with relatives for a period of time. Vicki continued to experience threats of violence and false allegations of child abuse from her husband.

Vicki called police after separating because she was concerned that her husband may attempt to harm her son. She received a very different response from police than when she had contacted them upon seeking support to leave. Vicki felt that she was supported by police at this time because she had left her abusive relationship and did not have to convince them of her situation after separating.

In sum, the Victorian government must appropriately invest in specialised domestic/family violence services and specialised personnel throughout the family violence system to enable them to support and empower women throughout the process of separation and on an ongoing, long-term basis.