

Submission to RCFV – by [REDACTED] - 27/5/15

Please find attached my submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. I have directly addressed some of the questions listed in the published Issues Paper based on my experience as a victim of Family Violence. For wider context of the situation I experienced I have attached an article that was published in the Herald Sun on 26th Nov 2013. [REDACTED]

Question One

Are there other goals the Royal Commission should consider?

An additional goal that I believe is worthy of consideration by the Commission is the method of collecting and reporting of Family Violence statistics. Statistics are notoriously misused to promote specific views and even the “official police figures” do not always give a true view of the impact across the whole demographic of people impacted by FV.

Who is/should be the source of detailed statistics? Is there a consistent approach to categories/demographics/severity of FV? What’s the best framework that should be used to ensure the best statistical baseline for key decisions to leverage?

Question Two

The Royal Commission wants to hear about the extent to which recent reforms and developments have improved responses to family violence, and where they need to be expanded or altered.

Point 14 in the Issues Paper states that

“research shows that it is overwhelmingly women and children who are affected by FV.....for this reason.....FV is described as being ‘Gendered’”.

I believe the Royal Commission and society in general should be careful with this point. Research shows that around 25-35% of victims of FV are actually men. This is a statistically significant number. Therefore we need to ensure that an immediate bias is not introduced into the conduct of the Royal Commission nor the ongoing debate and focus on outcomes moving forward. At a high level the Commission’s goals refer to “all victims” but this point seems to contradict this goal directly.

By way of comparison lung cancer “only” causes approximately one in five or 20% of cancer deaths in Australia, (reference www.cancer.org.au) yet there is a huge amount of effort to promote quitting smoking to reduce the prevalence of lung cancer. There is certainly no suggestion that cancer is only experienced by non-smokers, in an equivalent way to ‘gendered’ FV.

Unfortunately for too long FV has been a hidden problem. It is fantastic the current public attention on the issue is allowing for more open conversation and I am confident victims feel more support and a higher degree of confidence to report to the authorities what they are experiencing and to seek the support they deserve.

We need to be careful that we don’t just minimise the experiences of all non-female victims, including males and same sex couples due to the desire to focus on the largest and most obvious group of victims. By minimising the impact on these smaller groups it continues to further entrench community attitudes, makes it even harder for these victims to speak out and actually makes the situation worse for them as their ability to get real support continues to be effectively non-existent.

Question Three

Which of the reforms to the family violence system introduced in the last ten years do you consider most effective? Why? How could they be improved?

As mentioned at the start of my submission I have included a copy of the newspaper article that the Herald Sun wrote [REDACTED]. That was included as part of a multi-day special focusing on FV. To have a major newspaper dedicating that much space to FV and also giving a broader view of the impacts including male victims shows how far the FV cause has progressed. It gives great cause for hope.

By continuing to educate the community on the causes, symptoms and effects of FV it will help everyone to identify when it is occurring, support the victims experiencing FV and continue to evolve realistic community responses to this far reaching issue.

Question Six

What circumstances, conditions, situations or events, within relationships, families, institutions and whole communities, are associated with the occurrence or persistence of family violence?

FV is a complex issue that I believe at a fundamental level comes from a desire to control the situation within the family unit. Often it is triggered by a sense of loss of control or a fear of losing control and therefore the perpetrator uses FV to try to re-exert control over their victim.

In my case my partner responded badly to work and life stresses and took this out on me. Alcohol was often involved, lowering her threshold of self control. She would then get physical and violent as a way of expressing her displeasure as she was partially drunk and less aware of her responses. A cycle of abuse would then continue as she sought forgiveness, promised to not re-offend only to then revert to the violent behaviour at a latter point, blaming me for introducing the trigger for her violence.

Question Eight

Tell us about any gaps or deficiencies in current responses to family violence, including legal responses. Tell us about what improvements you would make to overcome these gaps and deficiencies, or otherwise improve current responses.

There continues to be very little resources available to male victims of FV. I was unable to access any support and very little reading material to help me whilst I was directly a victim of FV. Any support available was directed towards female victims and the only support services offered to men were for behaviour change programs assuming they were the perpetrator. This immediately negates that I am a victim, showing no acknowledgment of my needs and certainly does not help me remove myself from the situation.

At my lowest point I was suicidal. That was the only option I could see to resolve the situation. If there were wider support materials available and guidance around my options then I would surely have not sunk so low.

It has only been in the past few months that key websites like Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, which is funded by the Victorian Health Dept (www.dvrcv.org.au) have even had a section acknowledging male victims of FV exist. I think these organisations do a fantastic job and are to be commended for pushing for a change in society's attitudes towards FV, but unfortunately I don't see

that they have a balanced approach. In the “who we are” section of their brochure they state “we are family violence experts dedicated to making a safer community for women and children” There is no mention of male victims. Even in the “stories section” of their website which are designed to support victims of FV there are 19 stories about female victims and 2 about men and one of the men’s stories was solved by the female perpetrator “just leaving” which is not exactly great guidance for someone so entrenched in a violent relationship they are considering suicide.

Domestic Violence Victoria is considered the peak body for family violence services in Victoria. As a peak body it should reflect the total sphere of the issue. Its website makes it clear it is only the peak body for “domestic violence services for women and children”. Therefore there is actually no peak body that reflects or promotes a co-ordinated approach for females as well as males, same sex couples and the other separate demographics that can be victims of FV. This I see as a significant gap.

Sections of the BeyondBlue website provide support for men with many of the symptoms of FV, but it doesn’t drill down into wider issue of male victims of FV in any detail. The OneInThree.com.au website is the only online resource that attempts to offer support to male victims of FV but this is not supplemented by widely available on the ground resources to support the actual victims needing guidance. There is no Victorian based organisation which has male victims of FV as its focus. There is no direct funding by the Victorian Government to support such an organisation nor does there appear to be any direct desire to support the setup of such services.

Two other specific areas which I believe contribute, or affect, FV situations are regarding the Legal system:

- During the period I was a victim of FV I was subjected to both physical and emotional abuse. Coupled with this my former partner then sought to affect my wider relationships in order to hurt me further. She sent personal/nude photos of me to my employer to embarrass me, she spoke to the mother of my children directly to try and disrupt access to my children and she also made threatening and abusive phone calls to my wider family.

I could have taken out an Apprehended Violence Order to stop the violent interaction with myself, but I have no way of stopping her from these other actions. I have no straightforward legal way to stop her trying to hurt me via third parties. The parties involved e.g. my employer, would need to take out the AVO themselves, as I can’t on their behalf. As the victim I have no easy legal way to stop the perpetrator’s actions that can have very significant ongoing affects, often equally or more serious than a physical incident. It is an ongoing cycle of emotional bullying which is magnified if third parties are then drawn into a legal process which just adds further shame on the victim.

- Interactions with the Family Court system are notoriously stressful. It’s obviously a very complex arena with every situation having its own challenges and emotionally charged participants. I understand that reforms in this area are outside the remit of the RCFV, but it should not be underestimated how stress relating to these proceedings can contribute to the incidence of FV.

One of my key experiences is having gone through several unsuccessful mediation sessions, many long hours with lawyers preparing documents to finally actually getting a case before the Family Court and getting a judgement, it was only 6 weeks later that my children’s mother wasn’t abiding by the terms of the Family Court Order.

The only recourse at this point is to go back through the court system. The Police have no power to act to enforce the terms of the Family Court Order. This left me frustrated and without money to re-engage lawyers I was forced to just deal with the outcome. Over time I personally resolved the situation, but I am sure there are others who feel unable to achieve the outcomes via the Court process can revert to FV to somehow extract a result. A better enforcement method around Family Court outcomes is needed. It will surely reduce some of the related FV triggers.

Question Ten

What practical changes might improve integration and co-ordination? What barriers to integration and co-ordination exist?

In recent times there seems to be a blurring of lines between the desire to stop general violence towards women, that have garnered a large and deserved public response after events like the Jill Meagher murder, and the desire to highlight FV specific issues which have far wider causes and symptoms. The FV conversation in mainstream media is fast becoming only about physical violence towards women and to a lesser degree children. There is very little focus on the non-physical aspects, the economic, emotional bullying and abuse, restriction of freedoms and the other ways that perpetrators use to try and exert control over their victims. This narrowing of the focus again does nothing to help promote better outcomes for the full range of FV victims, across the full range of possible FV methods used by perpetrators.

One area that I feel the debate has gone off track is that many of the online forums and community conversations get hijacked by wider agendas. Specifically very strong views expressed by feminist, and equally “men’s rights”, groups do nothing to further constructive debate about how to counter the causes and deal with the effects of FV. It is deeply ironic that sections of the community are “fighting” about a cause in the hope to stop the fighting happening behind closed doors. Again I think more professional, well-structured campaigns to inform the population about the true causes, symptoms and support structures available can only help to educate those who perhaps have a very narrow view of the issue.

Question Twenty

Are there any other suggestions you would like to make to improve policies, programs and services which currently seek to carry out the goals set out above?

I strongly believe that more support needs to be given to frontline services and the agencies that deal with all victims of FV. As I have outlined above there is a lack of services supporting male victims of FV. There is no key group advocating for male victims, providing support, or even attempting to ensure a balanced debate is occurring. This not only further compounds the suffering of the male victim it also continues to give a license to the female perpetrators that their behaviour is in some way acceptable or less of an issue than that of a male perpetrator.

I would like to see the government introducing a wider policy response to ensure the whole range of FV victims are considered, that targeted support services are available to the whole range of victims and to ensure the current “gendered” approach to FV is tempered with a thought for the smaller sections of the community that don’t fit the key stereotype currently being portrayed of the female victim.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. I look forward to the many positive outcomes that will flow from your work.

News

Herald Sun

Law & Order

Men are victims of family violence too

- by: Ellen Whinnett
- From: Herald Sun
- November 26, 2013 8:37PM

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David, a victim of family violence.

Source: News Limited

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- **MAGISTRATE: Cases can chill the bones** (<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/law-order/domestic-attacks-give-you-the-chills-says-magistrate/story-fni0fee2-1226768212288>)
- **29 KILLED: Police shocked at rise in family violence** (<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/law-order/police-shocked-by-massive-rise-in-family-violence/story-fni0fee2-1226767415634>)

WHEN David became a victim of family violence, he had nowhere to turn.

After months of escalating violence from his partner, Jennifer, he finally left their home, assisted by police who kept the peace while he packed his belongings into a trailer at two in the morning.

Then, he drove to the beach and slept in his car, the trailer behind him holding his worldly belongings.

"That night spent near the beach in the car with all my possession in the trailer, and the joggers looking in the window the next morning, that was ground zero for me," David said.

A businessman with a senior job in a prominent Australian company, David has agreed to speak to the *Herald Sun* about his experiences with family violence to highlight the fact that men, too, can be victims.

Statistics released to the *Herald Sun* for the first time show that last financial year, men were the victims of 6122 family violence incidents at the hands of their current or former female partners.

While the number of attacks on women by their male partners or ex-partners was far greater - 29,064 last year - the number of male victims is not insignificant, and the impact on some was devastating.

David said that he did not know where to turn for help when his relationship turned violent, and said that support for men escaping violent relationships were virtually non-existent.

"In the end, I was fortunate that I was able to move into a short-term accommodation. But not everyone would be able to do that," he said.

David wrote to the *Herald Sun* to congratulate the paper on its Take a Stand campaign, which aims to address to scourge of family violence.

"I fully support all activity to stamp out this often hidden horror," he said.

"I am a survivor of domestic violence but don't fit the traditional stereotype. I am male and I was attacked by my female partner."

The *Herald Sun* met David, 43, in a city cafe. He bears a scar on his nose from the final time his partner assaulted him, hitting him in the head with a photograph frame.

"I know it's not a wrinkle, it's a scar," he said. "It's not who I am. I thought about plastic surgery to get rid of it. A part of me is annoyed that she's left that mark on me but I guess she's marked my soul, too."

The emotional scars are less obvious - until he tries to explain how the relationship affected his children. That's when the tears come.

A divorced dad of two, David was pleased to meet a new partner, several years after his marriage ended.

The relationship started well and after a few months, they moved into an apartment together in an inner-city suburb.

"It was fantastic, we spent a lot of enjoyable time together," David said.

But about nine months into the relationship, he noticed a change between them. His partner would criticise him, and escalate minor disagreements.

At first, David thought it was his fault, and he looked for ways to amend his behaviour.

"Like all men, I'm a bit of a problem solver, so I tried harder and harder to fix the problem and it became a bit of a cycle," he said. "The issue would get bigger and bigger and her response would get bigger."

About a year into their relationship, Jennifer started hitting him, striking him to the forearms and shins.

David would absorb the blows, hide the bruises, and didn't strike back.

"About a night a week, I'd be sleeping in the car just because I couldn't placate her. She'd ring me and say I was off sleeping with someone and I'd be like, 'no, I'm here in the car'.

"Looking back, I can see there were so many problems but at the time I didn't see that it was going pear-shaped. I was being led around by the nose. I was always trying to fix the problem. I couldn't see that it was broken and couldn't be fixed."

There were three or four major blow-ups between them where Jennifer would rain blows on David. He estimates she probably hit him "40 or 50 times" during the final months of their relationship.

"She would be laying into me. I'm very proud of the fact that she pushed me to my absolute (limit) but I did not touch her. I walked away."

About eight weeks before their relationship finally ended, Jennifer struck David across the face with the photo frame. It was the beginning of the end. David took refuge at his sister's house, and returned to the apartment the next afternoon.

"Every single thing I owned was either smashed up, or she'd thrown it in the garbage," he said.

"I had this big statue of Buddha and she's broken that on the tiles. Everything was broken or gone. This includes all my kids' toys, my daughter's dollhouse. There was nothing that wasn't targeted."

The garbage truck had been that morning, so David had lost forever some precious mementos and keepsakes.

The neighbours who David presumes had heard shouting and the sound of things breaking didn't question them. "I kept thinking 'how can this happen in an apartment block?' The neighbours looked at us funny."

Throughout the final months, David continued to turn up to work. He never laid a complaint with police or sought an intervention order.

His sister knew of his problems but he didn't tell his friends or his work colleagues.

"I had bruises all over me but I was capable of holding it together," he said.

He was worried people would think he was the aggressor. "I had bruises on my forearms and shins and I thought people would see that in a negative context."

He also worried that there would be a stigma attached to a man who was abused by his female partner.

"A couple of female friends know. I don't want a sign around my neck saying 'I was beaten by my missus'. I want people to take me at face value."

Jennifer had pushed for them to go to counselling and they did; through that, David met the counsellor who would eventually help him go it alone.

The stress was horrendous.

"I was suicidal. I didn't trust myself on our fifth-floor balcony. I still see the tree I wanted to drive my car into.

"The counsellor - a guy - was fantastic and I ended up seeing him individually and he was the one that first made me see this wasn't a positive thing and I had to end it."

After another counselling session in October 2010, David decided to leave the apartment and the relationship, and advised Jennifer of his plans.

"She started laying into me. I called the police and said something like 'I've been kicked out and my partner's being violent to me'.

David waited on the footpath outside late on a Thursday evening as police - a male and female - attended.

"They were great. They said I'd done the right thing."

The police escorted David into the apartment and stayed with him while he packed some belongings.

They left when he did.

"Then I got a message to say that she was putting all my things out into the foyer. She'd also rung the police and told them what she was doing."

The same police officers came back to the apartment and stayed with Jennifer in the bedroom while David tried to salvage all his items. He rented a trailer from a late-night service station and loaded it up at 2am.

"I got all the stuff out," he said.

He praises the police and the counsellor for listening to him, and believing him.

His former partner rang his boss, harassed his ex-wife and continued to contact him, but gradually disappeared from his life.

"It's taken me a long time to get my esteem back. I can see that now," he said.

David said he wanted it known that men could be victims of family violence too, and he questioned what support services were available for men.

"There's a whole lot of our story that's missing. How do you get help for men? How do you raise awareness?"

"I consider myself very lucky; I was strong enough to get out of it and now I'm thriving.

David now has a new circle of friends, new hobbies and sports, and has maintained his job.

"I am now in the best part of my life ever. It catapulted me into something amazing. It was literally my darkest hour but it didn't kill me, so it made me stronger."

Detective Acting-Superintendent Paul Binyon, from Victoria Police's sexual and family violence unit, said police recognised there were male victims of family violence.

"Statistically, they are certainly outweighed significantly by female victims and generally what we find is the level of violence that is inflicted on them is not at the same level as that experienced by female victims," Det-Acting Supt Binyon said.

"But it is important we acknowledge this problem does exist and we will continue to put time and resources into combating (violence against men)."

** David and Jennifer's names have been changed.*