

Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

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I was born in ██████ so a lot has changed since ██████ service-wise. In my own family, for some unknown reason I was considered the one who had all the problems when everyone else was absolutely fine

There was a lot of tension - there was no physical violence but a lot of psychological and emotional abuse. And neglect. When I was three I used to walk to kinder all by myself because my mum was pregnant and sick.

I don't know if anything happened to me at that time – when I was about 5 I started having dreams about having things stuck in my mouth, trying to bite. A lot of sexual dreams. I was shamed at that age... there was an intimation that my mother wanted me to go to bed with my dad. He was never that way inclined.

My mother would go beserk and rage about tiny little things, like if you put something away in the cupboard an inch from where it was supposed to be. When I cried I was told I was a manipulating child. My mother would scream to eight-year-old me "I hate women who use their tears to get something. You're an actress, you're a fake!" When I was 7, my father was in a rage. I had a stomach ache and was trying to vomit in the sink, when my father burst in. I told him I was sick, he said "I'm going to take you to the doctor, but if there's nothing wrong with you you're in big trouble." We went to the doctor, he poked my stomach and asked me if it hurt. I said yes because I was too scared to tell the truth. They took my ██████ out.

When they told him there was nothing wrong with my ██████ my father said that's just another example of you manipulating. On the way home from the hospital after surgery my father dragged me around car yards, me with my surgery wound. My nose started bleeding, I was tugging on his sleeve and he was ignoring me. That was what he did, he would just ignore you. We were standing there in front of the car salesman, him ignoring me while my nose bled. Another example of neglect. And the whole time my mum just sat in the car and smoked.

We moved 5 times by the time I was 7 so there was all this unsettledness. When I was at school, at 9, I had started really withdrawing. I was just in the library every lunchtime, I had nobody to play with. From that time with my appendix, the amount of psychological stuff directed at me intensified.

One day I was at school, and the teacher said your mother's here – I had no idea why. She said we're taking you to a psychologist because you can't get along with anyone. I was in a state of shock as we were driving along – my mother was getting me to look out for a particular street sign, and I couldn't look, I was in a state of shock. She started screaming at me as we were driving along.

I went for about 10 sessions. I remember I wasn't able to talk, I drew a few pictures. After 10 sessions I stopped going. Nothing was ever said about why I was going. Not even the psychologist said anything to me. There as always this silence, in my family. And there still is, I might add.

In high school, I wanted to be a doctor but my mother scoffed at that. Then I said I wanted to be a nurse and she absolutely wouldn't hear about it – "you wouldn't be able to handle wiping other people arses!" She's one of those people who when she thinks something, you couldn't think anything different to her. She wanted me to be a hairdresser. I was living in a yuppie suburb where everyone went to university, certainly nobody left school early. A couple of days before my 15th birthday I came one night and my mother told me she'd – her and my dad – had organised an

apprenticeship for me. I had to go to school the next day and say it's my last day here. I started my apprenticeship on my 15th birthday.

The school did nothing. I had lost my peer group now, as well as being the outsider in my family and I was working 6 days a week.

I went out with someone when I was 16, not because I was interested in him but mainly because I was lonely. I had a curfew - I'd been told I had to be home by 12pm when we went out one Saturday night. He got lost on the way home and we ended up being half an hour late. I was locked out of the house. I knocked on the door, tried to explain. He was there and a friend of his, we were all trying to explain that it was an accident, we didn't mean to be late. My father eventually came out, yelled at me, and then kicked me out of home.

A friend of a colleague from the hairdresser moved to America, and I was able to move into the house they were living in. My mother said to me the day before I left "remember, this is always your home, you can always come back".

I moved into this house and a week later I was raped by the boyfriend of the girl who had just left the house. He made out it was my fault, that I wanted it. A few days after that, the boyfriend of my flatmate burst into my room, and raped me. I didn't make any noise because I was terrified that my flatmate would hear and kick me out.

I went home to my mother and told her I'd been raped, that I needed to move home and she said no. So I had to go back to that place.

Over the next few months, men would turn up to the house, saying they were friends of my flatmate, and they would rape me. Once we had a party – something must have been slipped in my drink because I don't drink very much – but I woke up the next morning in bed with somebody I didn't know. I'd caught an STD.

When somebody's making out that they want to be your boyfriend, you just give in. I had a guy, the brother of the 2nd guy who raped me, chatting me up at the end of the party. The next thing, I was his sexual plaything in a really horrible way.

I'm still 16, a couple of months out of home, and I didn't tell anyone because I told my mum and of what her reaction was.

I ended up getting out of there the first chance I got. I lived in a series of households where I was the outsider, the hanger-on.

I was also experiencing a lot of trouble at work, someone new had bought the business and he was just horrible. Nasty.

I ended up, a couple of houses later, experiencing rape from a friend of mine. At least I thought she was my friend. I remember her throwing me down on the bean bag, and I went black. I don't remember what happened after then. It just set up this pattern of being used and abused. I acquiesced – I thought at least they'll go away if I let them do what they want to do.

You know that no one cares – you have nowhere to go and you're expected to be sexually available to everyone. That set up my pattern, and fed into me being in the sex industry later on.

I turned to my family yet again, and my brother said I should do escort work, because he thought I'd be good at that. At this point I just gave in. I went into the industry, and I was in and out for 14 years.

And most of the things that have happened to me in adulthood I have allowed to happen because I just didn't know how not to.

[Question about school]

Everyone thought if you left school at 15 you were dumb. I couldn't speak in those days, about anything. I let people think I was 'a bit of a slut' (I hate that word) because I seemed to have so many men. But I couldn't say "help – I'm drowning". When you leave school and you leave home early you don't even know about things like that – services, welfare. All I knew was, I had to be in control of everything in my life. I had to stand on my own two feet and fight my own battles.

If you asked me then if I was a victim of family violence I would have said no, because I hadn't been bashed. I always had this fear of getting into trouble – it could be a man wanting to sleep with you and you don't want to say no because you might get into trouble.

Working at [REDACTED] was the first mainstream job since I'd left the industry (apart from Project Respect). The team I was working in was in crisis. People were leaving at the rate of 1 per month. The manager was quite abusive and everyone was telling me to do different things. I went into the state where I was as a child – I can't think, I can't... it ended up getting so bad I ended up leaving and going on a pension because I couldn't cope.

It was a culmination of studying counselling and having that realisation that I had been a victim of abuse and working at Project Respect, where we did plays, we acted out my story and it brought up all this trauma.

Project Respect ran out of money after that to employ me, that's when I ended up at [REDACTED]. I wouldn't have applied to go on a pension if I hadn't worked in the family violence sector and at Project Respect – and I hadn't known that I was allowed to, that I needed to. One thing about the sex industry is that it allows people to fall apart and pick it up without any hassle. You can fall apart, you crack up and walk back into a job two months later. There were times when I haemorrhaged – I haemorrhaged for an entire week, I think from having too much sex. As soon as I was well enough to go back I would because I had fallen behind, I needed the money. And then there's the emotional, the cracking up, and you pick up and go back.

Every time you do meet someone you like you have to choose between not seeing them anymore or quitting your job. I quit the industry so many times.

All the support from here [Project Respect], and I'm in a 12 step program, it's allowed me to study social work and move on. Using my experiences to turn things around for other people.

Let me talk about services.

Initially I went to a psychologist when I was 22. A male. I don't think he believed a word I said. He told me he wanted my mother to come to a session, and I really didn't want her to. When she got there, I want you two to look at each other and say "I love you". I thought... what? My mother was able to do it because she could always do those sorts of things, but I couldn't. I felt totally betrayed so I stopped seeing him.

I tried to commit suicide when I was 19 – it was a very serious attempt. I took a whole bottle of what I thought was sleeping tablets but they turned out to be diuretics. I rang work on the Monday morning and said "I need to have a week off work because I tried to kill myself over the weekend". My boss said just said "oh... alright."

I tried to commit suicide again at 24. I took another bottle of pills – I'd thrown up, so I knew I wasn't going to die. I got concerned that I would get permanent damage instead. I called the poisons line, they said I should go to hospital. I contacted my friend's mother who lived around the corner. She said she didn't have time – but I think she was probably drunk. So I caught a taxi. At the hospital they gave me charcoal to drink. The guy, the nurse there said "you're a stupid little girl, aren't you?" And they sent me home.

I went to see a psychiatrist when I was 23. I was exceedingly bulimic – I started when I was 16 when I started having all those rapes. I went in, I wanted to deal with that [the bulimia]. This guy, he was so sick, he told me his life story, all his clients who had committed suicide. He told me "don't be surprised if you fall in love with me by the end of our time together." He prescribed me the strongest anti-depressants available. I said "but I'm not depressed! I have an eating disorder". So that was the end of him.

I tried one more psychologist but felt he was really sleazy so didn't go back.

One point, when I'd been in the industry for only a few months, I had a breakdown. I went to my old doctor, my female doctor and told her the whole story and she said "What! You prostituted yourself?!" and I just had to walk out because she wouldn't treat me

I went to another doctor, I wanted to go on sickness benefits or something like that. She said it might go against me in a custody battle (I had a son [REDACTED]). So I walked out. And because of the first doctor that had knocked me back, I was an absolute gibbering mess sitting in front of her [the second doctor].

I went to Centrelink and fell in a heap. I saw one of their psychologists and I was able to get on sickness benefits. I wasn't able to get on benefits initially because I didn't have a leaving certificate from my previous employer, so they sent me to their psychologist. Everywhere I went I was cracking up onto tears.

There was a pub [REDACTED] – a friend of mine knew the manager. I asked if I could work there unpaid for a week to get experience. He took me on.

I was in the fridge one day when he came up behind me and grabbed my breasts, then forced me to give him oral sex. So I left there and thought I may as well go back to the fucking sex industry, at least I get paid.

I did a lot of spiritual healing in the early 2000s. I thought, I'm not going back to mainstream services. And the healthier I got the more I thought I'm not staying in the sex industry.

From a young age, I read the Narnia books, they gave me a sense of what was right and what was wrong. I learnt about what healthy looked like through books. It just kept me sane. I'm so grateful that I can read. I've been spiritual all my life, but it wasn't until I was working in an illegal massage parlour... my son was still at school so I needed to support him. What kept me in the sex industry was that I wanted my son to have benefits I never had, I was working in the massage parlour and the police raided it and closed it down. I thought this is a sign. It's got to end. I was [REDACTED] by then. It's got to end. And it did. That was in [REDACTED]

In [REDACTED] after the [REDACTED] thing, I was allowed to go on a pension and go on the biggest healing journey. People who don't have anywhere to go... people just have got to have somewhere where they can collect themselves. When you have a lot of complex things to sort out, you need a safe place to be and enough to live on. The amount of growth I've had in the past few years in

phenomenal. To have had someone like Project Respect around me to support me, who understands me. What I noticed working in family violence [REDACTED], people would come and they couldn't afford to live. The rent is so much higher – people were paying 75-90% of their income on rent and living off their savings and hoping that something comes along. We had such a list of people who needed the service we would have meeting every week and decide who was most in need of the services.

[How did you get in touch with Project Respect?]

When I was working in a brothel in [REDACTED] there as an article in The Age, I saw this gorgeous young woman talking about starting this organisation working with trafficked women. I thought I would love to meet that woman one day. So I'm studying counselling, and I wanted to get work experience so I contacted them then

I'd also started going to CASA in a group, they had a group for women who'd been sexually abused in childhood. At the very last one, I had the courage to confess to the group that I'd worked in the sex industry and that I had not realised how much damage it had done to me.

The worker there said "other women say that they find it empowering" – after this 7 week program. I said "that is BS. That is the bubble you put yourself in when you're there to make it all okay". She said "well... I'm sure that's *your* experience". After the session I went up to her and said "it's a numbers game, I've slept with about 10,000 men. How can that be healthy?" And she said again, "well, I'm sure that's *your* experience."

It's those kind of betrayals, those kind of things put you right off services and telling the truth. You only ever share part of the truth.

I started seeing a lovely psychologist when I was working at [REDACTED]. She listens and understands, but she doesn't give me steps on how to improve things. The biggest impact this has had is on my ability to have relationships. I haven't been in a relationship for 5 years. The last one was an abusive one – that's why I joined a 12 step program. When it comes to having sex I snap into 'work mode' because there's no opportunity for me to be vulnerable. All of the relationships that I've had during that time were short. I did get married because I was pregnant. It lasted a few years. It is the best relationship I've ever had, but he had a lot of unresolved stuff so between the two of us it was never going to work.

In the back of my mind I'm thinking 'you're making a mountain out of a molehill'. When I first went on the pension, I would walk around thinking everyone was pointing their finger at me saying 'you should be at work, there's nothing wrong with you'. Because I've carried that with me from childhood

In my 12 step program I take sponsees though and I am horrified by their stories, but they have normalised it.

I think that at schools they need to let people know about what's healthy and what's not in relationships, and let people know what's available, and what's acceptable. Because even if you *might* go to a service, just knowing that it's there, and giving the impression that it's okay rather than a personal weakness. Teach communication right from a young age, communication and resolving conflict as part of the curriculum.

It's also important for doctors to have awareness because most of the women I've met in family violence – certainly a large number of women in the sex industry – are on anti-depressants but they're not depressed. They're traumatised. But they're given anti-depressants.

You don't just need counselling, you need help to shift the situation you're in first. We need services, places for people to go to.

We need people to learn as part of the school curriculum how to resolve conflict. Then we wouldn't need so many of these services.

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