

## **Submission – Royal Commission into Family Violence**

My name is [REDACTED], I am a victim of domestic abuse and violence.

I have two boys aged [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and I was married for a period of [REDACTED] years. I left the marriage almost [REDACTED] years ago, when the situation with his emotional, verbal, financial and physical abuse and gambling became intolerable.

During the marriage my ex was very controlling. He would fly into a rage for no apparent reason, everything was my fault, he was verbally and emotionally abusive, he tried to isolate me from friends and family, frequently accused me of having affairs, threatened me and forced me to give up my career by refusing childcare for the children. He would also alienate me from my children and this was becoming more pronounced as they were getting older. When the children were young he would physically stop me from going to them at night or on occasions attending to their needs, such as when they had fallen and hurt themselves.

He was a cruel and jealous man, who lacked empathy, but this side of him only came out behind closed doors. I stayed married for many years longer than I wished to because of his threats to take the children so that I would never see them again. I stayed because I wanted to protect my children and because I knew that given his level of anger and aggression that I would be left homeless.

I am protected by way of intervention order but this has not stopped the stalking, harassment, the manipulation of children who are being used to control me or his smash ball destructive behavior with the finances. I am wading through the family court system towards settlement of property matters and this process is both traumatic and exposes me to more risk.

In my submission I wish to share some of my experiences with the domestic violence system and based on my experience, offer suggestions for improvement. I feel that the current system exposes vulnerable women and children to too much risk, does not adequately address the damaging aspects of the perpetrators behavior or the damage this leaves behind.

### **Response to Q3.**

Of all the reforms and developments the most effective for me personally has been the police response to family violence. The police were very respectful and responsive and acted to remove my ex from the family home.

Prior to taking out the intervention order my ex and I had been separated under the same roof for a period of two months. During that period he had threatened me violently on a daily basis. He would physically stop me from interacting with the children and would tell them that their mother was a whore, who did not care about them. The atmosphere of chaos and intimidation that he created

intensified during this period and culminated in him leaving the house with the children and telling me that I would never see them again.

When he left with the children I was distraught, physically and emotionally wrought and worn out. The women's domestic violence crisis service assisted me to take out an intervention order on my ex.

I believe that the action of the [REDACTED] and the victoria police saved my life.

### **Response to Q8**

I see an enormous deficiency and gap in the way that family violence is assessed and managed. Beyond a crisis response, there is a lack of support in addressing the behavior and conduct of violent men, who in my case has continued his in violent controlling behavior through the children and financial resources.

There is nothing in place to hold him accountable for his behavior and the untold damage he is doing to his children. He will not honor any parenting arrangements and refuses to enter into any communication regarding his children. Through my children he continues to control me. I don't want to hurt my children or see them suffer, so any arrangement he makes with the children (who he showed no interest in during the marriage) I always go along with no matter how random, inconvenient or last minute the arrangement is.

It is a destabilizing and debilitating way to live.

I am most fearful of his anger and rage, which has not abated since the separation and in fact appears to have got worse. I am careful when I leave the house in case he is near by and I am always looking over my shoulder. I am most fearful in public places with my kids at community sport or school events, where he always seizes the opportunity to stare at me in his aggressive yet covert way. Because of this behavior I try to remain in the background at my kids events, which then provides him the opportunity to tell the children that I don't care about them. It is very distressing for both me and the children, and it is behavior that continues to have a cumulatively damaging effect.

### **Family Report**

In my desperation to try to bring closure to the issue of parenting arrangements, a lawyer suggested that we undertake a family assessment, with a recognized family therapist. Having found nothing else to assist me I believed that an assessment might help in identifying and resolving (at least) some of his behavior in respect to the children.

This proved to be another detrimental mistake because my ex manipulated the therapist, who described him in her report as an unconditionally loving man, who is child centered. Conversely I was described as emotionally hysterical, superficial and self absorbed with nothing else in my life, except for my children.

When I wrote to the therapist and provided her with evidence to refute some of these “facts” she advised me to challenge the report in court.

The impact this report has had on my life has been devastating. I was re-traumatised by the process and it served to validate my ex’s behavior. The period following the release of the report was the most terrifying time I have ever experienced. My ex would stalk me when I would walk to school to pick up children, laugh madly and yell “youre f.....d”.

He subdued his behavior only after I reported it to the police.

The family report reflected the authors cynicism over my intervention order and my ex used this report to challenge an extension of my intervention order. Had the magistrate accepted the report I may not have been able to have an intervention order extended and this would have placed my life and the lives of my children at enormous risk.

#### Q 14

I have not found anything in the current process to encourage and support change to his behavior.

As my ex is not accountable and does not take responsibility for his behavior, since separation my ex has:

- Stalked me and the children
- Abused and threatened me
- Refused to pay child support
- Stripped money from accounts
- Stole my jewelry, important documents and my computer
- Deliberately devaluated assets
- Refused to remove his unregistered vehicle from the former marital home
- Amassed considerable debts, including gambling debts
- Made false allegations about me to the children, the police and his lawyers
- Refused to enter into any settlement negotiations

The above behaviours have continued for a period of almost ■ years and it is behavior that my children and I are exposed to everyday. This controlling behavior has impacted my health, severely curtailed my ability to work, my ability to care for my children and my elderly parents. I have been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder and have been seeing a psychologist for a period of over ■ years to assist me to deal with the trauma of domestic violence.

When he left the home he threatened to “burn me” one way or another. He said that even if I survived, he would make sure that the legal costs destroyed me and he is working towards this aim. In my case I have spent many thousands of dollars in legal fees and have got no where. Mediation has failed and I am going through the family law process towards final resolutions.

In the meantime my ex is continuing to mount debt and by the time we complete the family law process, he may succeed in financially and emotionally destroying us beyond repair.

I liken my life with my ex as being in an out of control car with no steering or brakes. We are terrified and at the mercy of his behavior. We have an intervention order in place, but he is now being careful not to breach it. In any case we can only act on the intervention order AFTER he has breached it and regardless of what action is taken we are left with the continued and devastating impacts of his behavior.

Since we separated dealing with his destructive behavior has been a full time occupation for me. In terms of hours, I have spent conservatively over a period of more than 2.5 years, based on a 38 hour working week, **4,940 hours** of my time focused on dealing with his violent and abusive behavior and this is I believe the tip of the iceberg.

For each one of these hours I spend, this is matched with time spent on my case by service professionals such as:

- Police – for intervention order and protection
- Courts – for intervention order and protection
- Medical – for children's issues
- Counselling – to deal with PTSD
- School resources – discussions with teachers, school councellors
- Community sports – to ensure awareness of domestic situation
- Psychologist – to deal with PTSD
- Legal – community legal centres

The cost and time wasted in not effectively dealing with violent abuse, pales into insignificance when compared to the impacts this unchecked and prolonged behavior has on our children.

## **Q 20**

To improve policies, programs and service in line with the Royal Commission goals. I make the following suggestions:

### **1) Improve Family Violence Assessment Services**

I believe that any allegation of domestic violence, particularly where children are concerned should be thoroughly investigated or assessed.

The assessment process should be structured and have oversight and where possible informed by evidence.

Currently there is no such process in place and it places everyone at risk. The problem and the level of risk should be diagnosed before it is dealt with.

**2) Support to enable women to re establish their lives.**

The current system only provides a crisis service. It is an essential but over stretched and under resourced service. A crisis model also does not provide sustainable outcomes for women and children, who often have to return to the abusive relationship, because they are safer in it.

- 3) Encourage perpetrators of violence to accept responsibility and be accountable for their  
4) behavior.**

The violence and abuse that I experienced in the marriage has continued post separation and divorce. His actions typically fall short of breaching the intervention order and no one is monitoring his manipulative behavior towards the children. Many of the professionals I have sought help from recognize his behavior and can see the impact this is having on the children – yet there is nothing to stop this behavior.

**5) Fast track the process for resolution of children's and property matters, where family violence is established.**

It is common practice and well documented that manipulative abusers will draw out the legal process to destroy their partners financially. The current family law system takes too long to reach conclusion and in domestic violence cases it leaves women vulnerable and often homeless – as reflected in homelessness statistics. Potentially I could have been one of these statistics and it has only been my resourcefulness and resilience that has kept a roof over our heads.

I see many gaps in the system, but also believe that we can improve many of our current policies, systems, programs and services. Based on my experience, my suggestion for improvement is summarized in the model below:

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| <b>Improve</b> – Family violence assessment Services. | <b>Support</b> – Women to re build their lives.         |
| <b>Encourage</b> – Perpetrators to change behavior .  | <b>Resolve</b> – Children and property matters quickly. |

On a final note, my poor choice in a partner has cost me my career, health, financial security, happiness, dreams and hope for the future. On a daily basis I deal with the impact on my ex's behavior on my children and fear the impact this will have on them in the long term.

As many women in my position I laud this Royal Commission and welcome any opportunity to provide assistance and input towards reducing violence and improving outcomes for women and children.

