

Response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

May 2015

Personal Response – [REDACTED]

I am writing a submission about my own experience in order to highlight the reality of living with family violence and its impact on children.

I was [REDACTED] when I met my partner. He was [REDACTED]. I was a [REDACTED] at the time, he was [REDACTED]. He was very beautiful and from a [REDACTED] background. I was attracted by his outspokenness, political views and charisma. He has a network of friends who were also very interesting and whom I looked up to. He was also stunningly beautiful. The abuse started almost immediately – not physical violence but denigration of me often from a racist perspective ie I was a 'white' capitalist oppressor if I didn't give him money. The denigration wasn't always overt; it was subtle comments, questioning etc which made me doubt my views and opinions, particularly since the last thing I wanted was to be perceived as racist.

I was very political at the time and did not want to be seen as 'selfish' or a 'money lover'. He did break things of mine and would drive very fast and swerve at things to scare me. I accepted that I caused him a very high level of frustration due to my 'shortcomings'. He was on the dole as a political statement (whatever that means but it had something to do with not working in the capitalist system!). It sounded convincing at the time. It should also be noted that I came from a family where there was little empathy, my mother was depressed and my father arrogant and controlling (although never physically violent – whilst family violence happens to women from all backgrounds and family contexts my own family background made me more prone to self doubt, low self esteem and therefore being a victim of family violence).

I kept calling the relationship off but he would manage to woo me back by sweet talking. On reflection the fact that so many people loved him, he was so charismatic and funny and was so good at attributing his behaviour to my shortcomings and 'selfishness' made me both return to the relationship and doubt my own reality. I was a person who lacked confidence and belief in myself. It's also noteworthy that our sexual relationship was amazing; the sex was often the catalyst for me to return to the relationship.

We moved to [REDACTED] NSW when I was [REDACTED]. His abuse was mainly put downs – laughing at me as if in a kindly manner but really to undermine me and any belief I had. He often told me I thought I was better than him because he was 'black' and I was 'white' or that I was 'up myself' because I had been to university. He constantly pushed me to have children. He started to use physical violence – he would make me sit on a chair and yell at me all night long – this might go on for 7 hours, all night – he would point at me and jab my chest with his fingers so it was bruised and froth at the mouth. He would hold my hair and screw my head round so I had to look up at him and be so close to his face as he yelled abuse which included the worst sexual insults. I knew if got up or tried to leave he would have attacked me so I had to sit and listen to hours and hours to my 'sins' He became a heavy drinker. People in the local community loved him. He would talk about landrights and justice for blacks. He was the left wing, alternative community hero. We would often drive long distances and

he would pull the keys out of the ignition so the steering wheel would jam – we would slide to a halt, skidding alongside the road. He would push me out of the car in the middle of the night and I would have to walk ■ kms home or hitch hike in pitch darkness through a forest. He would pour food over my head. He would pull me along by the hair whilst abusing me. He punched me in the face, knocking me out. No one saw this. He was always charming in public, a great story teller and very popular. I remember with disbelief that he would be raging at me, pushing and shoving me, denigrating me then some visitor would arrive and he would snap instantly into the loving, caring partner. When there wasn't violence he was very physically affectionate to me and had a range of pet names he would use. He didn't try and control me in terms of my going out (I had a great social life with women friends). He also cooked and cleaned a lot. Sometimes after the violence and abuse he would cry and tell me how much he loved me. Or he might abuse me then say 'OK go then'. I would go out to my car and try to drive away but he would have taken the ■ out in advance so I couldn't drive the car. By then he would be laughing at me and had locked the door so I'd be stuck outside. I'd have to walk or hitch hike to stay somewhere the night. He thought this was funny.

He used to have a lot of affairs. Women loved him. It's hard to believe why I stayed. Money wasn't an issue. It was both the challenge to my reality that he was so popular in the community and that the criticism and eroding of self esteem meant I lost sense of who I was or what abilities I had. If everyone else thought he was fantastic and were so drawn to him it must be me that was at fault.

I had my son when I was ■. We had spent much of the pregnancy apart. But we would also come together. Towards the end of the pregnancy we started to live together again. On the night I went into labour he argued with me and told me I was a fucking cow and I wanted to be a single mum so I could get fucked if I wanted any support from him. We lived in a tiny isolated ■ house. He went and stayed in the spare room and threatened violence when I went in and begged him to please go through the labour with me. I had no family. I was scared and again begged him to not abandon me. But he just told me I didn't deserve his support and to fuck off.

So I went through hours of labour all alone in the night. After hours of crying I realised I had to be strong. I went out and it was a beautiful summer evening with a big moon. ■

and went through labour like that. At 7 am I called a friend and she came and took me to hospital. My partner 'came around' then and held my hand through the rest of the labour.

Things improved and in fact ■ was a fabulous father whilst my son was a baby. But then things got worse again when my son was about ■ years old. He started drinking again and not coming home. He also started to hit my son. Once he slapped my son hard around the head. I told him that if he did that again I would not stay in the relationship. I also found out I was pregnant again. Then he hit my son around the head again, really hard and that was that – it was easy to leave the relationship. I kept the rented house and ■ moved into town. I think he thought we'd get back together as usual. I knew absolutely that the relationship was over.

Things actually became worse now. ■ believed he should have access to his son anytime he wanted. He would come to the house and demand him. Sometimes he'd been drinking. I was in a dilemma – if I didn't hand him over ■ would start screaming and yelling and then my son would be crying and screaming in fear. I didn't want to have a literal tug of war over a child. I called

the police many times – sometimes [REDACTED] would still be there when they arrived but he was never charged. The police would just tell him to leave the property. I changed the locks. In the middle of the night he broke into the house. My son was asleep in my bed and he pulled the doona off and started throwing and smashing things and screaming abuse at me. My son was just three years old and literally screaming in terror. I will never forget that scream – it was real horror and he was shaking and crying. Finally [REDACTED] left.

I couldn't reason with him. He wouldn't agree with regular contact times reasoning it was HIS son and he would have him when he wanted. He would snatch him at the shopping centre or when I was down the beach. If I packed clothes he would never return them so I had to keep buying new ones. Even when my son was [REDACTED] years old he would turn up at the school or at soccer and just take him away. I gave in because I didn't want to create a 'scene' or for my son to suffer. I remember sitting in a café with a friend and [REDACTED] came in and threw [REDACTED] at me. He began using the most vile sexual language to describe to everyone in the café what I was like in bed, what my genitals looked like etc. He ranted at me. I asked the owner to call the police but she didn't. No one in the small country town wanted to take action.

One of the most amazing things was that he was a good friend with two women from the local women's refuge. One took him in to live with him after I ended the relationship. No one saw or could believe the things he did to the children and me. He spun the story of the loving father and how I denied him his children. I was cast by many in the community as a 'feminist' who stopped his 'right' to be a father. All this impeded my ability to be more protective of the children and myself.

The harassment continued. When [REDACTED] took my son he wouldn't put a seat belt on him and would drive away with my son standing up on the front seat. He was [REDACTED] years old.

I applied for an Intervention Order and sole custody through the local court. I was [REDACTED] months pregnant at this time. [REDACTED] contested both and wanted shared custody. By this time he was living with Aboriginal people on a mission and drinking a lot with the drunks there. I didn't want the children in this environment. The magistrate said he wouldn't grant an Intervention Order unless I could get a witness to verify there had been violence. He gave the court an intermission so I had about two hours to find someone. I rang about ten people who had seen the abuse – all gave reasons not to testify. Finally a hippy woman who had seen [REDACTED] chase me with an [REDACTED] testified and the Order was granted. The custody order gave him every second weekend. He used each handover back to me to scream abuse at me, sometimes for hours. I had no option. He would hold [REDACTED] to him who'd be screaming in fear and verbally abuse me. I could have left – but then I wouldn't have had [REDACTED] returned.

I had my daughter and also applied for custody. Again [REDACTED] was successful in gaining every second weekend. The children would come home filthy and distressed. I thought I had to put up with it. I should have called Child Protection. I varied the Order so the exchange of children took place outside a police station. But [REDACTED] would scream abuse at me or hold the children but then if I went in to ask the police to come out he would be as sweet as pie. They got sick of me asking them to do this to find everything seemed OK. [REDACTED] would drive up to my house in the middle of the night and bang on the door, or break a window and drive off.

He also started threatening that I 'Might have to learn a lesson the hard way' and that 'There's a lot of bush round here. Easy for some kids to go missing'. So I'd spend the whole weekend just frozen and trying to envisage that they would be returned OK. My nerves were shot. I couldn't sleep or relax whilst they were with him.

When my daughter was [REDACTED] I moved back to Melbourne. Of course he followed. By now he had another partner – a young woman – and a new baby. The children would go to their house. She was a good mother but of course the violence didn't stop with her and in fact intensified. The police were called many, many times but again [REDACTED] was never charged. I didn't realise the extent of it until much later. Towards the end of their relationship, which lasted [REDACTED] years, [REDACTED] would turn up at my home in the middle of the night with the three children in tow. One time [REDACTED] had ripped the [REDACTED] out and whipped her all round her body whilst the children looked on. Her back was black and blue. Another time they were all taken to a police station. I wasn't contacted and an Intervention Order was taken out but [REDACTED] withdrew before it was finalised.

[REDACTED] went back to [REDACTED].

[REDACTED] had another relationship. This woman would ring me too in times of crisis. Intervention Orders were taken out and never finalised. [REDACTED] was charged with her sexual assault but charges were dropped before it went to court. Sometimes the woman and my children had to run out in the night and hide in the bush (they lived in the country).

My children are grown now. Over this time my life has changed.

The violence has a legacy. My son is a lovely man – he cannot remember those early years although he has vague memories of the time with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. When the children were [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] their father flew them to [REDACTED]. That lasted a day because he wanted [REDACTED] to fight him and started goading him. He told his relatives my daughter was a slut. He was so drunk and the children were able to go and stay with one of their relatives.

I worked very hard to make sure my son would not follow in his father's footsteps and that both children had a good education and grew up to be responsible citizens.

My son will never use violence but is slightly controlling to his girlfriend. Very subtle but I notice this and that he can be slightly undermining of her. However he is responsible, has a good career and is very caring to others, especially his sister and brother (who has now come to live in Australia).

Both children bed wet until they were aged [REDACTED]. Looking back they exhibited many trauma symptoms – hyperactivity, restlessness, difficulty with concentrating.

My daughter is worse affected. She is in her [REDACTED]s but has never been able to sleep alone. She has to have someone in her bed or she cannot sleep at night. She would come into my bed every night until she was about [REDACTED]. Then she would sleep with her girlfriends or a boyfriend (she formed relationships from a young age). She has anxiety and has been on medication on and off for years. She has seen many counsellors. She has significant sleep disorders. At least she has had really good and caring partners. She had significant concentration issues at school but did a TAFE course and is employed. I am proud that she has spoken to men's behavioural change programs about her experience of violence.

My son sees his father fairly regularly. My daughter only recently saw him for the first time in years – she refers to him as ‘a dickhead’.

So my experience of violence really lasted another ■ years after I left. I wanted to point out the legacy – to me living through all those horrendous access visits, never knowing if he would kill them or they would survive all the risk taking activities he engaged in. When the Luke Batty case was publicised I went into a mini trauma myself – I broke down and didn’t sleep for days – years after my own story – because I knew that could have so easily been me.

And my children ...I hold significant guilt that I should have left and gone into hiding. I was never bashed nor was I was hospitalised – it was more the kind of ongoing verbal and ‘minor’ physical violence – I was knocked out but mainly shoving, kicking, hair pulling and physical subjugation. I stupidly believed that my children should see their father; other people told me this. I thought to deny them a father would be a bad thing for them. I wish I knew what I know about – about the effects of violence on children, the impact of trauma on child development. It would have made a difference. I wish the police would have taken action. He has been violent to at least three women; gone from one to the next – all within a few weeks and never ever had any consequences.

My hope is that the Royal Commission recommends a strengthened criminal justice response to men, particularly fathers and that the family court is more responsive to family violence. And that mothers receive better support to nourish the relationship with their children and keep them from harm.

Where there are children, their safety, wellbeing and development should be a key focus of interventions. We mustn’t forget that where there is contact, there is a means for the abuse and violence to be perpetrated. Should violent men have access to their children? What is in the children’s best interest? Good to consider. I know my children would have been far better off in terms of their emotional wellbeing and development if they had never seen their father again.