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Executive summary

The report presents findings from a literature review and qualitative research project undertaken with women who have left a domestic violence relationship and staff who have experience working with these women. The research was undertaken by the Social Policy and Research team at The Benevolent Society and this summary presents the key findings from the research.

Methodology and sample
Semi-structured interviews were carried out with eight women who had been out of a violent relationship for at least one year and considered themselves to be safe from the abusive partner. Interviews were also carried out with six staff who had experience working with women who had left a violent relationship. Half of the women interviewed were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background and the length of time they had been out of the domestic violence relationship ranged from two to 13 years. The women interviewed had been in a domestic violent relationship for an average of 20 years and all of the women had children from the relationship. Staff involved in the research had worked in both specialist counselling roles and in refuges. A detailed description of the methodology is included in the report.

Findings from the research

Literature review
As part of this research a review was undertaken of the literature exploring the experiences of women who have left a domestic violence relationship and the support that has helped them move forward. A full summary of the literature is included in this report. The review found that there was limited Australian research in this area and the findings from this review have informed the design of the current research. The following sections describe findings from the research undertaken with the eight women and six staff.

The nature and experience of domestic violence

Although the women were not asked details about the domestic violence they had experienced most volunteered this information. The women had experienced multiple forms of abuse including physical, verbal, emotional, and financial abuse and in some cases their children had experienced and/or witnessed abuse.

Women also discussed their experience of leaving the violent relationship and most described a point at which they were able to leave ‘for good’. This was sometimes triggered by a specific event or through the intervention of friends or other sources of support. Most of the women continued to have some contact with their ex-partner and some continued to experience abuse as a result of this contact or described living in fear of abuse occurring again in the future. A small number of women had also undergone identity changes to avoid contact with their partner after leaving, such as changing their name and identity or moving country or location.
The impact of domestic violence

Women and staff described a number of ways in which domestic violence continued to effect them after leaving the relationship. Some of these had short-term consequences but many had a longer term impact.

Women described a number of practical challenges they faced. Most talked about the impact of leaving on their finances, housing, and custody of their children. Women and staff talked about the difficulties of finding affordable rental accommodation after leaving. Most women spoke of leaving the relationship with no money at all and the pressure this placed on them particularly when trying to provide for their children. Some women and staff talked about the challenges involved in seeking custody of their children.

Women described the immediate impact of leaving the relationship and discussed feelings of isolation, loneliness, and an impaired ability to make decisions. Isolation from family, friends, and their community was experienced by most women after leaving the relationship and some women reported experiences of loneliness as a direct result of no longer being in the relationship with their ex-partners. Some women described the difficulties they faced in making their own decisions after leaving the relationship as a result of having had their life regulated for so long.

Women and staff described the profound and long-term effects of the violence on their psychological health and wellbeing. Most of the women reported being prescribed some form of medication for anxiety and/or depression and some women continued to experience depression years after leaving the relationship. Some women reported symptoms of post traumatic stress and described suicide attempts and continuing suicidal thoughts. A number of the women talked about themselves as though they were two different people – the self that existed in the violent relationship and the new, stronger self.

Women and staff also reported the long-term impact of the violence on women’s self-esteem, memory, and feelings of guilt particularly concerning their children. Many of the women blamed themselves for what had happened.

Moving forward

The women described a range of strategies and influences that had helped them move forward after separation including changing their thought patterns and cognitions. They did this through reducing their feelings of guilt, worry, and fear and changing their thoughts to believe that the experience had not been their fault. Women also talked about building their internal resilience and reclaiming their dignity as an important factor in moving forward as well as the importance of holding on to hope for their future, setting goals, and making plans.

Women and staff described the practical activities women engaged in to help them move forward. These included writing, walking, exercising, and reading, which all had a positive impact on their functioning and wellbeing. Women and staff also talked about the importance of rebuilding skills and connections including returning to work and education. However, some women described barriers to re-entering the workforce as a result of changing location, looking after their children, and in once case a criminal record that came about as a result of charges brought by her ex-partner.

As well as doing things for themselves women also reported the importance of doing things for others. This included focusing their attention and efforts on their children. Some women also discussed the importance of helping other women who had been in domestic violence relationships as being helpful in moving forward.
Experience and role of support services

There were three main types of formal support women had received in moving forward: legal and justice services; women-specific services; and general services. The women described mixed experiences of using all of these services and there were different opinions about the effectiveness and impact of different services on women’s journeys.

The women’s experience of legal and justice services had mostly been with the police, courts, and through seeking compensation as victims of crime. Women’s experience of the police was mixed with some describing extremely negative experiences. Women also described mixed experiences of obtaining apprehended violence orders (AVOs). Experiences of the court system were also mixed with some women feeling they had been treated fairly and with dignity where the outcome was usually a conviction of the offender. Others, however, spoke of not being believed by legal representatives and judges overseeing their case as well as the negative impact of the high cost of court proceedings. Most women described positive experiences with the court support services. Although some women had received compensation, most women did not reach the stage where they had followed through with a prosecution and were eligible for compensation.

Women and staff described formal services available to women after they have left a violent relationship including counselling, support groups, refuges, and services for women and children. Five of the eight women had accessed this support – three women had not accessed any formal support. Women’s experience of these formal services were mixed. Some women described very positive experiences of counselling particularly where they had developed a supportive relationship with the therapist. Some women, however, described their negative experiences of counselling particularly where they had not made a connection with the counsellor or where they felt they were patronising or judgemental.

Women who had attended support groups described a range of benefits including hearing other women’s stories as well as sharing their own and realising they were not the only person who had experienced an abusive relationship. Staff felt that support groups were important to allow women to make connections and friendships, although the women interviewed did not describe this as a significant motivating factor for attending groups. The women who did not attend groups emphasised the need to stay private and did not want to share their stories with other women. Women’s experiences of refuges were also mixed. Many women discussed accessing formal services via their children and these women often felt that this was the only reason they had ended up seeking support themselves.

In addition to the formal services received, informal support also emerged as a vital part of women’s journey away from DV, including support from family, friends, and community. Some women described the importance of the support they had received from family in helping them move forward, including support from their children. Women’s experience of support from friends and the wider community were mixed. Where women did have supportive friends, these friendships played a positive role in moving forward. On the other hand, some women reported having no support from friends and some reported not having a single person to turn to.

Barriers to moving forward

Women and staff identified a number of barriers to moving forward including not feeling able to seek help, having negative experiences of services and/or support networks, and the ongoing, long term impact of abuse.

Some women had not sought help from services since leaving the relationship. These women described the reasons for not accessing formal services as centred around the need for them to be flexible, anonymous, and free. Women described the difficulty of attending counselling or support groups due to restrictive operating hours and lack of availability outside business.
hours. Some women described how the financial difficulties they faced after leaving the relationship made it difficult to access some services and emphasised the need for services to be free. Some women also stressed the need for their experience to remain hidden amongst friends and colleagues and therefore emphasised the need for services to be anonymous.

Women and staff also talked about the barriers to moving forward created by the attitudes of some people in the community. Some women described not being believed by professionals as well as family and friends and described how this had presented a significant barrier to them moving forward and accessing support. Most women reported having had received a negative or blameful attitude from another person. Finally the long term impact of domestic violence on women’s health and wellbeing often prevented them from seeking support and moving forward.

**Women from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background**

This research has demonstrated that women from CALD backgrounds appear to face a unique set of challenges in moving forward. The CALD women interviewed as part of this research had not shared their experience with anyone outside their immediate family and had very limited social support on which they could draw. Two of the women had fled to Australia from other countries and described the challenges of arriving in a foreign country under these circumstances. The cultural context in which these women lived added a new dimension to the feelings of shame and guilt they experienced. Cultural and religious expectations played a strong role in this, particularly cultural attitudes about divorce.

**Implications for policy and practice**

This research has demonstrated the long-term impact of domestic violence on the women and children involved. The findings have highlighted a number of implications for policy and practice aimed at addressing domestic violence and improving the support available for women who have left an abusive relationship in Australia. Currently lacking in Australia are outreach services that are free, anonymous, and flexible. All women reported financial hardships post separation and the difficulties accessing services outside of business hours in a region that was suitable for them. This prevented some women from accessing services at all. Furthermore soft entry points should be available in services that are not domestic violence specific e.g., general practitioners and non-government organisations. The findings also highlighted a need for community attitudes towards women having experienced domestic violence to change so that they focus on the long-term impact of domestic violence, reduce imposing feelings of shame and guilt, and bring light to the often hidden nature of domestic violence.
The main purpose of this targeted literature review was to inform the design of the current qualitative research. It summarise the literature around the long-term experiences and needs of women who have left an abusive relationship and what helps them move forward.

**Prevalence of domestic violence**

The true incidence of domestic violence is difficult to establish, as incidents often go unreported (Drabsch, 2007). Australian statistics support international findings that victims of domestic violence are overwhelmingly female. In 2002-03 it was estimated that 87% of victims of domestic violence in Australia were women while 98% of perpetrators were male (Access Economics, 2004). The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Social Trends Survey (1997) estimated that in 2005, 17% (1.3 million) of women aged 18 years and over had experienced partner violence.

**Definitions and terminology**

While domestic violence has been defined in a number of ways, it generally refers to violence between adults who are in, or have been in, an intimate relationship. The following definition is based on studies reviewed by Laing and Bobic and it is this broad definition of domestic violence that was used in this literature review. (2002, as cited in Access Economics, 2004):

> “Domestic violence occurs when one partner attempts by physical or psychological means to dominate and control the other. Domestic violence takes a number of forms. The most commonly acknowledged forms of domestic violence are: physical and sexual violence; threats and intimidation; emotional and social abuse; and financial deprivation. Domestic violence can involve a continuum of controlling behaviour and violence, which can occur over a number of years, before and after separation.”

For the purpose of the current research, it was necessary to agree on a term to describe women who have left a violent relationship. The review therefore explored some of the more commonly used terms and their implications.

Some women identify themselves as being a ‘survivor’ of domestic violence, characterised by leaving a relationship and taking control of their life (Bagshaw, Chung, Couch, Lilburn, & Wadham, 2000). Evans (2007) found that for most women, identifying themselves as ‘survivors’ was both an empowering and liberating experience as it conveyed a sense of strength and victory.

However, characterising women as survivors can conceal the significant, long-term impacts of domestic violence (Wilcox, 2006). ‘Survivor’ could also be seen as a label that orients women to the past, and not to the future (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001).

Women in a Victorian study felt that the word ‘recover’ did not adequately capture their experience of trauma, preferring to describe their journey away from violence rather than recovery (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2004). For Evans (2007) the word recovery is not desirable as it suggests an end-date and end-state - a timeframe within which women will ‘be cured’. Instead, Evans’ study refers to ‘incorporation’ as a process by which women subsume their experiences within their sense of self, arguing that this complements women’s journey narratives.

**Women who leave a violent relationship**

The issue of ‘leaving’ the relationship in the domestic violence literature is complex and at times contentious. Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, and Winstok (2000) highlighted the common assumption that leaving a violent relationship is the only way to achieve freedom from violence.
These authors argued that if the role of support services is to empower women to make their own choices and exercise control over their lives, this must include the empowerment of women who stay. While not all women choose to leave or are able to leave, many who try to leave will return to the relationship (Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007). An ABS survey found that in 2005, 35% of women who had experienced violence from their current partner had separated from and returned to their partner at least once. This was also true for 57% of women who experienced previous partner violence (ABS, 1997).

There are many reasons why women may return to the relationship including a lack of resources or pressure from their ex-partner or family members (McInnes, 2001). An English study found that follow-up resources for women who had left a relationship were rare, particularly where those women had not accessed a refuge (Wilcox, 2000).

Relatively few studies have explored what happens to women who do leave, particularly in relation to their psychological and social functioning. For many women, the experience of abuse does not stop once they have left the relationship (Anderson, 2003; Evans, 2007; McInnes, 2004). Many women experience ongoing abuse through shared responsibility for or contact with children. In 2005, 25% of women who had temporarily separated from a violent partner reported experiencing violence during the separation (ABS, 2007).

As well as experiencing, and fearing, continued abuse, women’s lives are affected by domestic violence long after they have left the relationship, in areas such as parenting, health, finances, and employment. Despite this, most literature about separation focuses on what women need in order to leave the relationship and the actual act of separation. Few studies have explored what women need to help them cope with the long term effects of domestic violence as they rebuild their life.

This gap in the literature is also reflected in gaps in service provision for women. Women report feeling forgotten once the crisis stage of actual separation is over and are clear about their need for continuing support (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2004).

Separation as a process

One of the challenges in exploring literature on the post-separation period is that ‘post-separation’ cannot be neatly defined as a specific period of time in women’s lives. Women leave and re-enter relationships, and for many the abuse and violence continues.

Some qualitative literature conceptualises leaving the relationship as a process, rather than a single decision or act. This approach views the leaving process as taking many months or years, in which women become ‘survivors’ by learning practical and coping strategies along the way (Anderson & Saunders, 2003).

Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2001) describe a process of ‘reclaiming self’ as consisting of four phases: counteracting abuse, breaking free, not going back, and moving on. The last stage, moving on, takes the longest time. Having left the relationship, women who are moving on are characterised as having achieved some stability and are building a life separate from their ex-partner.

Similarly, in a 2004 paper the Victorian Government Department of Human Services describes women’s journey away from violence as moving through a series of spirals: from in the violence through movement, transition, moving forward, and finally continuing journey. Women described moving forward as either the stage after leaving the relationship, or a time when violence in the relationship had ended.

However the process is defined, it is clear from the literature that there are a number of common experiences, fears, and concerns that women report as they go through the journey of rebuilding their life. This review explores the long-term stressors most commonly reported in the literature and the coping resources that can be used to buffer stress. The review does not address the issues that women face in the earliest stage of leaving such as tackling the legal and justice system and finding accommodation.
Health factors

Women experience ongoing physical and psychological health concerns after leaving an abusive relationship. Previous violence and stressors such as income loss and changed family responsibilities have been associated with depression in women who left a violent relationship (Anderson, Saunders, Yoshihama, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003).

In one of the few Australian studies to explore the long term impact of domestic violence post-separation, Evans (2007) found that 57% of women who had been out of the relationship for an average of 10 years experienced some degree of depression at the time of the study. Prevalence rates of obsessive compulsive disorder, agoraphobia, and eating disorders were also high.

Women in the same study also identified ongoing physical health problems such as headaches, ulcers, and joint damage, although they were generally less confident about linking physical problems to the prior abuse compared with psychological problems. Participants revealed a high rate of General Practitioner attendance, with few reports of positive interaction (Evans, 2007).

Finances, work, and education

The sudden loss of finances and possessions is a common experience for many women immediately after leaving a violent relationship. Furthermore, financial abuse is common in domestic violence, often leaving women without basic money management skills (Evans, 2007). Nevertheless, many women consider material losses insignificant compared to the importance of leaving the relationship (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999; McInnes, 2001).

While many women find themselves initially reliant on welfare, most either re-enter the workforce or return to education in order to not rely on benefits (Evans, 2007). Challenges for women trying to find or maintain a job after leaving the relationship include low self-esteem and fewer skills (McInnes, 2001). Nevertheless, for many women, education and meaningful work are vital as a source of pride and self-esteem, even more than as a means to improving their financial situation (Lewis, 2006).

One UK study explored the importance of returning to education (Morgan, 2007). The nineteen participants, including some men, had typically been out of an abusive relationship for nine years. Their main aims in returning to education were to increase feelings of self-worth and achievement, followed by being a good role model for children.

Children and parenting

The ABS Social Trends survey found that 60% of women who experienced partner violence had children in their care, with 68% of those women reporting that their children witnessed the violence (ABS, 1997). There is increasing evidence of the negative impact of domestic violence on children's mental health, self-esteem, and social competence (see Evans, 2007).

Women with children who have left a violent relationship fare worse on a range of indicators than women without children, including increased social isolation, poverty, and poorer health (McInnes, 2001). The same study found that women leaving a violent relationship reported greater difficulties with parenting arrangements, as they were not able to rely on their ex-partner for parental support.

Children's needs can be a catalyst for establishing a normal routine (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999), and some women report improved relationships with their children once they are able to relax and not live in fear of violence (McInnes, 2004).

For many women, issues of contact and parenting are among their foremost worries after leaving a violent relationship. Women may fear for their children's safety (Evans, 2007) and many do not receive child support regularly with abusive ex-partners actively avoiding payment (McInnes, 2001).

While some women consider children's contact with their father to be important, many experience continued abuse against them and
their children (McInnes, 2001). Post-separation violence is common at handover time between visits (Bagshaw et al., 2000). Evans (2007) reported that women who want contact to continue would welcome a system of supervised access with some sort of compulsory parenting training and assessment of their ex-partner’s behaviour. Many women also seek parenting classes for themselves (Evans, 2007).

The intergenerational transmission of abusive behaviour is a concern for some women (Evans, 2007). Most women reported openly discussing the issue of abuse with their children to avoid that happening.

Having left the relationship, many women seek counseling for their children who have witnessed the abuse. School-based counselling can be a significant source of support, with the advantages of being ongoing, no cost, and accessible (McInnes, 2004). This is particularly important given that there is often a lack of services for children who have experienced domestic violence, with long waiting lists in place for those that do exist (Bagshaw et al., 2000).

Women in the Bagshaw et al. (2000) study whose children received counselling frequently reported that their children saw the counseling as punishment, with the counsellor focusing on their antisocial behaviour rather than the underlying experience of domestic violence. The report emphasised the importance of not working with children in such a way that binds their self-identity to the experience of domestic abuse.

Informal support
The literature repeatedly highlights that social support is vital to women rebuilding their lives after leaving a violent relationship. While the service network has an important role to play, services alone are not sufficient in the long term given the widespread and long-term nature of domestic violence and its effects (Wilcox, 2000).

However, building and maintaining a social support network is particularly challenging for women who have experienced domestic violence. Most women find that their social network declines significantly as a result of domestic violence, due to embarrassment, fear of seeking help, and deliberate isolation tactics used by the perpetrator of violence (Evans, 2007; Larance & Porter, 2004).

This is compounded for women who leave an abusive relationship, as leaving the family home often entails moving away from the local community and nearby friends (McInnes, 2001; Wilcox, 2006). Where women have moved to a new area, a friendly and well-maintained neighbourhood can help them feel safer and more positive about their future (Wilcox, 2000).

A further challenge is coping with the stigma attached to having experienced domestic violence (Wilcox, 2006) and unspoken community expectations of how survivors ought to behave (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). This can be worse for women with children who experience the additional stigmatised identity of a ‘single mother’. Negative perceptions of single mothers, particularly those who have left a violent relationship, can lead to social exclusion and further isolation (McInnes, 2001; Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2004).

Both women and support workers cite negative societal attitudes and stigma received by others as being a major barrier to women moving forward, emerging in the form of family disapproval of leaving the relationship or a lack of understanding from service providers (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2004).

Yet the most common thread throughout the literature is that women’s experiences of friendship and mutual support post-separation are absolutely vital to their wellbeing. Compared to financial resources and self-efficacy, Anderson and Saunders (2003) found that social support was the only personal resource to have a decreasing effect on depression.

In an English study of twenty women, those who managed to avoid returning to a violent relationship had one close, female friend or
family member to support them (Wilcox, 2000). This took the form of practical support such as childcare and transport as well as emotional support. Victorian women identified respectful personal relationships as a major support in their rebuilding journey (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2004).

Repartnering is an issue for some women post-separation. Women who have experienced an abusive relationship tend to be wary of starting a new relationship (McInnes, 2001; Wilcox, 2000) even when faced with a fear of loneliness (Wilcox, 2000) or a social pressure to repartner (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). Women who do repartner may find themselves in an exhausting cycle of vigilance and monitoring for signs of possible abuse starting up (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). For some women, however, a new relationship provides a sense of safety (Wilcox, 2000).

Social support can help women find the courage and confidence to return to education (Morgan, 2007). Most participants in this study reported that they had been encouraged to return to education, often by family and friends.

When asked to give advice to others who wanted to rebuild their life, common themes revolved around finding a focus for your life, talking to people about your experiences, and turning to family and friends (Morgan, 2007). The study also interviewed workers from support services from the voluntary, statutory, community, and education sectors. Most reported that friendships and informal support are the key to helping survivors move on.

**Formal support**

For women participating in the Evans (2007) study, the most commonly accessed type of formal support post-separation was counseling (31% of women), followed by support groups (13%), and welfare agencies (11%). The response to those services was overwhelmingly positive. 21 per cent of women did not seek any assistance, either through lack of faith in services or lack of awareness.

The use of support services tends to diminish over the long term, suggesting that women are managing to rebuild their lives; however, many women feel pressured to ‘move on’ or ‘recover’ within 6 weeks or 6 months of separation, which they consider unrealistic (Evans, 2007). According to Evans (2007) this demand for ongoing support highlights the inappropriateness of the recovery framework, which implies a state of ‘being recovered’ and fails to acknowledge the enduring impact of domestic violence.

Some services provide the structure for women to develop social networks, recognising the importance of social support. An evaluation of The Domestic Violence Intervention Project in the UK found that of the range of support offered to women, support groups were the most effective in reducing self-blame and shame and increased self-esteem (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1998).

Survivors’ support groups are also beneficial for longer-term survivors who can in turn assist the newly-separated. Helping others enables survivors to create something useful and positive out of their experiences (Evans, 2007).

**Grief, loss, and internal resources**

One study found that ten years after leaving an abusive relationship, women reported a number of negative feelings such as powerlessness, anxiety, and being unable to say ‘no’ (Lewis, 2006). Self-blame was also common (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001), as was guilt, shame, sadness, and loneliness (Lewis, 2006).

Two studies revealed the loss and grief that many women experience after leaving a relationship, despite the relationship having been abusive. For most women, the feeling of sadness relates more to the loss of the relationship and the role of wife/mother than to the loss of the partner (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). However it is also important to acknowledge that some women report a continuing love for their ex-partner (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001).
The internal resources that can combat some of these feelings are courage, resilience, and a sense of empowerment (Lewis, 2006). The very act of leaving a relationship and claiming independence can help to rebuild women’s eroded sense of self-worth (Wilson, 1999, as cited in Anderson & Saunders, 2003).

Rural experiences
Research suggests that women experiencing domestic violence who live in rural regions face different and additional challenges compared with those in urban areas. There is a lack of anonymity and privacy, with many women reluctant to bring shame or embarrassment on their family (Bagshaw et al., 2000). Fewer support services are available, and a lack of transport increases women’s sense of isolation (Bagshaw et al., 2000). Support with transportation is crucial for women who have left the relationship (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999).

However, there is a lack of research on the needs and experiences of women living in rural and remote regions who have left a violent relationship.

Diversity
There is some research on the challenges faced by women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds who have left a violent relationship. However, the extent of domestic violence experienced by CALD women is not clear and the specific challenges faced by CALD women over the longer term have not been widely researched.

The Victorian Government Department of Human Services (2004) found that women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, indigenous women, lesbians, and women with a disability face specific obstacles that intensify the difficulty of their journey. The report suggests that these obstacles include prejudice, ill-informed and inappropriate responses, and ignorance of the context of women’s lives. It argued that the factors affecting diverse women need to be better understood.

Some women from different cultural backgrounds may be geographically isolated from extended family (Office of Women’s Policy Victoria, 2002). That same report found that women who do not have permanent residency in Australia may not report domestic violence for fear of deportation or lack of access to work or welfare. Women may also lack knowledge of what services are available to them in Australia.

An investigation into attitudes towards domestic violence in Australia found that CALD women reported a number of barriers to disclosing domestic violence (Phoenix Projects, 2000). These included shame relating to family honour, a woman’s responsibility as a wife to hold her family together, and concerns that women should not be seen to want too much from a relationship. Fear was another common reason, including fear of worsening violence, being deported, and being alone without social or financial support.

In an Australian qualitative study (Keys Young, 1988a, as cited in Bonar & Roberts, 2006), women from CALD backgrounds reported a lack of confidence that mainstream services would understand or be responsive to their situation. Their fears of an unhelpful response and being placed in danger in their own community also led to CALD women not using crisis services. Phoenix Projects (2000) found that CALD women were concerned that mainstream services would encourage them to leave their relationship.
Purpose and aims of research

The review presented in Section one confirms the need for further research that investigates the journey women take when leaving a violent relationship. The research presented in this report seeks to add to the knowledge in this area by gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges, coping strategies, and support options for women during this period. Findings will also be useful for domestic violence service providers and will provide practical information about what supports women to move forward.

Specifically, the research aimed to:

1. Explore the challenges that women face in moving forward;

2. Investigate the levels and changes in functioning that women experience during their journey away from a violent relationship. Based on the review of the literature, the following areas of functioning will be explored with the women and support workers:
   a. Social functioning;
   b. Psychological functioning;
   c. Physical functioning (including health, parenting, financial, employment, education); and

3. Investigate experiences of and barriers to accessing the following support options for women during their journey away from a violent relationship:
   a. Formal support services and resources;
   b. Social support (including friends, family, new partners, broader social networks);
   c. Internal / Personal resources (including emotional, psychological, and practical coping strategies);
   d. Other support options.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted for this research and included semi-structured interviews with women who had been out of an abusive relationship for at least one year and staff who had experience working with women who had left a violent relationship.

A total of eight women and six staff members participated in the research. Two flyers explaining the purpose and nature of the research were distributed via a number of women's health and community services in NSW. One flyer invited women who had been in an abusive relationship to participate in the research, and encouraged them to call a private and confidential phone number to contact the researcher directly. Women had to have been out of the violent relationship for a minimum of one year and consider themselves to be ‘safe’ from the abusive partner. The second flyer invited staff members who had experience working with women either currently in, leaving, or separated from an abusive relationship to participate in the research. They too were invited to call a private and confidential number to contact the researcher directly.

Ethics approval was obtained from a registered ethics committee (The Spastic Centre’s Human Research Ethics Committee) as well as The Benevolent Society’s research approvals committee and internal ethics committee.

Interviews were conducted in a place that was convenient for the participants and locations varied from their place of work, to their home, to booking a convenient, private location for the participants and the researchers to meet. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. All women were debriefed by the researcher who is a clinical psychologist and followed up three days after the interview. Some women required referrals to counselling services and the researchers ensured that all received appropriate care and follow up counselling.
Interviews were transcribed and analysed using content analysis which examines, summarises, and organises common emerging themes in qualitative data. Emerging themes were examined and data was triangulated (i.e., combined) across women and staff responses.

Terminology
Throughout this report, specific terminology is used to convey a number of findings. The terminology used in this report has come about as a result of the literature review and how women themselves described their abuse, its impacts, and their experiences post separation. The time between a woman leaving an abusive relationship and the time of interview is referred to as the woman’s “journey”. The word “recovery” is not used in this report as it was not used by any of the women interviewed – despite often being referred to in the literature on domestic violence. Instead, women’s journey is referred to as a journey “moving forward”.

Demographics
Of the six staff members interviewed, four worked for specialist domestic violence counselling services and two for women’s refuges. Staff had experience of providing short term support, such as assisting women with accommodation and the legal system, and long term counselling that could last from 12 months to more than two years. Other support offered by the staff included court support, advocacy, group work for both women and children, and facilitating support groups. While the focus of the refuges was on providing crisis accommodation, both refuge workers provided broader support such as children’s groups and long term counselling.

Of the eight women interviewed, four were born in Australia and four were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The length of time that women had been out of a domestic violence relationship ranged from two to 13 years, with an average of six years. Most women had remained in the relationship for many years, ranging from 15 to 38 years with an average length of 20 years.

All the women interviewed had children from the relationship, ranging in age from 14 to 23 years old. One woman had repartnered and had a child in the new relationship.
The nature of the violence

Due to the research focus on women’s long term journey away from violence, the researchers did not specifically ask women about the nature of the abuse that they had experienced. Nevertheless, six of the eight women chose to discuss the abuse in varying levels of detail. Many described the abuse clearly and vividly. All six had experienced multiple forms of abuse, including physical violence, verbal and emotional abuse, financial abuse, and being manipulated or controlled.

Women discussed physical violence that ranged from being slapped and spat at to having bones broken. Most women described such physical violence as being triggered by minor, trivial incidents.

We were sitting around one Christmas and he was adding up the receipts and he worked out that I’d spent more on the boys than [our daughter]…and the next minute from nowhere he came and hit me and broke my nose.

If I was so much as five minutes late, that was a smack in the head for no reason.

Women reported that their violent partner used degrading language that made them feel worthless, and a range of controlling strategies including financial abuse.

Telling me that I was nothing, worthless, dirt, don’t contribute anything, don’t pull your weight, lazy.

When I wanted to speak with my family over the phone I was limited, and under constant supervision.

[He] used to keep us so broke that I would feed the kids first before I fed myself.

One woman, who had her shoulder dislocated and her jaw broken, described the emotional abuse as being worse than the physical violence in the longer term:

I honestly think that the emotional bruises are the one that does more damage. Your bruises and that heal.

This was mirrored by staff who referred to the severe, long-term impacts of emotional abuse:

Due to the mental stuff that goes on, they lose that belief in themselves. They actually don’t trust themselves anymore. And to me that’s the biggest loss for women.

This ongoing feeling of being watched and monitored and regulated and controlled means that oftentimes these women don’t have any supports because they’ve already been cut off from family and friends.

The children of at least two women had experienced abuse directly themselves, including verbal abuse, physical abuse, and being thrown out of the house in the middle of winter. Four women talked about their children witnessing the violence against them, often coming to their mother’s aid as this woman describes:

So I had one son hugging me to keep [my husband] away from me, covered in blood…and the other son running to the freezer to get ice packs to put cold aid on my nose.
Leaving the relationship

While the researchers did not ask women about the actual process of leaving their violent partner, all of the women interviewed discussed their experiences of leaving. All but one left the family home. Two women reported leaving and returning to the relationship a number of times before finally leaving.

Almost all women described arriving at a particular point at which they left and then remained out of the relationship permanently. For some this was triggered by a particularly violent incident, others could not explain why this one point was different to any others. One woman described it as a ‘breaking point’:

*It got to the point where it was a breaking point and it was going to be do or die and I knew it was going to be one of the two.*

For other women, it was the intervention of either a friend or formal services that was the catalyst for them leaving.

*The only reason I left was because a girlfriend wouldn’t cancel a removalist…I rang my girlfriend, who had booked the removalist, and I said cancel it and she said, no. Then my phone battery went dead so three big burly guys turned up to remove a couple of items from the house because that was all I took with me.*

Many women discussed the difficulties they experienced in trying to leave and how their intentions to leave often lasted for a number of years. This, coupled with the average length of time spent in the domestic violent relationship (20 years), suggests that women find it extremely difficult to make that initial separation.

The staff who were interviewed work with women while they are in a domestic violence relationship as well as after they have left. They described a sense of loyalty to or love for the partner as the most common reason for not leaving. However, most women were unable to explain why they stayed for so long, feeling simply that they couldn’t get out. The two women who talked about love or loyalty towards their ex-partner were from a CALD background.

*First I thought it’s my fault that I didn’t hold onto this marriage…I kept his picture in my wallet for two years.*

*But then nobody divorced you when you are a [religion]. The culture says that you stay [until] you die… You will listen to him and you do whatever he tells you to do.*

Continuing violence

At the time of interview, most of the women had some continued contact with their ex-partner. In line with the literature, the women still in contact with their ex-partner had either experienced continued abuse after having left the relationship or described living in fear of further violence.

Some women experienced stalking and harassment after leaving the relationship. For one woman, this continued for a long time:

*[That went on for] about two and a half years until….it came up in the courts for him to stop emailing me…I believe I’m still being stalked.*

In the most extreme case of continued violence, some time after the end of the relationship one woman’s ex-partner ran her over with his car.

*And the first thing they said when they saw me was…’we’re so happy to see you… We thought that [he] was going to find you and finish the job’ and when you hear someone say something like that it puts shivers up your spine.*

Other women described living in constant fear, and making practical choices to improve their safety. This experience of continued fear was also described by a number of staff, particularly as a barrier to women seeking help.
Because one of the things in moving is that I think you need to alert neighbours that you're not in a very safe position. I moved to a street that was just flat and I could see both ends of the street and there was a street light every second house.

Of the women who did not mention fearing their ex-partner, only one had regular contact at the time of interview. The others lived in a different country from their ex-partner.

Some women described making drastic changes to their life after leaving the domestic violence relationship. One changed her name in order to hide from her ex-partner. Two left the country that they and their partners were living in. One of these women described returning, briefly, to a life of hardship in her native country to flee her violent partner.

I went back to my country thinking that going back will solve my problem...I was going to stay back home and face poverty and whatever because I thought that that was going to be a better life.

The impact of domestic violence

Women and staff described a number of ways in which domestic violence continues to effect women after leaving an abusive relationship. Some impacts tend to be short-term, while many continue for years as women try to rebuild their lives. This report divides the impacts into two main areas: those that are practical or 'external' and those that are more internally experienced.

Practical impact of domestic violence

The most common practical challenges women described in moving forward were access to finance, housing, and custody of their children. Staff talked about very similar issues, with the strongest emphasis on housing. In contrast, one woman described the sadness of having to leave behind her personal effects.

When I moved in here I had no photos of my children. I felt like I had no children because I had no baby photos...[My friends] couldn't understand that I didn't want furniture, but I wanted...my cards I got when I was 21, things the kids had done in kindergarten, things that you can't replace.

Housing

A few women described the challenge of finding rental accommodation, including having to furnish their new home from scratch. The issue of housing, however, was described by almost all staff as one of the most significant practical challenges that women face. Staff were extremely concerned that public housing is no longer prioritised for women leaving domestic violence, and that rental accommodation in New South Wales is expensive and in high demand.

Once upon a time women could leave, apply for housing. It was a fairly high priority for women leaving domestic violence to be housed...with the idea of providing them with somewhere safe for them and their kids to live. That's kind of all changed now.

Once you're a single mum and you may not have worked so you haven't got any references and you're competing with other people who don't have small children. If you're a landlord, often you're choosing different people to our clients.

For this staff member, the lack of housing presents more than a practical challenge - it can mean the difference between a woman staying in or leaving a violent relationship:

That in itself is actually good at preventing women from leaving violence or forcing them back into violent relationships because they simply don't have the options with the housing.

Financial impacts

The majority of women described leaving the relationship with no money at all, and struggling with finances for many months or even years.

Note. It was a requirement for participation that women has not experienced any violence from their ex-partner for a minimum period of 1 year.
Two of the women interviewed felt that they were relatively lucky financially compared to others in similar situations, although one spent all of her savings on the legal process of gaining custody of her children.

Some women talked about their money being held in their partner's name, and many described the difficulties of trying to provide for their children while setting up their new life. For example:

"So we used to go with plastic bags walking all day and collect cans...for three or five dollars...[It made me feel] very bad. Every mum who is not able to provide her child a packet of chips or a lolly is not a good mum."

While financial hardship was an issue for most women, it appeared particularly significant for those from CALD backgrounds. This may be because those women had no social support, with two of them leaving the country in which they lived with their partner. Unlike the Australian-born women, those born overseas did not mention seeking or receiving any government benefits or assistance with practical matters.

"I came with $400...What I had in Super was in my husband's name and he took it. So I was turned out of my sister's house and I had to beg to the real estate agent to get a two bedroom...unit."

**Custody of the children**

Some women and staff talked about the challenges involved in seeking custody of children. For women, the focus tended to be on either not gaining custody, or their fears for the wellbeing of their children if they had contact with their father.

"I was terrified, absolutely terrified. He wanted the boys on the weekend and DoCS had said to me don't let him have them."

Staff emphasised their concerns about the current Family Law Amendment Act of 2006. In particular, they talked about the impact of contact on children who have witnessed domestic violence, and the impact on women's wellbeing.

Even if it's not as blatant as that we've got kids going off to contact when we know they've witnessed violence and they're coming home...frightened.

One of the things that we're trying to teach women to do is to build boundaries because they've lost all their boundaries. But the Family Law Act is really encouraging movable boundaries and flexibility.

**Internal impact of domestic violence**

In addition to the many external, practical challenges faced by women, many women and staff spoke in great detail about the internal impact of their abusive relationships. The more immediate internal impact of domestic violence were feelings of isolation and loneliness and women's impaired ability to make decisions.

**Isolation and loneliness**

A number of women talked about feeling lonely and isolated after leaving the abusive relationship. Isolation was considered by many to be a major barrier to moving forward and is discussed in greater detail below. This woman described how important a sense of community was to her:

"Women do belong in community groups, whether it's church groups or school groups or whatever and domestic violence takes them out of that community and isolates them...[what] you don't actually realise...until you're long gone from domestic violence is...how important that role is in your life and what support you need from other women right through that time."

CALD women in particular described having no family or friends and extreme isolation:

"I mean other women, I felt jealous about them, they have families here and they have friends. Only three people know where I live, but no-one else."

Some women and staff described how living in constant fear can add to the sense of isolation. For example:

"It's just that fear of not knowing and the fear of consequences of leaving. That whole fear, it just immobilises your every move."
Women will say part of reconnecting with community is being fearful to go outside their house, to go shopping. Being scared of who’s behind them. Overcoming fear’s probably number one.

One woman referred to feeling lonely as a direct result of no longer being in the relationship, and she went on to explain that the loneliness was still preferable to experiencing the abuse.

I’ll be quite honest, when I first broke up with him, I found it really lonely… [but] I prefer to be lonely and bored than sitting in a house full of tension or waiting for a bomb to go off…Got over that one quick smart when I thought of the alternative.

For one staff member, the silence on this subject reflects a lack of acknowledgement of the grief and loss that some women experience after leaving a relationship. She expressed concern that both women and support workers fail to name and acknowledge that loss:

I think it’s probably huge and my sense [is] that if we don’t acknowledge the loss it…makes it really hard to experience things like hopefulness and joy…because there is this constant sadness that may never go away…unless it’s addressed.

**Making decisions**

Some women and staff referred to the impact that domestic violence has on women’s abilities to make decisions and think for themselves. This is probably as a result of the years of reliance and dependence that women have on their partner due to financial abuse and controlling strategies.

The first couple of years after leaving, those decisions I couldn’t make them. I wasn’t capable.

For this woman who was born overseas, her lack of knowledge of the country made this even harder:

I didn’t know anything, I didn’t know even how to catch the train.

Given the extent and variety of the decisions and changes that women are required to make in the process of moving forward, the long-term impact of having their life regulated by their partner for so long is considerable.

**Long-term psychological impact of domestic violence**

Women described the profound and far-reaching effects of domestic violence on their psychological health and wellbeing. This was evident from women’s reports of having been diagnosed with a mental illness, as well as their descriptions of a range of symptoms and experiences that suggest ongoing psychological harm.

**Depression, anxiety, and post traumatic stress**

The majority of women reported being prescribed some form of medication for anxiety and/or depression. While two women were not happy to remain on the medication, the others reported how much it had helped and some were still taking the medication at the time of interview.

Most women talked about experiencing depression, either during the relationship and in many cases over the longer term. Women’s experience of depression included excessive sleeping and time in bed, sleeplessness, not being able to concentrate, and not being able to stop crying.

I suffered quite severe depression, had no idea but I had a really good doctor, was determined not to go on the antidepressants…until it got to the point where I worked from home and I would sleep. I would get emails coming in and I would just crawl into bed and I would sleep.

I cried and cried and cried and no-one knew what to do with me and I couldn’t stop. I could not stop crying until eventually I cried myself to sleep so I think I had [a breakdown] at that point.

The depression was still affecting some women at the time of interview, some years after leaving the abusive relationship.

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2 Symptoms of clinical depression (see Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV)
I can’t remember the last time I slept eight hours… this is how it will be for the rest of my life.

As you can see, [the depression] hasn’t gone. It hasn’t gone.

Some women reported symptoms of post traumatic stress:

It was very hard and post traumatic stress and the dreams and the constant nightmares… like I’m coming back for more.

[The report writer for the insurance company] determined that I was still suffering after all this time with post traumatic syndrome and she recommended that I needed counselling.

Suicidal thoughts

Some women reported suicide attempts either while in the relationship or at the time of leaving. Others described having continuing suicidal thoughts. Two women’s descriptions reflected a level of exhaustion with the stress and unhappiness they were experiencing:

I was hoping that a car would hit me. And that I’d be in a coma and that I would rest. That I would have a break.

All I wanted to do was go to bed and I thought if I could just go to sleep right now and shut my eyes that would be the best thing I could do. But then I thought if I did that then my son or my daughter would be left with him.

The above and the following quotes also reveal how, for some women, it was the thought of their children that kept them going.

When I’m thinking [that] way that you know, it’s time to do yourself in because you can’t deal with these things anymore in your head, I think of my grandkids and I think of [my youngest daughter].

Distinct selves

Three women talked about themselves as though they were two different people - the self that existed in the abusive relationship and the new, stronger self. Two of those three had not received any form of counselling since leaving their violent partner. Their feelings towards their old self were generally scathing and judgemental:

I don’t want to bring [those two personalities] back together… Jane Carter3 was a weak, pathetic woman who should have been strong enough to stand up and protect the children.

It was clear that some women were outwardly strong, projecting a specific persona to the outside world, while hiding a different person inside.

They don’t see the Jane Carter side of me, they see the Jackie Shaw4 side of me so they see a strong woman, self-assured, knows where she’s going, is good at her job… No one knows about the Jane Carter side except me.

When talking about that other self, these women revealed an inner fragility and sense of pain that remained hidden to the outside world:

But when Jane Carter comes in my thoughts I just wanna end it all.

She doesn’t know the real me, but here I am crying about my problems, yet she thinks that because I’m on top of all these activities I’m super woman, but I’m not.

These distinct selves were also manifested through the expression of conflicting emotions, in which some women described their life as being good while at the same time describing continuing sadness and pain. This can be summed up in the following example, where this woman describes being simultaneously okay and unhappy:

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3 Names have been changed to ensure privacy. Note, however, that the two ‘personalities’ described here each had a different name.

4 Names have been changed to ensure privacy. Note, however, that the two ‘personalities’ described here each had a different name.
It's just not going kind for me because I cannot speak to you in a happy way. I cannot release me of myself but I am okay. Really I am okay, but inside I'm really hurting because so much has happened.

**Long term impacts:**

**Self esteem, memory, and guilt**

In addition to the severe psychological impacts of the domestic violence, women and staff also reported the long-term impact of domestic violence on women's self-esteem, confidence, and feelings of guilt.

Women and staff equally mentioned the impact of the abusive relationship on their resulting self-esteem and levels of confidence. One staff member spoke about the impact of the abuse on women's lives after they had escaped the relationship:

*But it's this other this level of coercive control, this intimidation in their personal life that extends beyond... into their life beyond that. It has a great impact on their levels of participation within society... and their ability to feel confident."

Other staff members mentioned the lack of self-esteem that women have long after they have left an abusive relationship:

*They talk about how they feel and how their self esteem is non-existent, and how they don’t know how to make decisions anymore. It's very hard for them to go out and feel they can do certain things because there’s still the voice there telling them 'you’re no good, you’re no good'. They talk about how difficult it is to think they will be able to do something in the future."

*That takes years for women to heal, if ever. I would say that, if ever."

The women particularly spoke of their inability to forget about what had happened to them, even years after separation. For example:

*Then it will haunt me [until] the end of my days. Honestly, you do have troubles talking to men, you do have troubles trusting people. What I have to learn is how to live with this. I always wanted to forget and to delete from my memory. It's not happening. It wouldn't happen."

*I don't think some girls really get over it."

Finally, many women also experience extreme guilt long after they have left an abusive relationship. Whilst this guilt is mainly focused around their children, some of it is also directly towards themselves. The following examples demonstrate the profound guilt that women experience as they blame themselves for what their children had to go through during the DV:

*I was feeling so guilty that I'd stayed with him for so long and the kids went through what they went through. But that guilt is with me now, and I'm telling you, I've got a lump in my throat that I think 'how can I ever make it up to them? How can I?'"

This staff member also spoke of the guilt experienced by women post separation:

*Somed times women have a huge sense of guilt around 'how come I didn't leave sooner? How come I stayed that long?' They feel guilt and responsibility towards any impacts on the children. They feel guilty about the situation between family and friends."

**Summary**

As demonstrated in the above sections, the impacts of domestic violence are entrenched and enduring. In line with the literature presented in section one, these impacts range from short-term, external, and practical impacts, to severe, long-term, psychological impacts. Whilst women's discussions significantly focused on the impacts of the abuse, they also spoke in great depth about the strategies and techniques that they adopted in order to move forward on their journey away from DV. These will be discussed in the following section.
As discussed above, women have a number of immediate and longer term challenges they face on leaving an abusive relationship. Despite these challenges, all of the women involved in the research discussed a range of strategies and support that have helped them move forward. Staff members also spoke of the factors that played a life-building role during this journey. For example this staff member spoke of the change she saw in women she had worked with:

"One of the things I enjoy about doing this work is seeing that change over time and seeing women being able to move on with their lives, to create safe pictures for themselves and their kids… When you are working in the field you do see change… it's an incredibly dynamic process for women in terms of where they may move to with their lives."

These moving forward factors separated into two main categories: (i) self-initiated factors; and (ii) support and services provided by others. These will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Self-initiated
Self-initiated factors were those strategies and activities that women initiated themselves in order to move forward. They separated into two main categories – internal and external.

**Internal**
Women spoke of three main ways in which they were able to deal with the main challenges they faced in moving forward. These were: changing their thoughts; building their levels of resilience; and having hope for the future.

**Changing thoughts**
Women discussed a very active approach to changing their thought patterns and cognitions when moving forward on their journey. The first significant change that the women spoke of was acknowledging and believing that “It’s not my fault”. This seemed to be an active thought changing process and was reported to take a lot of time:

"My major one… is get rid of the guilt and it’s not your fault. And I’m not, you know, this bad person. That takes a lot of time."

In doing this, some women spoke of discounting the opinion of the abusive partner in order to come to this acknowledgement of being blameless. For example one woman said: “You know, now I don’t have to worry what he thinks. His opinion doesn’t matter”.

Other women spoke of the usefulness of putting things in perspective – a technique strongly adopted by cognitive behavioural psychology (Beck, 1975). This technique involves rationalising the fear that women experience and investigating the likelihood of past experiences happening again in the future. This is closely linked to understanding the negative impacts that worry, fear, and stress can have on one’s life, and attempting to change one’s thought patterns so as to prevent these negative outcomes occurring. For example, this woman discussed the learning she experienced through changing her thought patterns:

"You have to change your thinking now and realise that if it is going to happen it is going to happen and worrying about it is not going to change it and you need to live the next moment of your life as if it’s not going to happen.

Another woman used a slightly different strategy when putting things in perspective. Rather than rationalising the likelihood of domestic violence happening again in the future, she would consciously remember her past experiences and be grateful because she is now free from her abusive partner: “Thank God I’m by myself. You know… things like that. It makes me really grateful actually that I have got out”.

**Resilience**
Women also spoke about building resilience and internal strength as a key strategy in moving forward. This resilience was often referred to as a strength emanating from within the women as a result of everything they had been able to endure during the abusive relationship. Through this
resilience, women spoke of being able to set goals for their futures, stand up for themselves, and rebuild their lives.

*I’m such a different person now. I’m strong. I know what I want in life. I’m going for what I want.*

Many women also spoke about finding dignity and a sense of self that is confident and important. Some women spoke of the need to avoid associating with people who ‘bring them down’ so that they can retain this sense of dignity. For example:

*Dignity is the hardest thing to get back when you leave a relationship like that… Dignity and grace is something that stops you from talking about your ex [partner] to other people… Being very careful who you talk to is something that you do need to maintain… So many people just want to hear the drama. It gives them something to talk about. You need to stay right away from those people.*

Staff members particularly spoke about the resilience of the women that they had worked with. Themes of strength, resilience, and an often unrecognised ability to overcome adversity emerged as consistent themes throughout conversations with staff. For example:

*You just meet the most amazing women. Their resilience. I sometimes think that perpetrators pick these women because they are pretty strong and amazing and resilient. When they do leave I guess they draw on their own inner stuff. It’s hard to put a finger on it.*

*Definitely I think that one of the things that I really notice doing this job is that women are incredibly resilient and have a depth of internal resources and abilities, but often they either don’t recognise that or they don’t name it for themselves.*

**Hope**

Many women also spoke about the importance of having hope and making plans for their future. Their goals ranged from practical activities, such as going back to work and returning to education, to increased emotional functioning. This woman spoke of the importance of being able to process and overcome her emotional distress:

*The hope that I have is that I will be able to speak to you about my problems without crying. I know that it will happen.*

This woman spoke about holding onto words of hope that had been offered to her by her GP during the time of the domestic violence:

*I had a good GP. She had told me years and years ago… she said to me ‘one day it will be a faint memory’ and I hung onto those words, one day.*

Another strong theme that emerged from discussions with the women, was that separation from the abusive relationship meant that they were free to finally set goals and have hope for the future with a new sense of passion and optimism. For example:

*That whole passion for everything comes back… You suddenly realise the great things. You can actually dream. You have time to dream and not only do you have time to dream, but there’s not anything to stop you from having those dreams. Your future is without that war zone that you live in.*

Staff members spoke about the long-term benefits that are often apparent for women who are able to hold onto hope for their futures. For example:

*The women who hold hope that things can be different often have maybe different outcomes or more positive outcomes than the women where it’s harder to find that hope.*

**External**

Women and staff described the practical activities that women engaged in to help them move forward. They were focused around two main areas: Things for myself and Things for others.

**Things for myself**

The ‘things’ women engaged in for themselves seemed to separate into three main areas. The first of these were the personal activities that women engaged in, that seemed to have a positive impact on their functioning and wellbeing. These practical activities included writing and journaling (about the present and the past), walking, exercising, and reading. For example:
If I’m really stressed and stuff I’ll go for a walk. Like take me half an hour to get motivated, but once I, you know, that’s one of the best stress relievers. I’ll get up and go for a walk… and then when you do it, you’re like, oh, why didn’t I do that half an hour ago?

Journaling helps. I write a lot. I can actually now put it aside and go back and put my work hat on and do that whereas two years ago I wouldn’t have been able to do that.

Staff particularly spoke of the many practical strategies that they encourage women to participate in. They spoke about these activities being part of the healing process as well as a way of regaining some sense of normality in their lives.

Some women do physical exercise, journaling, art, yoga, all those kind of things. Very healing kinds of things… Expressing themselves in the ways they couldn’t before because they were not allowed to.

Journaling. It seemed to be very good, [a] sort of healing process. A lot of women, they go through the strategies of getting over anxieties… What is their passion? You know, what is some kind of hobby. You try and encourage that for women.

The second strategy that women and staff spoke about was that of rebuilding skills and connections. Some women discussed the journey of going back to work or returning to education and the associated benefits of building skills, problem solving and dealing with challenges, and re-connecting with people. For example:

I love my career. I really enjoy working with these people. I enjoy this atmosphere that I’m working in - it’s challenging and I feel to some extent with these people that we deal with… I feel that I make a difference in their life because I give them information and I care about them, without overstepping the boundaries.

I like my job very much. To me I don’t hate it. To me this is what keeps me alive because every single day I never get up and say ‘I hate my job’…. And this is the office where I have met all the ladies and where they’re always happy. They always have something to sort of keep you alive.

Some women, however, spoke of the difficulties they experienced in returning to the workforce. For example one woman was unable to find work because she had a criminal record as a result of charges brought by her abusive partner. Despite numerous attempts, this woman, who had been in an abusive relationship for a large number of years, could not find an opening to re-enter the workforce.

Many women also spoke of the location of work and other external activities as being important. As discussed earlier, some women had changed their identities after fleeing an abusive relationship. Due to a new location and a new identity, these women discussed being restricted in terms of where they were able to work (geographically) and what type of work they could engage in.

Staff spoke of other barriers women faced in finding work including not being far enough along the journey post separation and having to balance work and childcare. For example:

That’s a lot longer down the process, I think. Often it’s… the furthest thing [from] their mind and the furthest thing that they’re actually able to deal with…there’s all the issues then of having their children minded because there’s no-one at [home]… you know, if you’re a single parent, then who’s going to mind the kids? You have to find a job between nine and three… Availability of those jobs is just very minimal. So it’s very hard.

Women mentioned a need for distraction, or ‘taking their minds off things’ as a key factor in their decisions to return to work or education. For example:

I’ve been doing [voluntary work] for six months… Probably when I’m doing that, I’m out of here. It’s like I’m driving away from my own stuff.

Others also spoke about work and other activities as defining what many described as ‘another personality’ or a ‘a different person’. This concept of ‘distinct selves’ was discussed earlier.
as one of the long-term impacts of severe abuse, and has been supported by literature that has found a link between abuse and resulting dissociative symptoms (see Jaycox & Foa, 2000). Women who mentioned these ‘two selves’ said that their functioning self was characterised by a busy work life where they would remain distracted from memories of their past trauma. For example:

And when I go back to my community work, I’m another person because I’m so committed and so busy that I don’t have any time for myself… So because I get involved in all that, I don’t delegate work, I’m able to forget about [the past].

I want to come to work. This is what keeps me.

This theme of distraction was also mentioned by staff; however, more so when it came to the practical, personal activities that women engaged in, such as journaling, reading, and exercise, rather than work and education. For example:

I’m really big on doing that because I think they’re really good distractions and I think when you’ve got lots and lots going on in your mind, it is really great to be onto something… I do a lot of stuff about trying to find with people, is there something that you enjoy doing that just takes your energy and takes your attention?

Things for others

In addition to doing things for themselves, women also reported the importance and helpfulness of doings ‘things for others’ in moving forward. Women particularly spoke of doing things for their children as well as assisting other women who have had similar experiences.

As women started rebuilding their lives, many spoke about the important role of focusing attention and efforts on their children. Coupled with the guilt that many women experience (discussed earlier), women spoke of the satisfaction they received by devoting love and energy to their children post separation. This woman spoke of investing time and money in activities for her children:

It’s just to find things for my daughters… I involve them in leadership courses. One of my daughters was nominated for the community citizens award, so I’m always reading the local paper and finding out about things and I just want to inform other people or get involved myself. That’s how I sort of keep myself going.

Another woman said the following after discussing the many activities she does with and for her children:

It [is] just time where it [is] just me focusing on the kids because I wanted to make sure they were going to be okay.

Women also discussed the importance of helping other women – however the way in which they did this varied. Some women had experienced or wanted to take on a public advocacy role around domestic violence. This ranged from speaking at forums on domestic violence, to speaking to the media, to writing about their experiences. For example:

I would really like to be involved - whether it becomes a spokesperson - I don’t know… yes I would like to become involved. I don’t know in what capacity. I would like to write, not necessarily a book, but even if it’s just a flyer or a paper or something. I do think that my experiences and what I’ve learnt can be shared.

Other women did not want to advocate in the public domain, but still wanted to assist women by sharing their experiences with them and encouraging them to leave abusive situations. This woman spoke of an experience she had with sharing her experience with a woman currently in an abusive situation:

I explained it [to her]. “Okay now, when he does this, you watch, he’ll do that”… Sure enough, he’d do it…She actually got an AVO on him for stalking her and that. So… it made me feel really good and stuff. Because not a lot of people talk about it…
Two women had had no experience of sharing their stories with anyone. However, despite this, these women had chosen to participate in the research because they saw it as an opportunity to have their voice heard and to help other women through sharing their own stories.

**Summary**

The above themes of external self-initiated activities serve a range of purposes for women moving forward. These range from rebuilding their skills, connections, and passions with particular activities, to a self-protective distraction mechanism as a way to deal with their past traumas. The latter mechanism was often associated with the long-term impact of living in an abusive relationship for so many years and was often spoken about by women who had received no formal counselling or support throughout their journey. This will be discussed in the following sections.

**Support and services provided by others**

In addition to the internal and external self-initiated factors that influenced women’s journeys, women and staff spoke of the support provided by, or in some cases imposed by others. These appeared to fall into two main categories: formal and informal support and services.

**Formal support**

There were three main types of formal support that women received from external parties: legal and justice services; women-specific services; and general services.

**Legal and justice services**

Women reported coming into contact with a range of legal and justice services and reported mixed experiences ranging from helpful and trusting to arrogant and accusatory. The main experiences that were mentioned by women were with the police, courts and court support, and seeking compensation as victims of crime.

Women’s experiences with the police were mixed. Some women reported having police intervene in domestic violence situations who were helpful and ‘on their side’. Others however reported problems with either police not being trained in domestic violence issues, or being unsupportive of their circumstances.

One woman spoke of the police supporting her and encouraging her in her attempt to separate from her violent partner; however also being untrained and unaware of the necessary processes that must take place:

*With the police I was lucky. I had two perfect constables… they cared. But they weren’t trained. …When they came, they didn’t ask questions, they didn’t take any evidence that could show in court beyond reasonable doubt. They didn’t take any pictures… It was good in a way that she completely – she basically pushed me – kicked me out of this relationship, I was thrown out of this relationship. If it wasn’t [for] her involvement, I would still have stayed there. Maybe not, maybe I would be dead.*

Another woman spoke of the mixed attitudes of the police:

*Some of them are fantastic. Others are just sick to death with dealing with domestic violence because that’s all they ever deal with. They told me at [suburb name] that 90 per cent of their callouts are domestic violence.*

One woman had experienced a particularly negative experience with the police, whereby she was identified as the perpetrator, not the victim of an abusive relationship. She discussed how this impacted on her journey after separation:

*I was taken away in a paddy wagon and I think that’s when everything just happened. That’s when I was not able to return, not able to go 100 metres near my house. So for five and a half months I lived everywhere with a bag on wheels… Wherever I went he came wherever I went. But he was the victim, I wasn’t. So I’d probably last probably two weeks wherever I was and then I’d leave and I’d go somewhere else [but] he’d still come. And the verbal [abuse] and...*
screaming and carrying on. So I’d have to leave there to give the people who I was staying with a bit of peace of mind… Then he’d follow and then people would say why don’t you ring the police and I go ‘get real’. There was no way I was going to ring the police… There was no support.

Women also reported mixed experiences in obtaining AVOs. Some women reported taking out an AVO while some decided not to. Others discussed the ineffectiveness of AVOs on preventing the abuse, both during and after separation. Many women reported experiences where their abusive partner had violated AVOs and the resulting constant fear that they lived in despite having this form of legal protection.

Women also had mixed experiences of pressing charges against the abusive partner. Some women described positive experiences in which they pressed charges, and their partner was prosecuted. Others, however, refused to press charges due to either fear, or a belief that they would ‘get off’ the charges. One woman, who was still in contact with her ex-partner post separation, believed that the mere process of pressing charges again her abusive partner would be likely to inflame his anger and provoke more violence:

[The police] tried to push me into it. They came back the next day and they were saying, “you don’t have to put up with this. We can do something about it”. It doesn’t matter. They’re not the ones that are going through it…once you press charges that’s violating their power, their control, their everything. At least if they think they’ve got some power and some control it’s going to be less inflamed. So to lay charges…. No, couldn’t even consider it.

Women also had mixed experiences with the court system and court support services. Some women expressed being treated fairly and with dignity where often the outcome was a conviction in their favour. Others, however, spoke of not being believed by legal representatives and judges overseeing their case. For example:

I didn’t want to do it again and I finally worked out why. Because I remember the judge, like he had glasses on him and he leaned over [and] he said “oh, he’s broken your jaw”. He said “they’re very serious allegations there missy”, like he didn’t believe me… So that was the process [that] scared me off.

One woman said that court was not an option as it was too expensive:

I had no idea how expensive court was though. In two years I spent $100,000 and that was just the children. That was just getting custody of the kids. He put up some good cases. He did everything he could to obstruct it and whatever happens in those situations and I was just going by the advice that I could get and that was just keep spending more money really. It’s the only way you can do it.

Others were still fearful of the power and control of their abusive partner and believed that they would manipulate the court proceedings and be acquitted: “a great manipulator, great liar… Good manipulators can manipulate the system. They can manipulate the judge”.

One woman also discussed the fear she experienced when having to face her abusive partner in court, and the resulting actions of the judge sharing information during the court case:

The biggest challenge…[was] appearing in court and having to face him because things got pretty nasty and so forth at the end. I was a bit fearful of him. I tried to get an AVO against him…I was worried about him finding me… because the judge allowed him to know [personal information]… So I was always worried about him taking the kids.

On the other hand, the majority of women reported having positive experiences with the court support services. For example:

They want to be there… They want to make a difference. They make a difference in so many people’s lives. They are the sort of people that should be given the Australian medal of honour for what they do.

Very good. Very good. When you’re sitting waiting to go into court, brilliant… They’ve helped me in many ways. They’ve helped me with counselling.
They organised private counselling. They organised counselling for my boys...I rang her up sometimes... she just said to me then come and see me, I’ll be here till six. I’ve gone up and seen her sometimes at four o’clock and I’m still there at seven with her.

Some women reported applying for compensation as victims of crime and described the impact of this financial support in moving forward. Most women, however, did not get to a stage where they had followed through with court proceedings and were eligible for victims of crime compensation.

Other than discussions around the Family Law Act Amendment (discussed earlier), staff did not discuss other legal and justice systems in depth.

Abuse specific services

Women and staff described their experiences of a range of formal services that are available to women after they have left an abusive relationship. The main types of services mentioned were: counselling, support groups, refuges, and services for women and their children. It is important to note that only five of the eight women had received some form of formal service at some stage after they had separated from domestic violence. Three of these women did not seek any support – the impacts of this will be discussed later. The sections that follow discuss themes emerging from the discussions held with the staff and the five women who had accessed services.

The women who had accessed formal counselling from psychologists, social workers, and counsellors reported mixed experiences. Many of the positive experiences in counselling stemmed from feeling comfortable and connecting with the therapist. For example:

*It was really good. We’d sometimes sit here for two hours talking, but I felt you’ve got to be comfortable with the person that you’re doing it with, or else it’s pointless.*

*She knew me and she was very understanding of everything. I don’t know, I think she was just a lot like me where she could understand people, she liked people, she liked talking, you could tell*

She loved her job. And I felt comfortable with that because that’s how I used to work with people as well. I think if you don’t like what you’re doing you shouldn’t do it. It just made it more comfortable for me.

Another theme that emerged from women’s positive experiences in counselling was the sharing of knowledge from the counsellor and their ability to put things in perspective. This was particularly the case when counsellors encouraged women and gave them strategies necessary for moving forward. For example:

*She was practical. She was the most practical person I’ve ever come across in my life. Because your head’s very messed up you tend to be your own worst enemy. You just invent stuff and things are much larger than what they are in reality because you’re just in fear. She was able to break that down for me and gave me a few exercises that were, if I continued to think and behave the way that I was, where my life would end up and it was not a very good place. When I realised where I was heading I knew I had to do something about it.*

*[The most useful things were] the knowledge and understanding, the constant discussions. Sometimes you need to talk, you do need the reassurance... [she] was the first [person] that told me about the cycle of domestic violence. About the signs, what he’s done to you. And when you sit in conversation and when they talk you think, ‘oh my God, did they know my husband’? So basically the knowledge then of what is happening, helped a little bit.*

Other women mentioned the benefits of being able to open up to their counsellor about anything and to not have to filter any of their thoughts or opinions in front of the counsellor. For example:

*I could only talk to some people about certain things. Like my friends, I couldn’t sort of – there wasn’t everything I could talk about, it was only some things because I felt embarrassed and all these little things. So I felt with [my counsellor] I could talk about everything... She helped me a lot just to keep on top of myself and keep myself together through it all.*
Staff also discussed the aspects of counselling that they believed made it effective. Many staff reported adopting a 'strengths-based focus' to therapy that involved developing women's strengths as opposed to constantly focussing on their past trauma. For example:

The other thing is with the strengths-based [therapy], we are looking for positives that we can highlight for women. But I think the other thing is that it's genuine as well. So I'm not sitting there thinking 'oh there's a strength, there's a strength'... It's being able to try and get things so that people can feel a bit okay about themselves rather than I've gone to see someone because I'm a failure or I have some disorder.

On the other hand, some women reported having negative experiences with counsellors. The main reasons for these negative experiences were: not forming a strong connection with the counsellor; feeling as though the counsellor was patronising them; and having the counsellor minimise the domestic violence situation. This woman spoke of a lack of connection:

I've been to many psychologists, many psychiatrists... there's no connection. I went to many and I think a few of them were just too easy to write out medication.

One woman believed that counsellors were patronising and that if they themselves hadn't been through similar experiences, then they could not properly relate to her experiences:

I truly believe that for a person to understand how another person is feeling, you can go to uni and you can do all your degrees that you like, but unless you've lived the experience you can't truly understand how someone's feeling. I found that he was patronizing me and he's sitting there trying to tell me that he understands how I feel. But how would he understand how I'm feeling when I'm the idiot that stayed with [my partner] for so long. I'm the idiot that caused unnecessary grief and anxiety and violence in my children's lives. How can he understand how I'm feeling and how can he know how to lead me forward to sort my life out... [You have] to have empathy for patients, but this particular psychiatrist wouldn't have had a clue, absolutely no clue at all.

Women also had experiences with counsellors who minimised their experience of domestic violence — both during the abusive relationship and post separation.

Groups
The next most frequently mentioned formal service was support groups. Women's experiences of the support groups ranged from attending and having good experiences, to not attending as they were not interested and/or comfortable with participating. One woman discussed her initial hesitancy to be involved in a support group but also described the benefits she received after attending:

No. It was all about me. Seriously, it was. I didn't want to know about their stories. I was having trouble with my own. It was all about me. I did go to a group much later on and wished that I had have gone earlier because not only do you realise what you can get from other women but you also realise what support you can be to other women and that's a good part of it too, sort of learning that you can help others. It takes the focus off 'it's all about me'.

Some women described the role that support groups played in normalising their situation through hearing of other women experiencing similar challenges:

It's really a very good thing, that you see that it's not just a theory provided from the social workers. You can see every time when [the other women] talk about their husbands and their relationships and their boyfriends, you can see exactly the same thing that happened to you.

Hearing other people's stories, geeze that helps, and then you realise some of them are very similar... Some of them are worse than yours. But that's also an eye-opener - that it's not you... It happens to anyone, not just specifically you. It happens to all shapes and sizes.

Some staff members also spoke about this normalising process and the value of women sharing their stories with each other. For example:
It’s that kind of philosophy that’s very pronounced in the support groups. It’s more about providing them with information. It’s not a therapy group. We provide information, then we might open it up for discussion. One woman will say something and another will go ‘oh yeah that happened to me too’. Then somebody else will pipe up. Sometimes they pry and other women will support them, and they’ve never had that before. That support, understanding, validation. The benefits from the group are untold.

Some staff also mentioned the important role of support groups in creating connections, networks, and friendships amongst women. For example:

When we interview for the groups the main reason anyone wants to come is they want to meet with other people who have experienced the same thing and get that connection.

Women however did not directly mention a desire for connection or friendships from groups. Some of the women who had not received any formal services emphasised the need to stay hidden, anonymous, and private, and did not express any desire to share their experiences with other women. Women and staff also spoke about the practical difficulties in running support groups and other inflexible formal services. This staff member said:

Support groups I don’t think are the answer. We try and run them and it sounds all wonderful and people get very excited, [A woman] will say “oh is there a referral for the group?” I’ll ring up the person and she’ll go “I don’t need help, my children need help”… I’ll go “yes, we can do it on Wednesday morning, we’ll do it between 10 and 12”. “Well I don’t have child care on that day or that’s the morning I go to work or you know something is happening”. It is really hard to get people together on the same day. I don’t know if I’d like to go to a group.

Other services

Some women also had experiences with refuges, immediately after they had left an abusive relationship. As with the other formal services, experience with refuges were mixed. Some women reported having their immediate practical needs met and experienced support and kindness from the workers at the refuge. Other women reported receiving no emotional support, but that they were referred to other services that could provide this longer term support. One woman reported a negative experience with a refuge where she had experienced continued neglect and unkindness from the workers, after she had escaped from her abusive relationship.

Many women also discussed accessing formal services via their children. These women reported coming into contact with service entry points (we return to this later and term this a ‘soft entry point’) for themselves as a result of seeking services (e.g., counselling) for their children. For example:

The [children] went for counselling at a place, part of the Royal Children’s Hospital. Then through the courts, the person that was assigned to help the [children], she helped me.

Women who had received services via their children often said that had they not sought help for their children, then they themselves would not have received any support. Staff members offering counselling and support groups also spoke about broadening their services to ensure that they catered for the needs of both women and their children. One staff member emphasised the importance of rebuilding the relationship between the woman and her children:

The work we’re doing with the children’s services is about re-establishing that relationship between the mums and kids, and getting them to connect again. It’s just wonderful work. I’ve had a couple of clients that have participated in the group, and their whole face will light up. They did this with their kid. You can see the value to the women of somebody giving them some help around that stuff.

Some women also spoke of receiving more general types of services when moving forward. These ranged from medical services (including general practitioners, hospitals, speech and physiotherapy services) to other forms of support particularly from not-for-profit organisations. One woman had received financial assistance from
The Benevolent Society’s financial inclusion program and another woman had received food and housing assistance from Mission Australia.

Women reported mixed experiences with their general practitioners. Some women had been seeing the same GP throughout their abusive relationship and during their journey away from domestic violence; other women, when starting their new life, sought medical assistance from a new GP who had no knowledge of their experiences of abuse. One woman spoke of the need for GPs to be educated about the realities of domestic violence:

*GPs don’t understand. It needs to be ingrained in society for your local GP that if you go, they need to put you onto counselling, and not prescribe anything, but to say you need to go and do this… It’s got to change, starting from that point.*

Staff members often spoke of the principles that must be adopted by any professional representative that is providing a service to women who have separated from an abusive relationship. For example, this staff member said:

*For a woman to reveal herself, she needs to be believed, respected, given the opportunities she had before. And she needs to not be seen as a victim for the rest of her life. She needs to [have] that [to] heal herself.*

**Informal Services**

In addition to the many formal services received by women, informal support also emerged as a vital part of moving forward. Their discussion about informal support focused on support from family and support from friends and the community.

**Family**

Some of the women interviewed reported having supportive families who they could turn to in times of need. These women often described this support as being something they could not live without and that they never would have managed to either leave the abusive situation, or get to where they are without them:

*My family, my Mum and Dad especially, they were there through all of it and they helped me with every aspect of it all… If it wasn’t for [my family] I probably wouldn’t be where I am now.*

One woman spoke of a small but significant piece of advice that was given to her by her father when she was still in an abusive relationship:

*The other thing that happened, that was really important - and this is my dad who gave me this piece of advice - he said to me “don’t put up with his swearing. When he gets on the phone, the first swear [word] he says to you, you say to him ‘you’re swearing, I’m going to hang up the phone’ and you hang up the phone”. It wasn’t so much empowering but it meant that I didn’t have to listen to what was being said… it was just something that, it set up a boundary for me, so that’s a really important piece [of advice].*

Children also played a supportive role in women’s journey away from violence. This support ranged from intensive, hands-on, practical support to emotional support and general comfort. One woman spoke of the critical role her children played in helping her through a period of severe depression:

*She used to get me out of bed and put me in the shower and just, it was a mess, it was just a mess… and so with the support of my current husband [new partner] and my kids, with help, I would get up. I would get over it and get on with it.*

Other women spoke of their children being their only reason for existing and for trying to move forward in their journeys:

*The only thing that kept me functioning, and not even functioning, was my daughter…Honestly, if it wasn’t for her, I would be gone by now… The thing that kept me strong, [to] just keep fighting, was my daughter, she has to eat. She has to go to school, she has to be picked up from school. She needs books, she needs pencils. To keep me alive… [How have you done that?]… Just focussing on the kids’ needs. Nowadays it is becoming hard… because I think my purpose is done.*
Staff members also commented on the source of strength that children often are for their mothers both during and after an abusive relationship. For example:

*The other answer to [how women survive] is often the kids. It's often around 'I didn't want my children to grow up with this', 'I didn't want them to see it', 'I didn't want my little boy to think that it was okay to hurt women', 'I didn't want the girl to think it was okay to be hurt'... and despite the fact that violence gets in the way, women are able to maintain their relationships with their children, [which] is usually incredibly important in helping them to survive.*

**Friends and community**

The women's experiences of support from friends and the broader community were varied. Of the women who had supportive friends whom they had entrusted with information about their abusive relationship, the friendship played a very positive role in their journey away from violence. For example:

*I have to say the only reason I left was because a girlfriend wouldn’t cancel a removalist... Obviously, it is friends that you depend on and friendships that you have, that's definitely the main support that you have.*

*I had a lot of friends and they were very supportive. They knew what he was like and they obviously didn't want to see me stay there once I made that choice to leave. So they did everything they could because they also had families and things like that as well and worked. So they did everything that they could to help me out... [They] helped me a lot with emotional support. We always talked things over and they helped my with [the] practical.*

Some women, however, reported having no support in the form of friends, and some reported not having a single person to turn to:

*I didn’t have that... Nobody... No help at all... When I came from [overseas] I left my friends. I left the friends and it took a long time to have very few friends here... It got a little bit hard. I didn’t even think 'nobody is helping me'. I thought that was the way the world is. I just wanted help from my children.*

Opinions about the broader community were also mixed. Some women had relied on support from neighbours and other individuals and groups in the community, for example, religious groups, work colleagues, and peers through education.

*My work were great. I was with [employee] at the time and they gave me as much leave as they could possibly give me.*

*It was actually friendships that I developed in the neighbourhood very quickly... So shortly after moving in I think I must have told neighbours and became quite good friends with them. They played a fairly good role... They act as a safeguard because the bigger the presence there is of people around, the less likely there is of something to happen.*

**Summary**

There are a number of support options provided to women who have left an abusive relationship, both in the form of formal services (legal/justice and women-specific) and informal support (family, friends, and community).

This section has presented the findings from interviews with women and staff around the main factors contributing to women moving forward. Women and staff both emphasised the important roles of self-initiated factors (including internal and external factors) and services and support provided by others (including formal services and informal support).

Whilst there was a lot of discussion around the factors that assist women in this journey, some women spoke about their more negative experiences of those factors presented above. These are explored in more detail in the following section on barriers to moving forward.
Barriers to moving forward

For every woman that asks for help, there are probably 10 woman who haven’t. (staff member)

Women and staff identified a number of barriers to moving forward. These barriers mainly focused around the women not seeking help, having negative experiences with services and/or informal support networks, and the on-going, long-term impact of the abuse (discussed in Section 3). These barriers will be explored in this section.

Not seeking help

Some of the women interviewed either did not, or were reluctant to, seek help during their journey. In fact, for two of the women, participating in the research was the first opportunity they had taken to share their story. For another woman, it was her first experience of sharing her story with someone ‘equivalent, or similar to, a formal service’. Some underlying reasons for women’s hesitation to share their stories with either formal services or informal support networks are explored in the following sections.

Flexible, Anonymous, Free (F.A.F.)

Reasons given by women for not seeking formal help separated into two main categories: F.A.F – Flexible, Anonymous, Free; and the attitudes and resulting feelings of shame and stigma of services and/or individuals in the community.

Often the reasons women gave for not seeking formal services were relatively simple; and centred around the need for services to be flexible, anonymous, and free. Many women reported their struggles with attending counselling sessions or support groups due to the restrictive operating hours of the formal services. In fact, the researchers were unable to find any formal services (other than refuges, which do not provide longer-term counselling and support and the Domestic Violence Hotline) that offered support outside of business hours. For example:

Because of the work commitments I was not able to... because the work will not allow me to have that much time off... because of the work that I do, I have to keep it to myself. If I had another job maybe I could have accessed the services and the people that were available more easily... [but] I couldn’t get permission. Like this week, there’s four staff members away, so due to office requirements they couldn’t allow me to have that time off.

This woman discussed the impact that inflexible services can have on women's initial decision to leave an abusive relationship:

Don’t say “oh well, we’re busy at the moment, but next Tuesday at three o’clock there’s an appointment available”. Forget it! Because by that time she’s probably lost her courage or, if he’s found out she’s called, she’s not only lost her courage and been beaten up in the process... So it’s having services available now, not next Tuesday at three o’clock. You know it takes a lot of courage for beaten, battered women to finally ask for help... it takes a lot of courage and you don’t want to be told “come next Tuesday at three o’clock”.

As discussed in Section three, most women spoke about the financial hardships that they endured immediately after, and for some a long time after, leaving the abusive relationship. These financial burdens made accessing some services extremely difficult, and women mentioned that they were not priorities compared to providing for their children and affording somewhere to live. For example:

For me, I had no money and I had to support the kids. I was doing everything on my own so I really had to work and not spend money. I lived on $60 a week for groceries for a year and a half so that does not go very far when you’re feeding two teenage boys and their friends.
This woman discussed the stress that financial hardships created, particularly alongside being in a psychological state which she referred to as ‘mental’:

It was really tight. When I say it’s really tight, for three years I haven’t bought a coffee outside... When I moved [to my new place], if it wasn’t for [my refuge] to give me a voucher for food, I wouldn’t be able to have electricity because I had to put a bond, a hundred and something dollars, which I didn’t have at that time to get my electricity connected... You don’t have a job, you don’t have a life, you don’t have money. You struggle with the daily expenses... I’ve been working all my life. All my life I’ve had my own money, and suddenly you can’t work, you don’t have money, and you have to look after your child – and you’re mental.

This woman emphasised the need for services to be free due to the financial hardships women experience immediately after leaving and abusive relationship:

It’s not going to cost you anything. You’ve got no money. It’s got to be a service that’s free. You can’t do it otherwise.

Some women also spoke about the need to stay anonymous amongst friends, colleagues, and the broader community, and not wanting to be known as having been in an abusive relationship. Much of this desire for anonymity was linked to the guilt and shame that women feel, because as stated by this woman, they “should have got out earlier”. This anonymity is particularly important for building a trusting relationship between service providers and women.

This woman emphasised the need to remain anonymous in light of retaining respect from her work colleagues who do not know about her history of domestic violence:

Unfortunately, because of the work I do, I have to keep it to myself... I have worked at different offices, so you see locals when you do your shopping. So you have to maintain your respect, so when they come here [to my place of employment], they will not scream at you and say “but you did that”, like they tell my other staff, my co-workers.

She was particularly concerned about people from her community being able to identify her if she accessed a formal service for DV in the local area and wanted to avoid being identified by both her colleagues and the general public. Thus, she was not open to accessing these services. She was, however, happy to participate in the research being conducted by The Benevolent Society, as the research was conducted during flexible hours, in a place that was private and convenient for her, and where her anonymity was guaranteed. It is important, therefore for formal services to offer a guarantee that women who have suffered an abusive history remain anonymous when accessing a service. This has implications for the principles by which a service operates as well as the actual physicality of the service, e.g., where in the community it is located, how it is advertised etc.

Attitudes and resulting shame

Another theme that emerged in discussions with both women and staff were the barriers to moving forward created by the attitudes of people and groups in the community. These attitudes separated into two main categories: not being believed, and casting blame.

Not being believed

A number of women reported experiences of not being believed. Some of these were where another party had stated that they did not believe them. On other occasions, it was women’s perceptions that they were not being believed and these perceptions were inherently linked to feelings of guilt and self-blame about the abuse. Lack of belief and understanding came from professional service providers (and other related professionals) as well as family and friends, and people in the general community. For example:

My brother didn’t believe me [about] what had happened because he thought [my ex-partner] was a nice person.
Believe people when they’re telling you that, you know, I just told you that he wouldn’t buy tampons, I used to have to use toilet paper. Believe me because that’s true. Believe people when they tell you things. He didn’t, the doctor that I saw, I don’t think he took me seriously…[the abusive partner] gets away with everything. They have spent years getting away with things. That’s their focus on life is to get away with it and they will get away with it.

This woman held a belief herself that she would not be believed by other people:

I never told anyone about that you know… because I didn’t feel there was support out there. Would someone believe me? Would they say “well you burnt his meal, it’s your fault?” You know what I mean? All those things go through your mind when you’re in a situation like that.

Staff also reported cases whereby women’s stories were not believed and the importance of their voice being heard. For example:

Not believing women. That’s a huge one. As one woman told me, it’s so important for her voice to be heard. Or to be believed. Sometimes the stories are so horrific you think ‘my God, this is terrible’. But it’s so important to validate women.

Attitudes

The majority of women also spoke of experiences where they had received a negative, blameful attitude from another person. Most of these attitudes stem from the general sentiment of women that they should have left the abusive relationship earlier. For example:

The community has no clue and people just say there’s no point in talking to anyone about it out in the community unless you’re associated with it because [they simply say] why didn’t you leave? It makes perfect sense to them. It does from where they’re standing, they’re logical. They’ve not been in it. Why didn’t you leave? You can’t start to explain yourself because they’re never going to get it… They’re not going to get that domestic violence happens bit by bit. It’s a grinding down. You don’t walk into an abusive relationship because you would walk straight back out again. It happens over a period of time and people just don’t get it.

Mental illness is now acceptable, mostly. Domestic violence isn’t.

Another woman spoke of the shame attached to community attitudes, because they jump to the conclusion that the abuse must have been deserved and as a result of something the woman did:

I started making friends in the community, but then again, you have this shame that you don’t like people to know what happened to you…[There is shame attached] because the woman is not good enough and that’s why her husband [abused her] – it’s his reaction.

The evidence and impacts of this shame appeared to be amplified for women from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. This theme will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Staff members also discussed the shame that women experience as a result of negative community attitudes. One staff member suggested that most often these attitudes stem from a lack of knowledge amongst friends and family as well as in the broader community and the fact that the abusive partner easily disguises the abuse in the relationship:

He looked fine. Nobody would have known that five nights a week he probably got really pissed on red wine and he would stand there turning the lights on and off and screaming verbal abuse and threatening to kill her and just behaving in a dreadful way. Then he wouldn’t acknowledge that that happened. He’d say, ‘oh no, you’ve made that up’.

This theme, that the abusive partner disguises the abuse, is also linked to a second theme emerging from the staff data around women minimising the domestic violence situation. Staff mentioned that many of the women they work
with purposefully minimise or talk down their experiences of domestic violence – both whilst they are in the abusive relationship, and post-separation. This is also inherently linked to the attitudes that the broader community hold, as they are often ill-informed and do not gain a clear perspective about what happens in abusive relationships:

I think for a period of time it’s that you don’t want to think that your situation is that bad either. Like minimising what’s going on. Then if you get help I mean you’re having to take the next step… Because you spend a lot of time keeping it in and not being able to acknowledge it… I’m not suggesting that people should walk down the street and say “hi, my name is Libby, I’m a DV survivor”. It’s more that when you leave someone you say “oh no, we just weren’t getting on” as opposed to “he was threatening my life and that’s why I don’t want you to say where I’m living”.

Prior experiences

Another barrier that women faced in moving forward was prior negative experiences with service providers. Of the women who had accessed formal services, some reported having had negative experiences with counsellors, psychologists, and other health providers, and the impact that this had on their likelihood of returning to them in the future.

As discussed earlier, some woman reported feeling patronised by someone trying to offer them help who hadn’t directly experienced what they had gone through.

Staff also reported prior bad experiences as a main reason why women do not seek future help. This staff member linked negative past experiences with the theme of shame and blame discussed earlier:

There’s a whole lot of reasons including previous poor experiences… You know, if you’ve tried to seek help and it hasn’t worked, so you’re blamed or judged or you’ve been worried that your kids are going to be taken away from you… you don’t go [back] again.

Another theme around service delivery that emerged from staff discussions was the negative impact of disconnected services. Staff suggested that services for domestic violence but be linked up with health and legal services to ensure that women do not have to continually repeat their story and be re-traumatised in the process. For example:

The stuff around passing women from service to service, and the woman having to dredge up and go through a story over and over again.

At the moment, there’s a sort of piecemeal approach to service delivery for women. So the refuge might house you, and they might tell you how to fill out the Centrelink form, but they won’t give you an awful lot of emotional support, so you need to go and see a counsellor, and if you’re depressed we’ll send you off to somebody at mental health, and if you’ve got a drug and alcohol issue we’ll send you off there and if your kids need some help as well so we’ll get Child Protection Services for the kids or some counselling in for the kids… and so it re-traumatises women, but it also kind of negates their story in a sense because they’ve told it so many times that they’ve got it down to a little nutshell that gets them what they need out of a service provider, but it doesn’t actually honour their own history or their own story.

Whilst this theme was strong for the staff, it did not emerge in women’s conversations.
As discussed in Section 3, the long term impacts of domestic violence also create a number of barriers to women moving forward - impacts such as long-term mental health problems, including depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, splitting of the self, and suicide ideations. Whilst many of these mental health issues can be dealt with in therapy, they are often a barrier to women seeking help in the first place.

Some women also believed that seeking help for mental and physical health issues was a waste of time because they thought that things would not be able to change. For example:

*I can’t remember the last time I slept eight hours. I’ll sleep three hours, get up for a couple of hours, and then go back to bed. Some nights I don’t go back to bed, I stay up and come in to work, you know, which obviously is not good for my health either. So that’s just it. This is how it will be for the rest of my life. I don’t imagine it being any different and I’m just learning to accept the facts, that’s how it is… no amount of counselling will ever stop me feeling this way.*

Staff members also spoke about the long-term nature of the impact of domestic violence on the women they work with. Many staff discussed women relapsing or coming into contact with certain factors that trigger memories of the abuse and make them feel as though the abuse occurred recently. For example:

*I think they can survive and cope up to a point. Then I think – something – a little prod or something from heaven knows where – can get them, make them get right back there in terms of how they feel. We had a woman. She was about five years away from being in the refuge. She was amazed at how bringing it up again and talking about the issues and dealing with it, that it was as fresh as yesterday.*

Despite the many strategies employed by women and taught by staff members, there are also a number of barriers that women face when rebuilding their lives. Whilst women from all walks of life experience these barriers to moving forward, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds reported a unique set of challenges. These will be explored in the following section.
Women from CALD backgrounds

Whilst women from all backgrounds experience the significant negative impacts of domestic violence, women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds appear to face a unique set of challenges in moving forward. Whilst is it impossible, and unnecessary, to state whether their journey is harder than women from non-CALD backgrounds, their culture provides a different ‘context’ and different challenges.

Two of the three women from CALD backgrounds had not received any formal support since leaving their abusive relationship. All three women had physically removed themselves from the violence (two fled their countries and one relocated within Australia – a foreign country to her) and all three kept their abusive histories private. They all had very limited social support and none of the women had confided their story to any of the friends or work colleagues that they did have. They remained anonymous in their work environments and developed strategies to ensure that people in their lives were unaware of their abusive pasts.

All women had children who had experienced and/or witnessed the abuse and the women had therefore confided to some extent in their children. However, they did not share their stories with anyone outside of their immediate family. This inability to confide in anyone was consistent across the three women’s journeys.

I do have friends with work and stuff… but they don’t know what [happened to me]. No. Some people just don’t understand how you can’t get away from things. But anyway, I didn’t even think ‘nobody is helping me’. I thought that was the way the world is. I just wanted help from my children.

When I divorced, I lost touch with everything because I was not – he was the one who contacted everybody and write to everybody. I was not allowed to contact anybody. I lost contact with everybody.

No [I haven’t spoken to anyone since I left]. I just made my decision and just started a new.

This woman discussed her experiences with engaging in voluntary work and listening to the experiences of other women who had been in an abusive relationship. She still, however, felt unable to share her story with others:

They were ladies that were open and [they] were disclosing their personal issues during the time that they gather for two hours every week… but I never went through that. I heard and it just gave me that satisfaction that we are able to speak about the problem… To me that was enough [to hear the stories of other women] because they were expressing themselves, so that helped me.

Another woman experienced ongoing abuse from her actual family, who ostracised her because of the decisions she had made to escape the abuse (and the violation of their religion, to be discussed later):

My sister effectively cut me off from all the people, ethnic people, who are my cousins here…She kept on telling me “I told everybody, nobody wants to see you.”

The women from CALD backgrounds also discussed the added challenges of arriving in a foreign country. For two women, this was a result of fleeing the violence; one woman, however, was still experiencing the abuse when she arrived in Australia.

I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know even how to catch the train…. I was scared to go outside. I had fear for everything. I had no idea how the country is organised. I had no idea about [anything].

I wasn’t sleeping for days. I was afraid to go in bed. Like the first time when I saw a spider, I thought my husband put it in the house to kill me, because I haven’t even got knowledge of spiders in Australia.

As discussed in Section 5, the majority of women interviewed experienced some sense of shame and/or guilt as a result of being in an abusive relationship. The cultural context of some women, however, added a new dimension by which this shame was experienced.
One woman discussed the shame that was imposed on her by her family and community, to the point where her mother died having kept her daughter’s secret about the abuse she had experienced:

[There is shame attached] because the woman is not good enough and that’s why her husband – it’s his reaction… I’ll just tell you one thing. My Mum passed away without letting my family know what happened [to me]… actually kept a secret for four years.

This increased sense of shame was also discussed by staff members who had worked with women from CALD backgrounds:

I think women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, there’s a whole host of other issues including language barriers, feeling that they’re going to be misunderstood. Feeling that it’s going to be dismissed as “oh well, that’s part of your culture”… [that] shouldn’t be happening, but we know some people hold views that align with that… Feeling that they’ll lose the support of their family because they are [from] different cultures where divorce is seen as something that’s really shameful.

A very significant theme that emerged for the women from CALD backgrounds was the role played by religion and in particular the ‘rules’ imposed upon women by her and her family’s religious beliefs. Discussion was particularly focused around the unaccepted and sinful act of divorce, even when it meant women escaping the most unimaginable acts of violence and abuse. One woman discussed her family’s reaction to her divorce from her abusive husband (the result of an arranged marriage):

Because I am a [religious person]. It was a pretty untraditional thing to do. I don’t know about kids that are brought up here at this moment, but my generation, we are a little bit traditional. It is hard to find the people who are divorced. [A relative] told me he would have seen me rather die at the hand of my husband rather than divorce.

Usually you stay with the man… [my relatives] told me I am nothing. I am sort of a bad thing that happened to her. Like a shame on her that I got divorced because it is a very traditional attitude that I brought shame to her and her children and family. So they wanted nothing to do with me.

This same woman had these opinions imposed on her from not only her siblings, but also her children, who had both witnessed and experienced the violence:

Nobody divorced you when you are [of my religion]. The culture says that you stay after you die and you are supposed to marry. You are a virgin and then that is the only man you have got. You will listen to him and you do whatever he tells you to do… [My daughter] will not accept the fact that I had to [leave my husband]. Even though she is a [professional], she cannot understand why I did that. That is what frustrates me.

Staff discussed the resulting impact of these opinions of family on the women who are trying to rebuild their lives:

We see a lot of women from lot’s of different ethnic backgrounds whose family aren’t supportive and are saying “you’re married to him and you’ve got to make this marriage work.” It’s an awful sense of betrayal.

Thus, the cultural contexts of women from CALD backgrounds, give women added challenges to overcome when trying to rebuild their lives after leaving an abusive relationship. The main challenges facing women from CALD backgrounds (but not limited to CALD women) are: limited support networks and reluctance to confide in others; continued abuse from the immediate family; cultural and/or religious shame; and religious beliefs about divorce.
Implications for policy and practice

[Domestic violence] has a great impact on [a woman’s] level of participation within society... the society doesn’t grow. Society misses out. In Australia, statistically one in three women will be either exposed to domestic violence and/or sexual assault in their lives. So we are talking about the potential of a third of the women in Australia not participating in society, not having that opportunity to take on roles that might change policy and procedure and social change.

As highlighted in the above quote, domestic violence and its devastating impact is a serious blight on Australian society. Not only are women prevented from participating to their maximum potential during an abusive relationship, but the long-term impact of domestic violence prevents them from fully participating for many years after they have left the abusive relationship.

The findings of the current research have highlighted a number of implications for both policy and practice aiming to address domestic violence and related issues in Australia. In the context of this research, which focused predominantly on women’s journeys after they have left the abusive relationship, the main implications are around (but not limited to): service availability (F.A.F) and societal attitudes.

Service availability

As discussed in Section 5, one barrier to women rebuilding their lives that was highlighted by both women and staff was the lack of services that are F.A.F – Flexible, Anonymous, and Free. There is a paucity of services that are available to women who have separated from domestic violence that are affordable (and more desirable, services that are free) and anonymous. There is an even smaller number of services that offer domestic violence support to women out of business hours and in a flexible location.

It is the three F.A.F criteria that women emphasise are necessary for services to be of any use to them in helping them rebuild their lives. Women who have re-entered or remained in the workforce require services to be available during a time that they can receive them. Services are often location-specific and many women cannot access these services due to where they are often forced to reside (after escaping the violence). The majority of services also operate during restrictive business hours and cannot be accessed by women (especially single mothers) who cannot take time off work, and who often keep their domestic violence history a secret from their employer and colleagues.

Women must also be able to access services where they can remain anonymous and there is no risk of their identity being uncovered, to either their abusive ex-partner, or others to whom they have chosen not to disclose the abusive relationship.

Finally, due to the financial hardships that many women endure, services must be affordable, and ideally free. All women who participated in the research had to surrender their home, the majority of their personal belongings, and financial savings when they left the abusive relationship. Accessing formal services to assist women post separation is often low on the priority list when compared to providing basic food and shelter for themselves and their children.

In addition to the F.A.F criteria, there is a pressing need for more services to be offered across the whole spectrum of phases that women go through in moving forward. Services must be offered to women whilst they are still in abusive relationships, when they are at the crisis point of exiting the relationship, and throughout their journey moving forward. Even though there are currently more services being offered to women at the crisis point of separation, these services are still underfunded and under resourced. Services must not cease immediately after the woman has separated from the relationship. As clearly demonstrated in this research, the impacts of domestic violence are

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5 The ABS estimates that approximately one in five women have experienced sexual violence and one in three women have experienced physical violence at some stage in their lives since the age of 15 (ABS, 2005)
enduring and severe. Services must be available for women for the longer term and service providers must acknowledge the nature of the impact on women – from a number of perspectives (e.g., mental health, physical health, ability to participate in work and education etc).

Further, service provision must take a more holistic view of women’s experiences and endeavour to integrate a broader range of services accessed by women experiencing domestic violence. Women often mentioned having accessed domestic violence services via their children and other avenues, such as GPs and non-government agencies. These “soft entry points” must be recognised as vital passages by which women can engage with domestic violence specific support services. Soft entry points must be created in a range of services where service providers are educated about issues relating to domestic violence and have connections with appropriate services to which they can refer women and their children.

This research has also demonstrated that a different approach needs to be developed that is sensitive to the unique experiences of women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This approach must consider the family, cultural, and religious contexts in which women from CALD backgrounds have experienced domestic violence and the often heightened experiences of shame and resulting lack of support these women can rely on after they leave an abusive relationship. It is vital for more research to be carried out with women from CALD backgrounds to identify effective elements of service delivery and therapeutic techniques to help them in the journeys moving forward.

**Societal attitudes**

In addition to changes to policies and practices around service provision, the current research has highlighted a need for changes to be promoted in the attitudes of society to domestic violence.

Women reported experiencing attitudes of shame and blame from a range of people in their lives, including personal family and friends; and professional counsellors and psychologists, GPs and other health professionals, and other formal service providers.

Staff also discussed their experiences of negative attitudes from the community. They emphasised that the ‘hidden nature of domestic violence’ contributed to a number of myths and lack of understanding about what many women in society endure. The focus of these attitude changes needs to be on not only “saying no to violence against women”, but also on what is needed for the long-term recovery of women who have separated from an abusive relationship.

Societal attitude change must also play a preventative purpose. Staff also discussed the need for the broader community to be educated about domestic violence in order to prevent it from happening in future generations:

On the TV, we see these things about “say no to violence to women”. It’s women being hit, or yelled at, or threatened in some way physically. We need to see those same pictures of women who have been worn down by years of control… It’s a gender issue. It’s a political issue. It’s an issue for governments to take onboard and make visible… Start talking about it, not just the physical and not just violence. But naming all of [the abuse] and showing pictures of what the long-term effect is.

People in the community need to be educated about the reality of domestic violence in Australia, the long-term impacts of this abuse on women, children, and the broader community, as well as on what a respectful relationship is and looks like between two people.
A final word from each of the women...

I say in one of my poems... “release the ties, you future’s there, let it unfold”... you just need to be pointed in the right direction.

I have learnt to realise that what is happening to me happens to other people and it's part of life that I now accept. And I now accept that I should not be ashamed to sort of understand that this is what has happened to me... It does get better, but then you have your little days.

Don’t go back, go forward. And you can better yourself. You can be someone special and you can like yourself eventually.

I feel strong about what I talk about now because I feel better... Yes there were times in the past where I started talking about it [and] used to get really upset, but I think as a person I’ve accepted how it is now. And I think when I look back, I think I climbed Mt Everest.

[I have done some healing] probably because all I wanted was just peace. Peace and coming home and nobody hitting, or nobody acting up, nobody throwing things. I guess you stride through that.

It gets better. You know? Just keep going and it will get better.

It does get better. They need to know, yes, it does get better. But you have to go through a lot of shit. My Dad used to say you get to the end of the rainbow, and you realise it's a bucket of shit. And sometimes you’ve got one foot in it and sometimes you’ve got two. I was up to my neck... [but] what you’re going through now doesn’t last forever.

Now when I look back on then, I didn’t know anything. Now I have the knowledge, I have understanding... So now, it’s okay.... you can feel the warmth, you can feel the support, you can feel that they are caring about you. They are helping as much as they can.


Lewis, R. M. (2006). Rebuilding lives after intimate partner violence in Aotearoa: Women’s experiences ten or more years after leaving. AUT University.


