

SUBMISSION – confidential and would like to remain anonymous

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

Sadly, I find that nothing appears to have changed over the years in relation to supporting women and families within the system.

I hope that my lived experience can be effective in changing attitudes in the present and future, so the past loss of lives is not in vain.

I feel there has been so much media attention on domestic violence (DV) and family violence (FV), yet nothing appears to have changed within the wider community, and within the system that is supposed to protect individuals and families.

During my 25-year marriage, DV and FV was a silent affair. The children and I lived in a world built around keeping secrets. It was our 'normal' way of life.

I did reach out to the church community, when the situation became volatile, although was only prayed for to remain in the relationship – another form of control. What was the point – I was trapped!

Not all family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV) is physical. FDSV is complex, and does not necessarily involve any direct physical assault, although can lead to, and be accompanied by, physical violence.

The concept of 'coercive control' was developed by Professor Evan Stark, a sociologist and forensic social worker, who defined it as a 'pattern of domination that includes tactics to isolate, degrade, exploit and control' a person, 'as well as to frighten them or hurt them physically'. Professor Stark describes coercive control as a 'liberty crime'², and it has also been described as 'intimate terrorism'.

The Australian Women Against Violence Alliance describes coercive control as 'an umbrella term that refers to an ongoing pattern of controlling and coercive behaviours that are not exclusively physical but can pervade an individual's daily life with a devastating impact'.

After ■ years of marriage, I finally escaped from the perpetrator's coercive control. It was extremely difficult, as I had been controlled for most of my life, and to break the shackles left me in total fear for my life.

I became homeless for the first time in my life, a 42-year-old woman, a single parent with four children.

I was not listened too or taken seriously - one size does not fit all, and there was no understanding of my situation.

Reporting and asking for help was daunting and fraught with danger - I did not know who to trust to get it right.

I ended up fighting to be heard, after an escape that could have cost me my life.

Although I am aware that some workplaces are now providing up to ten days of leave for victims of DV or FV, there is no way that I would have asked for help within my workplace, for fear of being judged and concerns about breaches of confidentiality.

Although some workplaces may be understanding, from my experience my workplace failed miserably.

I was offered counselling through an External Assistance Program (organisational counsellor) following a 'sudden outburst' within the workplace, which was 'out of character' behaviour. The therapy only added to my trauma - there was a lack of understanding and I felt misunderstood.

After losing considerable weight and becoming extremely emotional, I was perceived as having cancer, and no-one bothered to explore why - no-one wanted to get involved.

The process of obtaining additional financial assistance through Centrelink (currently Services Australia) was degrading, as you felt as if you were asking for a handout, when I was only trying to exist.

Best practice

- **It is important that counsellors and therapists are properly trained in DV, FV and mental health, and assistance can be accessed at small cost or bulk billed.**
- **Being able to have time off, allowing time to regroup, or, to make up the time, without questioning.**
 - I had leave without pay (LWOP), on and off for several months, and although it was a burden, I knew I had a job to return too, and this was helpful, until it wasn't, when it became untenable because of my emotional roiling.

My lived experience

I was terrified of him early in the relationship.

He blamed his 'mood' on his childhood - his biological parents murder suicide when he was ■ years old and having to go and live with his ■ Aunt.

In the relationship he had a short fuse. He would go blank, saying that he had lost control – knowing it was wrong but could not help himself.

He would apologise profusely, and treat me kindly and indulge me, and promise not to hurt me again, telling me I was the best thing that ever happened to him and informing that he would seek help and ask the Christians/church to pray for him.

In the relationship, I concluded that it was his 'artistic way' that made him a difficult character for others to warm too. He was an extrovert and needed to be the centre of attention. He could be arrogant, patronising and show off or act like a chameleon.

He had delusions of being the patriarchal breadwinner, when he could never hold down a job.

He was intelligent and a great con man – he even preyed on the Christians who prayed for him.

I had no idea I was living with a 'narcissist.'

I was unaware that he was 'gaslighting' me in the relationship - others noted his 'bizarre' behaviour but said nothing and chose to avoid him.

In public he would squeeze my hand, sending a silent message to keep quiet, and say nothing to anyone.

He had an insatiable appetite for 'control' – I was petrified, and wondering, when will 'the mind snap.'

He was manipulative and deceitful and would twist my words. I felt as if I was the 'crazy' one.

He told me that I was imagining him flirting with other women and that I was 'jealous', even though his infidelity was rife – I second guessed myself.

I tried to avoid conflictual topics, yet he would goad me into conversations, that then turned into arguments, allowing him to leave the home for hours. I was never sure where he went - he would return home like a dog with his tail between his legs, begging for forgiveness.

He mocked me, saying that I only made sense or was congruent when I tried to defend myself, causing me to lose all confidence in my speech – something that has followed me all my life.

I still find it hard to pause and respond in a calm manner when I feel threatened - I become defensive.

When I finally escaped, I sought protection from the authorities. I was unsure of his state of mind and how he would react now that he had lost 'control' of me for the first time.

At the time, violence was seen as something that only happened from the lower socioeconomic families, involving physical assault, or related to alcohol.

From 1975- 1999

In 1975, the perpetrator, [REDACTED] years old. I was [REDACTED] years old. The relationship soured within weeks. I was naïve, shy, and easy prey.

I discovered he owned guns, after another male made a sexual pass at me.

I was distressed and confided in him about what had happened.

This is when I saw him retrieve a shot gun (my first encounter with a weapon) and he 'acted' out wanting to go and shoot the other man - to portray that he was a 'man in shining armour ready to slay the enemy', or to 'intimidate me.'

Either way, I was in shock, even though he had no intention of shooting the man – it was a ploy.

This was the beginning of the many insidious games he used to manipulate me.

In 1976, I tried to leave him – my first attempt

However, he involved me in the church community - another form of control.

When I asked the elders for help, they prayed for me to remain in the relationship - it was my 'biblical' responsibility. I felt trapped - I was isolated from my family and friends and had nowhere to go.

We married in [REDACTED], and we moved to [REDACTED] away from my family and friends.

He had no friends - only a biological Aunt who had adopted him as a child. He was an only child – a loner.

As a child he burnt down his aunt's outdoor laundry because he was angry - he always had an appetite with fire.

I spent the following years in isolation and alone.

In [REDACTED], we had our first child.

During this time, his cheating and deception heightened. I had no access to the outside world, no phone, no access to a car and I knew nobody.

In 1981, I managed to get him to seek help, insisting that I would leave him and return to [REDACTED] if he did not seek help.

I am unsure how I managed to get him to agree. I was scared. I was sure he would change his mind as we walked towards this ominous black building. We were interviewed separately, and I was in disbelief when they admitted him into the psychiatric hospital in [REDACTED]. He remained in the hospital for a week. To this day, I am unable to recount the interview. I was petrified of him and had a young baby to care for.

It was a missed opportunity in leaving him, however, with a small child. I also did not have the financial means to leave.

Nothing changed. We returned to Adelaide in [REDACTED].

On our return to Adelaide, we went to live with my parents, after a few days we left, as he despised my mother, and I had no family support.

We had our second child.

We lived in an unused manse provided by the local church, as we could not afford full rent. He was in and out of work because I believe was his 'anti-social behaviour'.

In 1983, two plain clothes officers appeared unannounced at the house.

To my surprise he was taken away on the spot and spent a weekend in the cells, before being released. To this day, I do not know why? And I did not ask questions, out of fear. He told me 'It was some sort of a mistake'.

This was my first encounter with the police.

In [REDACTED], I was allowed to join the workforce, while he studied at [REDACTED] - this is where he obtained the access to machinery to make two saw-off shot guns.

Entering the work force opened my eyes to many things – he had an altercation with our [REDACTED] GP. She called me at work to advise she is transferring his file to another clinic as he is no longer welcomed at this clinic, however the rest of the family could still attend.

I became the 'provider', although he remained in control of 'paying' the bills.

1999 – THE ESCAPE!

In [REDACTED], I was 42 years old, married with four beautiful children.

In April that year, my father suddenly died, and I experienced profound grief – this changed me - I withdrew and no longer cared what happened to me!

I believe this was the catalyst for what was to come.

On 30th December [REDACTED], I ESCAPED.

After a year of turmoil and having to deal with my grief and his behaviour as he tried to feign ill health to gain my attention, I told him, 'One of us has to leave' – knowing he would never let me go.

To my surprise he walked out of the home (too disturbingly easy), believing he could return as he has done in the past.

Somehow, this day it was different. I had had enough.

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect the day would ever come.

It was not planned - it was an impulsive decision - the planets were all aligned.

I had spent [REDACTED] years learning to survive the only way I knew how - to keep the peace and never challenge him - to not poke the bear!

I feared for what was to come – I had poked the bear and wondered if this was the end of my life.

WHEN DOES A MIND SNAP!

2000 – South Australian Police (SAPOL)

After he walked out of the home, fear set in.

For me, the marriage had ended, but not for him.

It took courage to drive to the local police station.

A male police officer was at the reception desk. I tried to articulate what had happened.

I was told "you don't have a black eye". I was bewildered and upset and walked out.

On my second attempt, no-one was on the front desk, and only a male police officer standing behind the two-way glass. He called out, 'Can I help you?' Again, I ended up walking out and sat in the car crying.

In both attempts there was nowhere to speak in private.

On my third attempt, I tried calling, and spoke with another male officer.

With my voice trembling, I explained for the first time that he was in possession of a shotgun, and I feared for my safety and the children's safety. I explained I had no idea where he was staying - I needed to know where the 'enemy was.

The police officer mentioned that they would follow up, but there seemed no urgency in their voice.

SAPOL returned my call a few days later.

The police officer stated that they had located him at a men's shelter and told them he was planning to return to the family home. This did not seem to be a problem for them, and the officer wondered why I was alarmed.

The officer mentioned he was not in possession of any guns – they had taken his word over mine.

I felt dismissed.

In distress, I reiterated to the officer that he had a gun, sounding like a woman possessed - How do I get through to them?

It was hard to remain coherent and calm in the situation - I was fighting the system on my own.

SAPOL mentioned to act, was to provide six new incidents, and to apply for a restraining order (in [REDACTED]), even though this was a mere piece of paper and would likely be useless against someone who flouted authority.

In disbelief, I responded that I had just escaped a 25-year marriage and feared for my life – this seemed to mean nothing.

Over the next few months, I reported to the police as requested.

At this time, he was escalating in the community, venting his 'rage' to friends and church members, making false accusations, and praying for me to the congregation - telling everyone I was brainwashing the children from seeing him.

He began to make repeated phone calls to the home, annoying the children (no mobile phones back then), so I took the phone off the hook intermittently throughout the day and night - not safe!

In February [REDACTED], he placed an ad in the [REDACTED] stating his 'devout' love for me in the Valentines Day section, and another ad in the Public Notices.

Women's Legal Service Tasmania and Women's Safety NSW 'explain that in some cases the existing criminal law is incident based and does not recognise that a 'course of conduct' or a series of acts over a period, taken together, may constitute an offence'.

When does the mind snap?

I was an emotional mess – sleep deprived and hypervigilant. If I hear a sudden noise, I will flinch - I am still hypervigilant to this day!

He sent two rambling suicide letters – making references to the movie *Silence of the Lambs* – during the marriage he had often threatened to maim me or take his own life.

I did not feel safe as he was out there acting 'crazy' - others may not have seen the monster, but I did!

SAPOL was not acting fast enough, so I took further action.

I approached the [REDACTED] Mental Health Service.

I spoke with a female worker, who acknowledged my distress, and took copies of the articles he had placed in the newspaper and the suicide notes.

The worker mentioned that SAPOL and the Mental Health Service did not share information with each other, although she would see what they could do (made no promises).

At the time, I could not understand why agencies did not communicate or share information with each other – this was so frustrating - surely the sharing of information would be helpful.

Best practice

- **Having a private place to speak with a female officer or someone experienced in DV and FV, and the importance of active listening, and being believed.**
 - It is extremely difficult to speak up to the authorities when you have lived your whole life surrounded in secrecy and fear. It is overwhelming and distressing to speak up, and victims need to be believed.
 - It can be extremely difficult for a victim to clearly articulate what has happened and to put sentences together when they are experiencing immense fear.
- **Sharing information between agencies and across states.**
- **Monitoring perpetrators for at least twelve months and removing them from the area.**
- **Having perpetrators regularly report, and psychiatric assessments/risk assessments.**

On Easter Sunday (██████████) he tried to return to the family home, dressed in black with dark sunglasses, referring to himself as ‘the Terminator’, his worldly possessions in his car.

I phoned 000, and was asked if there were any weapons? Responding ‘YES,’ within five mins (which at the time felt like eternity) the Star Force showed up and arrested him at the front of the house.

After searching his car, they found a rifle.

He was allowed to make a call from the police station, and he ended up calling me – which added to my fear. It was unclear why they allowed him to call me? – he was delusional, and it freaked me out.

Two police officers later returned to the home to take a statement, telling me that he denied possessing any other weapons. After I continued to stress that he had a shot gun, they questioned my intelligence, asking me if I knew the difference between a rifle and a shot gun - this caused me added stress.

The officers then searched the house, finding a belt of shot gun cartridges in the back shed, supporting my claim.

I had no faith in the police officers - what did I have to do - lose my life to be taken seriously.

SAPOL had ample evidence to act prior to his appearance at the house.

In the end he received a 2-year good behaviour bond, and a restraining order not to be five hundred meters from the home and was released on a \$1K bond. This information was not provided to the Family Court.

Every time I hear that another woman has been killed, it sends shivers up my spine – this could have been me! I fought every inch of the way to be heard, and this may have saved me, who knows.

██████ suggests that one of the shortcomings of the implementation of the offence is the lack of a 'systematic approach' involving not only police, but also prosecutors, other professionals, and members of the public:

If I were to start again, I would actually train the police and the prosecutors together, because you're bringing them together by doing that and you're getting a common understanding. I'd go further with that common understanding and say that should be attributed to all professionals, and the public as well, who could ever be part of that evidence collection. ... All the professionals come into contact with victims of domestic abuse—health professionals, social care professionals - and they need to understand the nature of coercive control. They need to understand that it's fluid and dynamic. They need to understand that it instils fear in that person and they need to understand that it's a form of control that entraps them in a relationship and it's very difficult to get out of that relationship..... written in other states and not implemented in SA'.

'Dr Scott 'explained that there was 'widespread training' in the year between the passage of the legislation and its commencement, involving sheriffs, judges, police, victim-survivor services, and social workers. While she noted the importance of this training, she also stressed it was essential that it was part of a larger implementation strategy over five to ten years:

Training alone is a bit of a waste unless you have accountability built into the system. In other words: you can train police, but if their supervisors aren't holding them accountable for their change and good practice, if we don't have data that measures that, if our parliamentarians don't ask for report-backs on the consequences of legislation, then we wind up with really good legislation sitting on the shelf and not changing people's lives ...'

2000 The Family Court

In the Family Court, information from SAPOL and the Mental Health Service/SA Health I believe was not shared.

The incident of him showing up at the home with a gun in the car, resulted in him being kept over weekend in the cells, prior to a Family Court appearance on Monday. I wondered was this shared with the Family Court.

There was no information regarding his admission to hospital for mental health issues after leaving the home. He was in a Men's Shelter which I believe would have only angered him.

The psychiatric report ██████ from his admission stated his 'obsessive behaviour' towards me and how I was brainwashing the children against him (four children aged between 9 - 20 years old).

A private psychologist did not report he owned guns, even after he went to make an unannounced visit. Fortunately, the psychologist was on leave.

In the FC, subsequently lied on a sworn statement, saying he worked for 20 years as a nurse, when this was an outright lie. There were no consequences for providing a false statement - what was the point of a sworn statement when the information is not properly checked.

The Court's psychologists' reports relied on a one-hour session with each individual family member at separate times. There was an expectation that the children would be willing to open to any stranger, and speak up against their father/mother, when their whole life they were told to keep secrets. Research shows that children tend to protect their parents.

I believe The Family Court made decisions on untruthful and incomplete information.

No-one considered that three of the children had chosen not to seem him of their own accord.

The children later regaled their abuse after he left the home.

If I had adhered to the Family Court's psychologist, my 9-year-old should have access to their father, the results could have been disastrous – as he had made the girls lay under a railway track while a train ran over them.

I feel there was no consideration of the children's feelings – I found the Court counsellors to be inadequate. How can anyone decide after a one-off session.

I fought for around 2 years in the Family Court, because he wanted full custody of the children, only to get back at me.

My children did not present as clingy or upset at time – my children considered the situation at home to be the 'norm' – the children could not state the reason as to why the relationship broke down to the counsellors, because it happened suddenly on the [REDACTED] (even I did not expect this day to happen) there was no lead up to the event– life was normal as far as the children were concerned. Only after the event did the boys show any reaction, waiting for their father to make a move, ready to defend themselves after many years of abuse which they had succumbed to as young children – the tide had turned, and they were 'angry'.

One size does not fit all - DV or FV can occur in wealthy and poor families, educated, and not educated.

Best practice

- **Sharing of information between agencies and the Family Court.**
- **A requirement that victims do not need to attend mediation if there is a history of DV or FV – mediation can be used by the perpetrator as another form of control.**
- **Making decisions that are in the best interest of the child/children.**

Finding Accommodation

I was told by lawyers that we could have stayed in the family home. It would have been the best option however without support from the authorities, staying in the family home was not safe!

Six months in transit, with the children dispersed was a nightmare and took its toll on me emotionally and physically.

Seeking DV support had its limitations when it came to applying for short term accommodation. I was offered a motel room as temporary accommodation (for a week) until the agency told me they would try and locate a housing trust house in the northern suburbs (Elizabeth). I was flawed. This was not support. To be sent to an area that was completely different from where we had come from. I wondered why a woman would leave if this was the only option. It was insulting.

After declining the option, I was accused of being ungrateful, even though I suspect the agency worker would not have lived in these circumstances.

I had to find a home to bring the children together again– this was emotionally taxing.

I frantically managed to locate private rental. It was an enormous financial strain, but it was better than having them separated, and stability was an imperative.

I found no support from DV. It was assumed that we were helpless and just needed food and clothing and some sort of shelter out north- a band aid approach. I believe not much has changed.

Best practice

- **Keeping children in their school/community, to remain with their friends etc., and to help normalise the situation.**
- **Providing financial support such as rental assistance or help with utilities or school fees.**
- **Enforcing that the perpetrator pay specifically for items such as school fees or sporting activities if they feel they are giving child support money to the other parent to spend on themselves.**
- **Promoting family friendly workplaces, including flexible working hours to allow the parent to drop off/pick up children from school – this is valuable for the wellbeing of the child and the parent.**
- **Providing programs in schools that focus on respectful behaviour.**
 - Teaching children self-respect and respect for others, promoting team building, accountability, active listening, positive family involvement, and constructively address bullying and anger management (instead of resorting to suspension)
- **Providing family counselling for children who are struggling.**
 - Up to 20 bulk-billed sessions rather than the current 10 sessions.

The latest monthly crime statistics released by SA Police show twenty-two murders were reported across the state between April 2023 and March 2024 – a 69 per cent increase from the 13 murders reported the year prior.

"In '22/23, the rate of domestic abuse matters reported to SAPOL was over 22,000 — that is increasing, that is of concern — but, as I say, **one of the indicators may be a confidence in reporting,**" Deputy Commissioner Williams said.

"But we have to work hard to gain that confidence because we do understand it takes some victims approximately seven attempts to come forward and report matters to police. Part of that is the cycle of violence they're caught in.

"The fact that it's still so prevalent [means] we need to work stronger and harder as a community across government agencies."

