

My name is [REDACTED]

I have had lived experience of domestic violence, and sexual assault when I was a child and then as an adult. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] worked in community development and health promotion around domestic violence I then specialised in [REDACTED] Therapy counselling and worked in Alice Springs, Darwin and outreach work in remote areas in the NT. I retired at 71 years old and worked with many First Nations people for nearly 40 years. I am from a [REDACTED] background and have lived in Australia since 1950. I am an Australian citizen.

I would like to address the four key areas.

Prevention

The acceptance of violence and no respect for women and girls starts at home or within communities. We need to reintroduce programs for primary schools, health promotions in health services and on TV and media outlets about “What is a respectful relationship?”

Many handouts with information and also easy cards to slip into a purse with numbers of services to help a survivor, in different languages. I used to run Protective Behaviours for children and their parents and police cadets, why can't we run continuous programs around this issue, looking at power and control issues and dare I say Patriarchy and what that means. You need basic language and examples especially for CALD communities and for some First Nations communities run by Indigenous health workers. We need to develop a stronger culture around speaking out especially focusing on young men to learn to speak out for women and girls. To make it shameful for men and younger boys to make fun or say jokes about DV and sexual assault. It won't cure this issue, but we need to be much stronger in repeating Enough is Enough!

We also need to run programs for young women about Expect Respect, what is ok and what isn't, how to be assertive within a peer group.

Victim- survivors need to be the priority in domestic violence cases, men must understand that if you are a perpetrator of abuse and coercive control you will be jailed and removed from their home. Not the other way around where the woman must leave her home. If they are repeat offenders, they must be punished by increased jail sentences and forced to take on programs to address their violence. I understand unless they want to change, they won't but we must make it clear that they are wrong in their thinking, it is not their right to inflict such pain and control on women and girls. This is the consequences of their behaviour. Until this happens not a lot will change. I

support groups for perpetrators but only if they demonstrate a willingness to change and accept responsibility for their actions, in my experience many don't accept responsibility so maybe mandatory programs around self-respect and new ways of being for perpetrators is useful.

Early Intervention

We all know that domestic violence and sexual assault is under reported. The justice system has let survivors down, due to the so-called proof of any wrongdoing. How do you prove someone is raping you every night as their right, if you can't leave the house as you are chained to the bed whilst he is at work (an example of one of my clients story) or control you constantly in what you wear, where you go, do not allow any access to family or friends or a phone, and dictate what you can do. I can't count the number of times women and children have been silenced and therefore not reported the ongoing abuse.

So, the question is how can we make the justice system, the police system and safety better for these survivors? One way would be to educate communities, build awareness and strength in speaking out. Take the shame away from the survivors will be very difficult but this is where proactive community development workers and social workers can begin. As for the justice system I have absolutely no idea, as unless you are rich enough to hire a barrister you will not get true justice in many cases in my experience.

My advice is to ensure that when the woman rings the police and reports domestic violence, then the home is secured by trades people that come out within 24 hours. They make the place secure and install security cameras so that any threat to the family will be recorded and can be used as evidence against the perpetrator. The woman may require a medical examination asap to secure evidence if physical harm or rape has taken place.

The family are given counselling in the home or by telehealth as part of the process and information is given regarding services available. Translators are used if required.

I am aware that some women want to leave their home, and they should be supported to do this. They should be given a choice.

My concern is that funding for women's safety at home is constantly underfunded. In SA I believe we have the lowest funding for Women's Safety Services in all of Australia. I have been told by a survivor that she had to decide if she wanted a security screen on the front door or the back door as funding didn't allow both. How ridiculous is that? If the government is serious about women's safety, then give adequate funding to make women and children safe at home.

Lastly all services should cooperate and share information once the survivor has signed a release of information form. Services should coordinate safety and care for survivors together.

Responses

Why must the women with children have to leave the home to escape domestic violence? The woman and children are uprooted from school, possible close family members, friends, and their home. They are being punished for being survivors of the perpetrator. The perpetrator gets to stay in the comfort of his home whilst women and children are sleeping rough or in unfamiliar unsuitable places. They must leave their home and possessions.

Older women over 55 years old who are victims of domestic violence have unique circumstances as they may have lived in the area for years, so are frightened to move. They can have significant health and mobility problems and can be extremely vulnerable. If they are unaware of their rights, are from a CALD background or are from a First Nations background, these women often have more pressure from their cultural group to not shame the family/cultural community and, in some cases violent payback is threatened if they report a perpetrator, from the perpetrator's family members. Which I witnessed in Alice Springs and in remote communities.

If the perpetrator breaks an order and threatens or tries to enter the home of the survivor a custodial sentence is automatic. Each time this occurs the sentence is made longer. Every conviction is recorded so if the perpetrator starts up a new relationship, she can have access to this information through the police reports.

Police in my experience are sick and tired of returning back and forth to reports of domestic violence, AVO's being ignored, and women being threatened, or violently attacked by the perpetrator. The safety of the woman must be made a priority for the police, and contact made with the security systems and arrange an appointment for medical assessment if required. So that this situation is handled asap. Unfortunately, some police do not remove the perpetrator and confine him, which then places the survivor in a much more dangerous position.

Recovery and Healing

Sentences for perpetrators – I am so frustrated when I hear excuses of mental illness, alcohol and stress used to justify violence. I understand if you have a significant mental illness such as schizophrenia and are not being monitored or taking medication than an individual may be influenced by their mental state to do harm to others. Let us be realistic about this, not every male that is an abuser has a mental illness. Nor does it justify using the excuse of alcohol or drugs since they have made a choice to take them well knowing that it can make them more violent. It can be seen as a premeditated act

so that is their responsibility. I have counselled many people over the years with significant mental illness and they are often gentle, non-aggressive people who usually would do harm to themselves rather than to others.

As for stress, many people have enormous stress in their life, but they do not commit violence, it is not a justification to hurt others.

Regarding best practice, it is not one practice fits all situations. When I worked with refugees in the 90's and early 2000 I had to have a different approach than I would with someone born in Australia. The same goes for CALD and First Nations people.

I find best practice is:. To be respectful, not assume anything, ask if you are unsure what is culturally acceptable, look for alternative ways to solve the issue with the survivor, walk alongside the survivor, it is her life so be there for her and always check out what she wants. Never turn her away if she returns to her partner, just always give her the option to return to see you, no judgement. Explain the dangers of returning to her partner and then if she tried to leave again in the future. Arm the survivor with information, give hope and connect others in her family or friends to support her if this is what she wants. I had a client from [REDACTED] that was in a terrible situation of violence and sexual assault for 45 years. Finally, after saving money for 20 years, she could escape, the partner who had total control over everything including money, having cameras in every room and not allowing her outside without her son who also bashed her. Only through a phone call to me by one of her friends I was able to help her know what her rights were. It was a very difficult time for the survivor but with time and listening she realised she didn't deserve this behaviour towards her.