

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. The focus of my submission is upon the first two areas of interest, **Prevention** and **Early Intervention**, with particular regard to potential and actual male perpetrators of such violence. I provide four recommendations for your consideration.

In terms of **Prevention**, I applaud the intention to '*facilitate WIDESPREAD change in the underlying drivers*'. Prevention is a multi-faceted and complex network of very many factors, and an effective approach will require widespread, well-resourced and multi-layered strategies across many institutional, social and cultural fronts. Preventing domestic, family and sexual violence requires a change in the behaviour of men who are its chief perpetrators.

What then are the underlying drivers of their behaviour as they move from the teenage years into young adulthood? What factors are at play when they resort to violent behaviour towards others, especially women? What self-knowledge and support do they need in order to become better men and to be capable of respectful and life-giving relationships?

Recommendation 1: Educational programmes directed at teenage and young adult men.

Educational programmes that teach young males about the complex reality of who they are as human beings and about the influences on their thinking, feeling and acting are vitally necessary. Such programmes need to directly address what violence is, its impact upon self and others. They need to teach tools for self-control, resilience, self-esteem and for acting respectfully. They need to explore what a purposeful life looks like. They need to explore the impact of addictive behaviours, alcohol and drugs, pornography and gambling upon a person's decision making and sense of worth. They need to explore ways of dealing with frustration, disappointment and anger. They also need to explicitly outline the behaviours that are coercive and violent and the criminality of such behaviours. They need to provide avenues of support for those who are already at risk of becoming violent in their relationships. Creating such programmes would not be difficult, especially given how many similar programmes already exist, both here in Australia and beyond.

** While my focus is upon males, educational programmes for girls and young women which help them identify the characteristics of healthy and non-healthy male behaviour in relation to personal relationships would be very helpful. An ability to recognise authentic, affirming behaviour in ourselves and others would be a worthwhile protective skill. All girls leaving school should have a working familiarity with what constitutes sexual and domestic violence and an understanding of how such behaviours can be identified, resisted and reported.

I return now to the notion of *WIDESPREAD*. Educational programmes can be delivered most easily and comprehensively through schools and I would certainly see this as a vital component of an educational focus. However the reality is that post school age young people are more commonly forming relationships, especially cohabitation ones. How does an education programme reach this post school age group, who are now at the forefront of experiencing intimate personal relationships?

Recommendation 2: A compulsory, online course for all 18 to 25 year old South Australians on Respectful Relationships.

Given the profound urgency of tackling Australia's appalling domestic violence epidemic, I believe a case could be made for imposing an online course for young South Australians aged 18 to 25 on Respectful Relations. The course would need to include what constitutes Domestic, Family and Sexual violence and the legal rights and obligations of individuals concerning Domestic violence. A course could be designed that guaranteed the participant saw it through from beginning to end and were then issued with a statement of completion. The element of compulsion makes it widespread and at the very least ensures some exposure to critical information.

While imposing a compulsory course may seem to some to be draconian and disrespectful of individual freedom, I would counter that society owes it to its young people to ensure they have a working knowledge of what constitutes respectful relationships and an awareness of the prevalence of issues that can confront a couple in living out an intimate relationship. You do not get to drive a car without an imposed regime of training and practice, yet nothing is provided to prepare individuals for relationships that can be fraught with as many if not more dangers than driving.

Something radical is needed if we are to break the cycle of violence, and education at the appropriate stage of life is vital to any such endeavour.

Perhaps the compulsion could be 'sweetened' with incentives and effective advertising campaigns. Even the government writing to each of these young people outlining the seriousness of the domestic violence situation and highlighting its support for them through education in respectful relationships could be a valuable awareness tool in its own right.

Recommendation 3: Include the online Respectful Relationships course as a requirement for couples preparing for marriage.

Marriage celebrants currently have considerable freedom in terms of just how specific they are in dealing with potential issues in the couple's ongoing relationship. While they are required to make couples aware of services available to help them in difficult times, I would suggest few delve into the darker prospects of relationships going wrong. Requiring couples to do an online Respectful Relationships course as part of their marriage preparation would be one way to ensure that at this pivotal moment in their relationship awareness of the complexities and pitfalls in intimate relationships is addressed.

Early Intervention

The focus upon *'identifying and supporting individuals who are at high risk of (in this case) perpetrating violence'* is of critical importance if rates of violence are to be lessened. I have been turning my mind to the question of how do we, as a society' support potential and early stage male perpetrators of violence. Much of society's attention is directed towards how we can best support victims. However, supporting those identified as at risk of becoming an offender, and those who are in the early phases of enacting violent behaviour towards women, is absolutely vital if we are to both prevent and effectively intervene in emerging domestic violence situations.

The most effective agent of change is that person himself. External forces and coercions may play some role and our society's punitive systems rely on this approach. However, effective and lasting change is seldom brought about by these measures, which generally occur after the individual has become entrenched

in negative, violent, self-destructive behaviours. How do we best help the individual help himself? How do we empower and support him to become more aware and more in control of his thoughts, emotions and actions?

My suggestions cost money, lots of money – but in the end, nothing like what it currently costs to incarcerate perpetrators and support victims. AND the monetary cost should be the least of our concerns in the face of the lives lost and lives subjected to trauma and despair. Domestic, family and sexual violence is a scourge upon our society. Our men need to be better. We need to put in place educational and support mechanisms, as well stringent restraints supported by the law as a matter of urgency.

How do we, as a society, help men, particularly young men, break with violent behaviour and become better men?

Recommendation 4: Residential Courses for early offenders.

Many people (if they can afford it) who have a serious issue with an addictive behaviour take themselves off to a residential programme to help recover control of their lives. Such residential programmes offer benefits over and above consultations and other therapies by taking a person out of the setting of their normal everyday life. An early intervention residential programme for domestic violence offenders could be another powerful approach in helping such men recognise the issues that lead to their violent behaviour and provide them with some understanding and personal tools to become better men.

Who would undertake such a residential programme?

Two groups are possibilities. Men dissatisfied or concerned with their own behaviour and intimate relationships projectory could voluntarily undertake the programme. Secondly, early (first time) offenders could be directed to do it via the court system. I have no doubt there are many excellent experts in this field who could design a programme that could work very effectively in supporting men to change their behaviour. Investing in the support of these men could potentially save lives and help families to function more safely and provide kinder, more nurturing environments for children.

While residential programmes would seem expensive at first glance, a cost analysis would clearly show that even a modest success rate in helping participants become better men would far outweigh the costs of continued offending. And who can put a price on one life saved, one family restored?

A residential programme provides the opportunity for a more wholistic approach to change. Time for reflection and self-evaluation are scarce commodities in modern life. A well devised programme that encouraged participants to think differently about themselves, their problems and of course their relationships with their intimate partners and children could be life changing.

In conclusion, thank you once again for this opportunity to make a submission. I wish the Commission every success in its profoundly important work for our society, and our women and children in particular.

Submission provided by:

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