

Submission: Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence from Escape to Better Foundation – August 2024

Dear Commission,

May I respectfully begin by saying I'm disappointed with some of the language used in your support documents. The reasons are:

1. While you say you recognise that domestic violence and intimate partner abuse includes more than physical violence, the support documentation for the Royal Commission seems to emphasise violence and sexual abuse. Fear, verbal abuse, intimidation, financial abuse and coercive control are precursors to violence and ever present. Therefore, they should be given equal weight in your investigation and your messaging at all times.
2. The focus still remains on identifying high risk perpetrators of abuse and their victims. In my opinion, you should also be looking at assisting people in abusive relationships before they are at high risk. By providing pre-crisis intervention support services, we can help victim-survivors minimise the trauma by offering escape services in a timely and better planned manner.

### **From lived experience**

There will never be sufficient funding or emergency accommodation for victims of domestic violence. So what happens is the charities and government services evaluate women on the basis of the most desperate need. As a result, women who are educated, employed (even if she is earning an unsustainable wage) or have the capability of becoming employed, are left to fend for themselves.

This was my experience and it was the experience of my [REDACTED] so not a lot has changed.

As a result, women like me are forced to remain in abusive relationships long after we decide we want to leave because we don't know how to plan and implement our escape. For some women, the financial hardships after they leave the relationship are so significant, they return to their abuser out of desperation due to lack of housing security, the welfare of their children etc. In these situations, abusers become more controlling and the ability to escape again is significantly reduced.

What I've seen from the victim-survivors I've spoken to is the longer they stay in an abusive relationship, the more traumatised they are and the greater the trauma suffered by their children (if they have any).

By the time I left my abuser, I had gone to the police, had a solicitor and a counsellor. Yet none of them warned me I'd be in great danger once I left. I was saved by my instinct to disappear suddenly and stay hidden. I was fortunate that I didn't have children with him so legally, I didn't need to reveal my whereabouts. Even then, he discovered my address. A utility company accidentally gave him my

**We collaborate with others to support victims of domestic violence**

physical address. Filled with rage, he somehow entered my secure apartment building, located my apartment and tried to get in.

The stalking, verbal abuse, financial abuse and fear of potential physical abuse lasted for years after I left the relationship. He made endless calls to me at home, at my workplace and to my parents' home. Call after call only minutes apart. He held up the sale and settlement of our home for about [REDACTED] – all while he was in other relationships. He wasn't broken hearted. He wanted revenge. This type of financial abuse seems to be a common theme when speaking with victim-survivors.

It took me years to rebuild my life and regain my confidence. For years, I've been fearful of his ability to track and monitor me through social media. For many months after I left, I had difficulty leaving my apartment to take the rubbish out, hop in my car to go to work or even the supermarket. Yet I had to work in order to live independently of him. My legal fees were more than my monthly wage. I've since discovered, this is common. My father kindly lent me the money to pay my legal bills because he knew I could repay the money once the sale of our home was finalised. I'm not sure he could have done that if I didn't have a part share in the matrimonial home.

### **Systematic Gaslighting**

Because domestic violence support services focus on women in desperate need, women who don't qualify for assistance are essentially told, "Your situation isn't bad enough for us to help you". They may not use these words, but it's the message we receive. This is the same message perpetrators of abuse use when justifying their abuse ... "It's not that bad. You're exaggerating."

I experienced similar messaging when I went to the police to report abuse. I had no bruises, broken bones or other physical injuries. But on a previous occasion, my abuser chased me out of the kitchen with a carving knife. So while the significant verbal abuse was happening and his anger was building, I was terrified he would pull a knife out again. The police response was "Everyone has arguments", reinforcing the gaslighting and minimising the seriousness of the abuse, just like my abuser.

The police made it clear, there were worse cases for them to deal with (again gaslighting me). The police also made it clear that because I couldn't remember what was said during the verbal abuse, I would be a poor witness. The reality is, while the verbal abuse was happening, I was trying to ensure I was standing in front of the door in case I needed to run. I was also noting where the carving knives were in relation to my abuser, and the location of my car keys, purse and phone in case I had to flee. The words didn't matter. It was my ability to escape that was important.

### **Now helping others (including women living in regional areas)**

Around [REDACTED] I became frustrated with the approach taken by the legal system, government and non-government agencies when it comes to supporting victims of domestic violence.



There seems to be no pre-crisis assistance, support or education for people living in abusive relationships. That just seems dumb and short-sighted. The sooner we can get victims safely away from the abuse, the sooner they can heal and rebuild their lives.

There is even less support available for people living in regional and rural Australia. Imagine living in an abusive relationship, on an isolated property, often with rifles readily available. I can't imagine the terror.

We should also be doing more to recompense victims of financial abuse. This type of abuse amounts to embezzlement or theft of family funds which usually leads to multi-generational poverty.

For all of these reasons, we decided to begin our own registered charity.

- We speak from lived experience and from the heart.
- We are gender neutral although we recognise women are more likely to experience intimate partner abuse.
- Our services are offered completely online for free or for a nominal fee and are available nationally.
- Our online model means we can care for thousands of victims at once so there is no queuing and no systematic gaslighting of victims needing help.

We see Escape to Better Foundation as the first step a victim may take as they try to make the courageous decision to leave an abusive relationship. We refer website visitors to other national support services for delivery of in-person supports.

We do this at significant personal cost. In fact, we are drawing down on our mortgage to pay for these services. While our website only went live in June 2024, we are surprised by the length of time visitors spent on the website per visit and the diversity of their locations. Yet information and training on how to raise funds privately or via government grants seems to be non-existent. If government recognises it can't do it alone, please help others (like us) to provide the services it can't.

Thank you for your time. Sincerely,

[Redacted signature block]