

# **A Powerful Journey**

## **A Research Report**

### **Women reflect on what helped them leave**

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north-east Victoria.

PO Box 853, Wangaratta, Victoria, 3677

Phone: 03 5722 3009

Fax: 03 5722 3020

Email: [whealth@whealth.com.au](mailto:whealth@whealth.com.au)

Webpage: [www.whealth.com.au](http://www.whealth.com.au)

The information contained in this publication is copyright. When copying or reproducing any part of this document, please acknowledge Women's Health Goulburn North East as the source and include the title, year and page number.

This report has been written by Debra Parkinson, Kerry Burns and Claire Zara. It is based on information generously offered by 16 women in the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria. Our sincere thanks to them.

Thanks to Kylie Stephens, Family Violence Prevention Worker, Women's Health Goulburn North East for advice on recommendations relating to the broad directions of family violence policy and practice. Our appreciation extends also to Lee Fitzroy, Upper Murray CASA, for her insightful discussion about the issue of women's violence and its relevance to the current debate on family violence.

Artwork by Jacquie Coupé.

© Women's Health Goulburn North East, 2004.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The research approach .....	1
Methodology .....	2
A note about artworks in this report.....	3
Locating the researcher in the research.....	4
Literature Reviews .....	5
‘What’s going on?’ - Executive summary .....	5
Recommendations .....	7
1. Implement the women’s recommendations .....	7
2. Effect change in community attitude and behaviour.....	7
3. Effect culture change within service provision.....	8
4. Redress injustice .....	9
Findings and discussion .....	11
The last straw – the decision to leave .....	11
‘Why doesn’t she just leave?’ – barriers to leaving .....	12
A shaky freedom – staying out of the violence.....	14
‘You call this help?’ – women’s experience of support services .....	16
The legal system .....	16
The medical system .....	18
The service system .....	18
DHS Child Protection Unit .....	19
Where the system works .....	20
‘You’ve gotta have friends’ – what friends and family can do.....	22
Discovering strength.....	25
Staying strong - women leave for good .....	27
Appendix 1 – Research questions and interview schedule .....	32
Appendix 2 – Literature review about family violence .....	33
Appendix 3 - Literature review about feminist research.....	37
References .....	39

## Introduction

During 2003, Women's Health Goulburn North East conducted a qualitative research project to hear from women about their experiences of leaving violent<sup>1</sup> situations in the Hume region (Goulburn Valley and North East Victoria).

The sample included three Koori women, and three women with culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. There was a range of socio-economic status represented, and an age spread from mid-twenties to mid-fifties. Women from all parts of the Hume region participated, some from major provincial towns, some from small towns, and some from rural areas. Some used the family violence service system and some chose not to. All of the women had children, suggesting that it may be valuable to conduct further research with women who have no children.

This research report has a companion book: 'A Powerful Journey - Stories of Women Leaving Violent Situations'. These are the complete stories as told to the researchers from Women's Health Goulburn North East. The only editing was to conceal identities where women requested anonymity, and for clarification.

## The research approach

This research has been conducted from a feminist position, choosing to privilege the voices of women who have experienced family violence<sup>2</sup> and the oppression that is overt in such an experience (Millen 1997: Trinder 2000).

Feminist research is best understood by considering the values that inform it rather than the methods used, as feminist researchers draw on a range of techniques to conduct their work (Millen 1997). It endeavours to provide a location from which women's voices can be heard, to empower women and to create equality in the research relationship (Millen 1997: Trinder 2000).

Change is critical to our research agenda. We do research to bring about positive change, and we are using our findings to inform those close to women experiencing family violence – including service providers - of the ways they can offer support (Humphries 1997). Women have told us what is useful, as well as what has not been useful to them in seeking help to leave violent situations.

In-depth interviews were conducted with participants. A range of open-ended questions were used to start conversations. Within this open structure, participants defined and discussed their experiences, whilst at the same time the information remained relevant to the research question (Chatzifotiou 2000). Participants chose a venue that was comfortable for them, so that stress would be minimized (Chatzifotiou 2000). Woman to woman conversation, where researchers listen with care and attention to participants, creates an environment where women can develop meaning for their unique experience (Reinharz 1992).

---

1 The terms 'violent' and 'violence' is broadly understood in this report as including verbal and emotional abuse, restrictions on personal freedoms, threats and physical assault,

2 Throughout this report, we have used the broader term, 'family violence' in preference to 'domestic violence' as 'domestic' locates the violence primarily with women. 'Family violence' more accurately depicts the various forms of violence that exist and that we encountered in our research. The women often referred to 'domestic violence' and this has not been changed in quotes.

We chose to have one researcher offering participants questions and one researcher transcribing notes. This is a response to the notion that sensitive discussion about family violence can be difficult with a tape recorder playing (Chatzifotiou 2000). Written notes are considered valid under these circumstances. However, it is important that a full account of the interview can be produced. Our choice to proceed with two interviewers is based on the degree of difficulty associated with interviewing and note keeping. We appreciate that this decision changes power dynamics and we worked hard with participants to build trust before commencing the interview.

With two interviewers we have built credibility for findings by increasing opportunities for the researchers to explore observations of the interview and to generate alternative explanations for observations. Accuracy was ensured by returning a copy of the notes to participants so that they could expand or retract any aspect of their dialogue and to correct any misinterpretation of their account that had occurred during note taking.

We have employed a participatory approach in validating the data, in actioning the findings and in launching the report.

Sharing gender, culture and first language has benefits for the research because the researcher is able to understand meaning that is culturally constructed (Warren 1988: McCracken 1991). With this in mind we sought research assistants with cultural similarity to participants on an 'as needs' basis. In these cases an assistant worked in place of one of us.

Researching family violence is sensitive work. We were acutely aware that interviews had the potential to raise anxiety and stress levels for participants. We were also aware that as researchers we could experience anxiety, either through hearing the pain of the stories women produced or through connections between our personal and professional experiences (Chatzifotiou 2000). We carefully considered how to respond to this issue and arranged for counsellors to be available to us and to participants after interview. As researchers we paid careful attention to debriefing together to build in further support during our interview and data analysis stages. Peer debriefing was also available to research assistants.

In further acknowledging the sensitivity of this research, an application for ethical approval was submitted to an institutional ethics committee registered with the National Health and Medical Research Council. Approval was granted.

## **Methodology**

The goal was to achieve personal and political transformation through the process of the research and the dissemination of findings. To achieve this, our objectives were:

- to hear from women who have experienced family violence about what was helpful to them, both from the service system and from family and community support
- to identify areas of action for improvement in our response to women leaving violent situations
- to engage the service sector and the informal sector in improving responses to women's experiences of violence

The specific research questions and interview schedule are reproduced in Appendix 1.

The 16 women interviewed were recruited through an invitation to participate either through their local newspaper, or from a worker in the family violence and community services

sectors. This two-pronged approach to recruitment ensured that women who had not used the formal support sector were also able to inform the research. In the first case, Women's Health Goulburn North East placed advertisements in local newspapers across the Hume region. In the second, an invitation to participate was circulated as a flyer through the family violence and women's health networks. Women were informed about the project by workers in community agencies and the family violence service sector. In both cases, if a woman was interested in participating in the research, she telephoned Women's Health Goulburn North East directly and discussed her participation in detail with one of the researchers.

We were careful to stress to workers that participation was to be entirely voluntary and from the woman's own instigation. Our awareness of the potential for (unintentional) coercion led to the process whereby the worker simply told a woman about the project and/or gave her the Explanatory Statement and the contact number for the researchers at Women's Health Goulburn North East.

The initial criteria for involvement was that the period during which a woman left was more than six months and less than three years ago; that she had been living in the Hume region; and that she was over 18 years of age. After some consideration, two women were accepted who had left violent situations more than three years ago because we were persuaded that their stories could offer a different dimension in greater distance and time for reflection.

Women were accepted into the research project as they contacted our office. The number of women who agreed to participate fitted the sample size we wanted. As described in the introduction, the 16 women provided a range of socio-economic status and cultural and linguistic diversity, and were aged from mid 20s to mid 50s. Three Koori women participated. In geographic terms, women lived in country regions, small towns and large provincial centres, and were drawn from all four quarters of the Hume region. All of the women had children. Future research could consider the circumstances of women without children who live in, or have left, violent situations. (One woman was unable to approve her story for publication, so the book of stories contains the stories of 15 women.)

The interview schedule is attached at Appendix 1, and the interview process is described in the section entitled 'The Research Approach'. Written consent was obtained from each of the participants.

The data was analysed inductively with the phrase or sentence as the coding unit. In total, the interviews produced 180 pages of data, coded into 23 thematic categories, each with a range of sub categories.

Women told us so much more information than we had actively sought. As a result, this research has produced a rich body of data beyond the scope of our original project. Although we had not asked, women told us of the history of violence that led to their leaving. While we were restricted in this document to reporting just the data that informs our research questions, we honour the trust of the women by including artistic presentations of their words throughout this report.

## **A note about artworks in this report**

Jacquie Coupé, Community Artist

*The artworks you see here are my conceptual presentation of the findings from this research.*

*I was overwhelmed by so many words and statements that elucidated the women's facts and feelings. Such powerful messages cannot be denied and must never be negated.*

*The home is often portrayed and revered as a sacrosanct space. Yet we see that within this sacred place so much damage and heartbreak can occur.*

*And so I chose to use the everyday domestic effects coupled with the statements and words to show the absolute anomaly that presents itself here.*

## **Locating the researcher in the research**

Kerry Burns

*As researcher I bring my personal history, ideology and identity to the project, particularly when seeking to understand and interpret data (Dobozy 1999). I am actively engaged with the construction of the story we will present about family violence. Therefore I present a description of the particular aspects of my life that I believe the reader needs knowledge of to understand how my being influences the work.*

*I grew up in a working class family in rural Victoria and have only accessed tertiary education in the past few years of my life. Now in my 40's, I firmly hold to a feminist view. My special interest in domestic and family violence began in 1990 when I observed youth homelessness in my hometown and began inquiring about it. Since that inquiry I have worked for many years with young people and their families about issues related to homelessness and have noted that domestic and family violence is one explanation for youth homelessness.*

*Personally, I have also witnessed domestic and family violence amongst my friendship and family circles. The pain I have felt, whilst secondary in some sense, has been strong and indignant. It has been frustrating at times to see the service system respond sluggishly to issues as urgent in nature as domestic and family violence. It has been joyful to see women and children I care about recover safety and wellbeing in their lives.*

*I consider myself privileged to have the opportunity granted by this research project to engage with women and learn more about the factors that have enabled them to leave and to establish a new life.*

Debra Parkinson

*On a winter morning Kerry and I went to interview one of the women at her home. We knocked and were waiting on the doorstep. She opened the door, and was understandably suspicious of the two of us. When we said we were from Women's Health about the family violence research, she immediately opened the door and welcomed us in.*

*Times like this emphasise the weight of responsibility we hold as researchers and as community workers. Our work with the women in this research has pointed out to me how fragile we all are – and at the same time, how strong.*

*Let's use our strength and our knowledge to change things. We just need to grab every opportunity to influence. The women have done this through their courage in sharing their stories. As researchers, workers, readers and friends, let's use this report and the book of stories to stop the silence around violence in the home. And to stop condoning it.*

## **Literature Reviews**

At the beginning of the research we reviewed the literature on family violence to inform ourselves of the critical issues and to situate our local research within the parameters of broader research. The literature review explored definitions of family violence and considered the wider social and economic factors that contribute to the existence of violence in intimate relationships. It examined the risk factors associated with family violence; the effects of family violence on women; the reasons women stay with violent partners; and the factors enabling women experiencing violence to leave that environment and establish a new life (Appendix 2). Finally, in conducting this literature review, we sought to understand the purpose of telling and hearing our stories, and issues around feminist research (Appendix 3).

The information in this research builds upon Patton's (2003) work and offers information about strengthening responses. We understand the social and economic basis of family violence and reiterate that it occurs within the context of patriarchal society. This feminist research continues to uphold feminist values by hearing women's stories, placing them in the public arena and working for the type of change in service sector and informal support systems that is suggested by the women informing us.

## **'What's going on?' - Executive summary**

The economic cost of family violence to our society is enormous. The social cost to human health and happiness cannot as easily be measured.

At the start of this research project we asked questions to understand what helps women to leave - and stay out of - violent situations.

We learned that the actual leaving occurred in a range of ways. For some women, it was the result of years of planning to get away. For some it was a sudden epiphany that what they had been suffering was family violence. For others it was an extreme episode of violence. For every woman, it was the hope of a better life for themselves and their children.

People often ask, 'Why doesn't she just leave?'. There are a myriad of reasons why. Some violent partners have threatened to kill the children if a woman leaves. Fear of further violence is a significant barrier. Years of emotional abuse have left women with little sense of their own capability. They have been told over and over that they are inept - until they start to believe it. While practicalities like poverty and lack of resources generally keep women in violent situations, women also talked about dedication to the ideal of 'the perfect family' and their responsibility to keep the family together.

Every woman felt she had failed – in marriage and motherhood. Women regretted that their children had witnessed and experienced violence as babies, as young children, and as teenagers. They often felt responsible despite being a victim of this violence themselves.

It was this self blame that led women to believe they had no future, and no hope of love in their lives.

Systems have failed women: courts have offered women even more injustice; police have failed to offer protection; and doctors and health workers have condoned violence by husbands. The Child Protection Unit of the Department of Human Services has expected women to protect their children against violent men that they, as workers, often refuse to engage with. There are lengthy waiting lists for housing and counselling.

The standards of practice and frameworks for helping women and children leaving violent situations are comprehensive and informed by sound consultation, but they are not

consistently implemented by workers. And workers, with their own backgrounds and experiences, may bring subjectivity and personal judgements of women to their professional practice.

Practical barriers to leaving can be mitigated by access to effective services. This research shows that such access is complicated by rurality. Distances and the cost of travel combined with a paucity of services severely reduce women's choices. And this is exacerbated when children are involved, both in a practical sense and in the strongly-held notion of family, extended family and community within rural areas.

However, where the systems work, they work well to support women leaving and staying out of violent situations. Women have spoken in very positive terms about the family violence service sector – refuges, emergency accommodation, outreach workers and counsellors. Broader support services such as those offered by Centrelink and the Rural Housing Network underpinned the women's ability to leave.

Informal support from family, friends and community members was a critical factor in getting out and staying out. The women were very clear about what was helpful to them and what was unhelpful. A set of simple and direct recommendations have emerged from this research – about listening, being there, not judging. They are stated in full in the recommendations section of this report.

Leaving and staying out demanded that women draw, too, on their personal strengths. It is a long process of recovery, characterised by small steps – sometimes two forward and one backwards. Distance in time helped clarify for women the reality of violence and abuse they and their children had lived with. They found a voice to state their right to fair treatment and to live peacefully. They spoke of finding freedom.

The women responded to the violence against themselves and their children with a range of actions. The reactions of an individual woman would vary as she struggled to cope. Women had to find the strength to leave and to protect children. At times women used violence against their violent partner in retaliation and anger. There seemed to be a clear context that they believed their dignity, their health and even their lives depended on this extreme response. In some cases, threats and violence against their violent partner was – they felt – the only way to protect their children.

Violence is never simple. Nor is it always limited to one partner against another. These stories include an instance where adult children demonstrated emotional violence against their mother; where a woman responded violently to the new partner of her ex; where siblings played out violent behaviour they had lived with; and where a mother used violence as a disciplinary tool with her children.

It is important for us, as researchers, to state that our reaction to the violence displayed by women was problematic. Our culture encourages complicity in violence directed 'appropriately' and evidenced by the terms 'just wars' and 'just desserts'. As products of this culture we felt, at times, seduced into this way of reacting.

Yet there is not a simple dichotomy of good people and bad people – violent people and victims. To deny this is to negate the complexity of a human being.

This research adds to the body of knowledge around family violence. We have a long way to go to understand it fully.

## Recommendations

### 1. Implement the women's recommendations

*Through this research there was congruity from the women about what they needed to help them leave violent situations. They recommend:*

- 1.1 To friends, family and community members supporting a woman in a violent situation that
  - We believe
  - We listen
  - We're patient
  - We give information
  - We accept her choices
- 1.2 To community workers, teachers and other professionals to tell women
  - What family violence is
  - Of their rights within marriage and partnership
  - What a healthy relationship is
  - There's a better life
  - To stay close to people and things that support and nourish you
- 1.3 Ask workers to teach others
  - That family violence is real, it happens, and is a crime
  - The perpetrator could be their good mate, the school president, their brother
  - That it has a ripple effect through the community and through generations
  - That family violence has no excuse

### 2. Effect change in community attitude and behaviour

- 2.1 Recommend to the federal government that sustained campaigns to effect community attitude change towards family violence be implemented, e.g. through implementing the proposed 'No Respect, No Relationship' domestic violence campaign.

*We know it is possible to change community attitudes and behaviour through the success of campaigns around issues such as anti-litter; smoking in public places; safe sex; drink driving; wearing seat belts; anti-racism; wearing helmets on bikes.*

- 2.2 Recommend to the federal government that funds be allocated to engage community opinion leaders to promote and reinforce the anti-family violence stance presented in campaigns.

*Opinion leaders could include service club presidents, school principals, church leaders, sporting representatives, politicians, city and shire council mayors and CEOs, and health and welfare organisations' CEOs. Engagement could occur through a series of regional forums.*

- 2.3 Recommend to federal government that funds be allocated to extend (across both city and rural areas) effective, accredited programs working with men who use violence, using established infrastructure such as community agencies.

- 2.4 Recommend to the Victorian Government that funds be allocated to offer existing 'Healthy Relationships' education to *all* Secondary School students across Victoria as part of the curriculum.

*An early intervention approach could clarify to young people the components of a healthy relationship and how to identify abusive behaviour.*

- 2.5 Recommend to the Victorian Government that funds be allocated to resource and support schools to implement 'Healthy Relationships' education targeted to all primary school children.
- 2.6 Recommend to government that programs such as Neighbourhood Watch and Community Safety be extended to encourage responsibility for the safety of women and children experiencing family violence.

### **3. Effect culture change within service provision**

*Much of the work has been done in consulting with relevant stakeholders and developing sound approaches to family violence incidence. Whilst the frameworks do exist, there are significant deficiencies in their implementation. Intervention Orders often fail to protect women; demand for emergency housing exceeds supply; police response to women varies and can be swayed by a personal relationship with the perpetrator; GPs and health workers can be time constrained and not aware of the dynamics of family violence situations.*

*Judgemental and subjective responses from workers from all sectors is perhaps the most powerful hindrance to the effective implementation of these frameworks.*

- 3.1 Recommend to the Victorian Government that resources be made available for local services with family violence expertise to offer ongoing training, education and support in responding appropriately to women and children. Such training to be offered in a sustained way to:
- Generalist health and community service workers, including hospital staff, allied health staff, nurses and specialists, district nurses, community health workers.
  - Workers in the legal sector, e.g. court staff, police, Victims Assistance Program workers and volunteers
  - General Practitioners
- 3.2 Recommend to the Victorian Government that resources be made available for local representatives of the legal sector to offer paralegal training to family violence workers.
- 3.3 Recommend to the Victorian Department of Justice that community legal services be established across the Hume region.
- 3.4 Recommend to the Victorian Government that additional resources be made available to build on and maintain the recognized achievements of local initiatives that increase effectiveness of the justice and family violence systems, e.g. Wangaratta Family Violence Integration Project
- 3.5 Recommend to the Victorian Government that equitable funding be made available to resource support groups for women and children, particularly in rural areas
- 3.6 Recommend that Women's Health Goulburn North East continue to work collaboratively with Hume region Department of Human Services Child Protection Unit to explore and address issues raised in this report.

- 3.7 Recommend to Women's Health Goulburn North East to disseminate this research report and accompanying book of stories to selected libraries and to individuals and agencies able to positively influence family violence policy or service provision.
- 3.8 Recommend to readers of this report to use this local data to continue to advocate for women.
- 3.9 Recommend that Women's Health Goulburn North East submit the report and book of stories to the Victorian Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence

#### **4. Redress injustice**

*These recommendations emerged from the negative experiences of the women when seeking help and support.*

- 4.1 Recommend to the Victorian Government that the review of the Crimes (Family Violence) Act 1987 consider legislation to keep women and children in their homes<sup>3</sup>.
- 4.2 Recommend to federal and state governments to improve resources for rural services to meet the demand for accessible and ongoing counselling:
  - 4.2.1 for children who have witnessed and experienced family violence
  - 4.2.2 for people affected by family violence.
- 4.3 Recommend to the 'Victoria Police - A Way Forward - Violence Against Women Strategy' that conflict of interest should prohibit the ongoing involvement of a police officer in family violence disputes (e.g. where a personal or business relationship exists).
- 4.4 Recommend to the 'Victoria Police - A Way Forward - Violence Against Women Strategy' that Recommendation No. 10 be implemented (to ensure that the role of the family violence officer be reviewed and resourced at district or divisional level), and that the family violence officer roles be made full time positions.
- 4.5 Recommend to federal and state governments to resource personal protective measures to safeguard the lives of women and children in the 48 hours following a life threatening family violence event.
- 4.6 Recommend that magistrates enforce penalties for breaches of Intervention Orders at the first breach<sup>4</sup>.
- 4.7 Recommend that court staff have a responsibility to ensure that the woman attending court is not subject to threat or intimidation before, during and after the proceedings.
- 4.8 Recommend to the federal government that in cases where a perpetrator is representing himself, video or other means be employed to ensure the woman does not have to be confronted by the perpetrator.

---

<sup>3</sup> As in the proposed legislation drawn up by the Federal Department of Justice and Police in Switzerland (and reported 12.11.2003). This would empower a judge to order the violent member of the family out of the home immediately and would prevent them from contacting the victim. [http://quickstart.clari.net/qs\\_se/webnews/wed/cq/Qswitzerland-justice.RcDE\\_DNC.html](http://quickstart.clari.net/qs_se/webnews/wed/cq/Qswitzerland-justice.RcDE_DNC.html) (Accessed 10.2.2004)

<sup>4</sup> As is the case in .05 offences where ignorance is no excuse.

- 4.9 Recommend to the Victorian Government that:
  - 4.9.1 the Department of Human Services Child Protection Unit front line workers have the proven maturity and life experience to deal with families in crisis
  - 4.9.2 the pay structure reflects the importance and difficulty faced by Child Protection Unit front line workers (indeed all workers within the family violence sector)
- 4.10 Recommend to the Victorian Government that:
  - 4.10.1 the mother be a member of a multi disciplinary team (Child Protection Unit, family violence, GP, counsellor) designed to support her in keeping her children safe.
  - 4.10.2 Child Protection Unit workers be trained in methods of working with violent perpetrators so that the safety of children is enhanced
- 4.11 Recommend to the Victorian Government that foster carers:
  - 4.11.1 be rigorously screened before acceptance into the foster care program
  - 4.11.2 be trained in preparation for their role
  - 4.11.3 be rigorously monitored to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children in care
- 4.12 Recommend to the Victorian Government that diverse initiatives and social marketing strategies are funded to ensure women receive information about available services, rights and obligations.
- 4.13 Recommend to federal government that all Centrelink offices:
  - 4.13.1 provide a safe room for women while waiting to access crisis funds
  - 4.13.2 employ at least one staff member with training in family violence issues

## Findings and discussion

### The last straw – the decision to leave

The decision to leave was made as a result of the cumulative effect of the many dynamics of violence. There was usually a moment of epiphany that provided women with clarity about their experience and the impetus to make this decision. These revelations included critical points regarding children, personal safety and rejection of the partner's dominance combined with reclamation of personal rights, partner infidelity and parental relationships.

Concern for children was the most frequently cited motivation for leaving the violence. Women wanted to protect their children. They wanted their children to be safe, to have opportunities, to have good role models and to have a better life than is possible when living with violence. Women did not want their children to reproduce violence in their future lives as adults.

*I left because of my daughter. She didn't need to grow up in all this violence.*

*The kids were trapped in this with me. His drinking started earlier and the kids were awake and had to watch how horrible he could be.*

*We were fighting and this time the girls were in the house and heard. So that was it .... We broke up that night.*

*It was ... no longer a positive relationship for my children and me. I didn't see him as a good role model for my children.*

*I don't want my four boys to treat their wives and kids this way. Even for my daughter, being a female, there's nothing to say she won't beat her children.*

*If not for my kids I'd still be there.*

The possibility of death brought an urgency to decisions about finding safety.

*I wanted to see my kids grow up and to see their kids and if I didn't get out who knows what would have happened.*

*I felt my life was in danger; I couldn't come to terms with my life.*

Reclaiming the personal right to freedom from abuse and to a life that includes happiness and choice was a significant motivator to women's decision to leave.

*No one has the right to be domineering and tell you who to see, who to talk to, what to wear, whether to wear make up.*

*At some point in the relationship I realised this is not the life I want. Then I thought maybe things can change then realised they don't....If someone's like that you can't change him. Even if you're a good person there is only so much you can take. It's strange. You wake up one morning and think, 'I can't take this.' I've tried and tried and tried and I can't take it anymore. You think of having a better life than this - having fun, not just tears. You start to realise in ten years you'll still be in this situation.*

For some women their partner's infidelity provided the impetus to leave. A question to pose is whether partner infidelity provides some legitimacy of rationale for leaving when the myriad forms of violence women are subject to are too difficult for others to believe or accept.

*Paul was unfaithful on several occasions and lied a lot.*

*Also there was the fact that he was not only abusive but was fooling around with other women. When I found that out it made it easier. I thought, 'I don't need to be in this situation'.*

When one woman's partner extended the violence to her father she faced an emotional ultimatum. When her parents refused to attend her wedding to a violent man, it challenged her to reconsider her decision. This was the source of her decision to leave.

*The reason I left was because we were supposed to be married. Three weeks before the wedding he came to my parents' house to organise the reception. He came up to the house and it ended up being a physical fight with my dad. It was quite severe ... I was pregnant at the time and hadn't told my parents because we were getting married ... What helped was that my mum and dad weren't going to the wedding. That's what did it. It was stronger than Jack.*

### **'Why doesn't she just leave?' – barriers to leaving**

Leaving is not simple. It is a dauntingly complex task. Women informed us that in many ways staying is simpler than leaving. Some of the barriers women encounter when leaving are difficult to overcome and are a legitimate response to the violence. The primary restraint is fear of harm from their partner. However, other barriers are structural and can be addressed.

The acute shortage of affordable housing is a condition that can be changed if there is the political will to do so. Often women face immediate poverty when they leave a violent situation.

At the time of crisis women can approach Centrelink and be assessed as to their entitlement to a crisis payment of approximately \$200. This payment is intended to assist women with the costs of establishing a new home. It is not a loan and is additional to other entitlements. While it is good that some acknowledgement of the cost of leaving is provided, this sum is grossly inadequate when compared with the real costs of establishing a new home.

Is it fair that women and children bear these costs? Or should the cost be relocated - either by asking partners to be responsible for it or by asking the community to provide sponsorship through the tax system with funds redistributed via federal government?

Responsibilities, hardship regarding practicalities with children, lack of economic viability, perpetrator behaviour, access to services and the great blank landscape of the future all contribute to keeping women in the violent home.

Commitment to responsibilities often prevented women leaving partners using violence. For one woman this was a commitment to her rental obligations and to repairing damage to the house.

*One of the reasons it was hard to leave was that he smashed the house up, and, stupid as it sounds, I remember thinking, 'I have to go back and fix the house'. The real estate agent wouldn't rent to me at first, because he'd had so many bad experiences of George renting. He was completely financially dependent on me, and I'd convinced them to rent to me, so I was thinking, 'Oh my God, he's smashed the house'. I wanted to make sure he'd fixed all the holes in the bathroom that he had kicked in (he's a plasterer!), and I wanted to get someone to fix the doors and windows.*

While she says 'stupid as it sounds', there is nothing stupid about trying to preserve an acceptable rental reputation. Tenants who have left properties in disrepair or who have rental arrears find it very difficult to re-house themselves.

For another woman business responsibilities stalled her when she was deciding to leave.

*It was hard to leave because we had the business. That made it hard. People know me as being from the business. It was the responsibility that goes with that. Even now, people come up to me and ask me about that. For about twelve months I didn't shop in my home town because I felt ashamed and judged.*

While the motivation for leaving was strengthened through concern for children, having children complicates leaving in several ways. Obtaining suitable, affordable housing at short notice is very difficult. Children's behaviour changes during this time and can be more challenging for women to manage. The practicalities of seeking help become more complex for women with small children. Basically, it is very difficult to cart numbers of children to and from appointments to agencies that are not child friendly.

*I had a couple of friends who offered me to stay a couple of days but it was too hard with the kids [three children under four].*

*I was in emergency housing. It is especially hard when you have three little kids to find something suitable. It is really, really hard.*

*It's very hard when you have so many kids and you're trying to get out to a refuge and you have to lug them around.*

*There are so many obstacles – the children's behaviour and that sort of thing.*

Finally, we must consider the emotional and practical aspects of economic hardship and of leaving goods and property behind.

*The little things you need like sheets and pots and pans. It's pretty hard to get that organised and to find a house. They're the main things.*

*I left a lot of stuff behind. I always could not leave because I couldn't stand the thought of leaving stuff behind.*

*And financial difficulties. I got paid yesterday and now I'm penniless, there is so much to be paid out. It's \$400 for food so I do that first.*

*Everything was against me when I left; where to go, no money, no Centrelink payment and three little kids.*

*I didn't have a bed. The children had beds. I had only \$50 that I needed for nappies and formula for the week.*

Violent partners use a variety of methods to prevent women from leaving. They keep women poor, they instill fear, they maintain surveillance and they use the children.

*I sat Robert down and said I'm going to be leaving. And he said, 'Ha-ha silly cow. You can't afford to.'*

*When I made the decision to go, it became scary.*

*He used to keep me up all night and get me to do jobs and then he started to keep my son with him all the time so I couldn't leave.*

Women reported the future as scary, an unknown horizon. Worrying about it consumed much of their pre-leaving thoughts. Finding another partner played havoc with decision making about leaving the relationship. Being alone and unloved is a fear that competes with

the fear of staying and enduring the violence. Women worried about their ability to succeed in building a new life.

*I also had a worry that nobody else would ever want me. No other man would find me attractive, that I'd be nobody without him. That's why I stayed too, because I thought I'd never find someone else. He had me believing that.*

*I had no idea that I was going to be able to make it. I was really scared in myself.*

*It was all too hard and scary. You'd think the situation I was in was even scarier [than leaving] but it's amazing what you'll put up with.*

Access to services can be complicated by rurality, and by the degree of hardship to be navigated when small children must be taken to appointments. And by waiting for services.

There are five family violence outreach workers in Hume region based in the larger regional towns of Wodonga, Wangaratta, Benalla, Shepparton and Seymour. Outreach workers travel to smaller towns and country areas. When women find the right time to seek help it is unacceptable that we do not have the structural ability to respond with immediacy. To wait ten days for a service is potentially dangerous and may also be a deterrent to women when seeking help.

*Sometimes women don't have ten days to wait for services. Some can't get out 'til he goes to work or some can't get away at all.*

*In country areas there are not many places to get help. You've got to really look to get out.*

Finally, one of the most powerful and destructive consequences of the violence is the loss of personal power and the ability to act.

*We remain in these relationships because we have lost faith in ourselves; after all the one person we love and would do anything for makes us feel we are such sorry excuses for life.*

*Mostly, I thought I was the problem. I was letting the side down and I was lucky to be there.*

*When you're in this situation, your identity goes, you're pleasing this person all the time, not doing what you want to do.*

*You lose confidence and self-esteem and it takes so long to get it back.*

*Our spirit breaks and subconsciously we believe ourselves to be worthless.*

## **A shaky freedom – staying out of the violence**

The most critical time for women who have left violence is the phase when women are establishing a new life for themselves and for their children (Patton 2003). The cruelty is that women can leave but that does not mean the violence stops. Establishing a new life and new routines is a hard task for women and includes the difficulty of practical and economic hardships. One emotional challenge of staying out of a violent relationship came from the sense of failure women suffered about the end of their relationship. Another emotional pain to grapple with was abiding affection for their ex-partners. For some, a caring role extended after leaving.

*I really, really loved him and he really, really loved me.*

*I used to feel I couldn't breathe without him.*

*I felt sorry for him. I saw a vulnerable side to him. He was crying when I cancelled the wedding. His father had just died too. Five or six things happened at the same time. It was a terrible time*

Continuing to love or want connections with a partner who has used violence in the relationship was an obstacle to leaving and establishing a new life for many women, indicating the complexity of emotions for women as they recover from abuse.

*I felt strong about leaving him but I still wanted to have contact with him, so I was taking the baby to see him. And that carried on 'til she was one. I was still sleeping with him at times.*

*I still have feelings for Paul and always will ... I will care about and love Paul forever. He is the children's father.*

Yet, most women reported the difficulty and distress of the continuing violence from partners who pursued them.

*I was with him for two years and then had another year, after the separation, putting up with his bullshit. Last Christmas he was still behaving violently - he was drunk, feeling sad and sorry because he had nothing. I'd said I would take our daughter over to see him. I had the baby in my arms and he threw the coffee table at us.*

*The hardest thing was that I thought I'd be getting away from the blackmail and the verbal abuse but I didn't.*

*He keeps on annoying, intimidating and harassing me. My son has just started playing football. And he comes and pushes things to the limit.*

*He knows where I live and where I work and he knows the car. He would hunt me. He threatened to fire bomb the house and the car six months ago.*

Changes to daily routines resulting from the new life posed difficulties for some women, further complicated by practical and financial constraints. Women found it easier when they had support from family and friends. The critical question is how women survive when family support is not available.

*It was difficult doing something different. For the first two or three weeks I went to see him almost daily. I would come back in tears. It was hard to break such a habit, something I had been doing for so long. It was hard to change my way of life.*

*It was hard breaking from that day-to-day routine of normal living.*

*It was hard setting up a house. I was pregnant and had two other children. It was an extremely difficult time.*

Powerful images of 'the perfect family' influence women to stay with a violent partner. It tells them to keep working at it. It is also a fantasy that continues after they've left, feeding their doubts about their decision.

*It's this fantasy of a family.*

*I didn't want to fail again.*

*You think you've failed - it's a relationship and it hasn't worked. There must be something wrong with you. Am I the one at fault, am I causing this? I initially thought I was the problem and there was something wrong with me. My family and friends said, 'You're OK. There's nothing wrong with you'. You feel really strongly that you've failed.*

*When you have parents [who are close and loving] you stick at it longer than you should because you think you've failed. I took marriage as a serious thing but you can't stick at it forever. You feel like you've failed.*

## **'You call this help?' – women's experience of support services**

### **The legal system**

The legal system has the mandate and the obligation to support women leaving violent situations. Women's experiences of the legal system vary considerably. There have been helpful responses, but regrettably, many women have found the legal system inaccessible. For some it has been a place of secondary abuse.

*I've been abused first by my partner and then by the legal system.*

Police are front line workers dealing with women experiencing violence at many stages, either in the immediacy of a call to an episode or during the course of responding to Intervention Order breaches. Women have found police communication styles, prejudice, failure to act, lack of empathy and failure to provide information an additional hardship to manage during their leaving stage.

*I have no faith in the police at all. Never did really, I suppose. When John was drinking and I had to call the police a couple of times they just sneered at me.*

*I got told off by one of the police sergeants. He told me off.*

*They [the police] treated me like I was the problem.*

*But in this situation you tend to be treated like the perpetrator not the victim. They infer you make things up.*

*The police don't treat it seriously for anyone leaving and especially for someone in my situation, where you've gone back and forwards.*

*The police asked me four times if I was a lesbian. Four times this year! 'What's it like being a lesbian?'. That's the sort of flack I get.*

*The policewoman [was] saying she thought I was lying to get crimes compensation. I was devastated. Hell, it's taken so much guts to get this far – to get him to court. .... I am so angry with that policewoman. She was a trained policewoman in the community policing squad. Isn't she expected to know?*

*They were the worst. I think because I lived in a small country town. The red tape is too much effort for them.*

*The police thought he was a madman going off. They could have enforced more with Jack. He has gotten away with too much; too many threats were made without follow up. That's why he's gotten so bad.*

*The first time I was told about counselling was in January this year - three years after I'd first contacted the police. Prior to that I'd never been told.*

Police behaviour has been compromised at times by relationships between individual police officers and perpetrators of violence. This leaves women in unacceptably vulnerable positions.

*[His] father was a former policeman. This was always in his favour.*

*I found out the case was the next day. The DPP [State Prosecutor] said he'd asked the police seven times to tell me, and they wouldn't come out to tell me. Rod is friends with one of the policemen.*

Providing safety for women when leaving is paramount. Additional police resources are vital. The most dangerous time for a woman is often at the time of leaving.

*One time we had someone outside the refuge and had to call the police ... They didn't get there for 45 minutes. They said there was a robbery and this took precedence. But another woman and I both had violent partners and we knew if it was our partner out there it could have been much worse than a robbery.*

*They didn't have the manpower to send an escort with me to Centrelink or to the bank the day I left. You've got someone like him who was going to shoot his ex and who had been threatening to kill me and I still have to walk around on my own... I was frantic, thinking he was going to walk around the corner any second. I had the three kids with me and the baby was only three months old... so I felt the police had just put me back in the same situation I was in, in the house. If the police can't help, then someone should.*

Many women are fearful of the court system. Placing intimate and violent details of one's life in the hands of a public and unpredictable system is daunting. Close contact with the perpetrator in the court setting can be almost unbearable for women who continue to suffer the effects of violence, emotionally and psychologically. One woman suffered further trauma by being cross-examined by the perpetrator.

In general, women's experiences of court procedures and staff attitudes was unsatisfactory and at times damaging.

*It was during this court case that Rod cross-examined me. He was allowed to because he represented himself.*

*The thought of going to court was bad enough. I was shaking and I couldn't handle it ... There are a lot of people listening to your life. This is about you. It's hard to take. You're sitting there thinking I can't wait to get out of this place. You don't want to look at them, don't want to sit so close – just a few seats away from them. You don't want to be near them at all. Doing the paperwork was OK but to face him in court was too much.*

*I was scared to ring the court. The registrar at the court was really mean. He said revolting things to me when I was there.*

Intervention Orders, designed to protect victims of crime from ongoing violence, have been weakened by the legal system - the police and the courts - when breaches are not acted upon and when penalties are insignificant. Intervention Orders can also be used by perpetrators to harass women. When an order states the perpetrator will stay 200 metres away, a perpetrator can use that distance to maintain some proximity to the woman.

*He comes over within 200 metres then quickly goes back.*

*The Intervention Order system needs to be looked at. They need to be strict if that person comes near you. They need to send him to jail. They need to know you're serious about it from the first time they do something. He did it four or five times. Police said to him if you come again you'll end up in jail. That's all that stopped his fun and games.*

*He just gets off. It's awful knowing that when I walk out the front door he's 200 metres away, watching us all day.*

*The Intervention Order has been breached 30 times and they don't do anything about it. I'm pretty frustrated about that.*

*For three months I chased them (police) to sort it out and I got nowhere. I put in a complaint to the ombudsman and he came round to my house. There is no way this Intervention Order is worth the paper it's written on. He was trying to get it revoked over 12 months and there were fun and games for a long time after that. I said to the domestic violence worker I wouldn't have taken out the Intervention Order if I had known the trouble it took.*

Overall, women were condemning of the legal system - a system that professes to assist and protect them.

*The service system is supportive and the other side, the legal side, is exactly the opposite.*

*I have no confidence in the legal system and the police. They really are the worst part of it. They need to look at it.*

*I came out of court saying there is no justice in the world.*

One woman made a distinction between police response to family violence as against other areas of police work.

*I'd rank the police right down the bottom. I have great respect for them in other areas.*

### **The medical system**

Medical services provided by GPs and nurses were, in most cases, sensitive and helpful. There were two exceptions. One related to a GP working in a forensic role and the second related to a mental health service. Mental health practitioners were unable or unwilling to make the link between the man as patient and as a perpetrator of violence. They were not able to respond to the reality of the family violence situation.

*When I came back in (to the room) it was as though it was my entire fault. I was told to take him home as he didn't need an assessment. He had promised that he wouldn't hurt me or harm himself.*

*I think the mental health service didn't really believe me. They wouldn't do anything until they saw him in this state for themselves. How could they? They were never there.*

*The doctor was elderly and he was looking at me saying, 'That's your husband. You've got to do what your husband says'.*

### **The service system**

The service system, like the medical system, has been supportive and highly valued by women most of the time. This is absolutely the case for specialist services such as the Centre Against Sexual Assault and family violence services, although structural issues surrounding accommodation and the wait for services continue to be problematic. Women are waiting for accommodation and waiting to access workers. Waiting is an ordinary part of life in ordinary circumstances but dangerous for women living with violence.

*They told me they couldn't do anything without an appointment. I went there crying with three little kids and they gave me an appointment for ten days later! I went to the domestic violence counselling service and they said the same thing.*

The refuge system has been a valuable support for women over the past twenty years and remains an important part of service provision. However, there are aspects of care related to communal living and worker presence that some women have found difficult. Finding a way to identify and respond to the needs of women in a more immediate way is one of the challenges for the service sector. Workers who are not woman centred and directed can be experienced as unhelpful.

*A lot of women can't handle the refuges. The hobnobs are out the back watching your every move.*

*I was pregnant. The workers thought they were doing the right thing when they advised me to have an abortion. They said I had no other children so I had no ties to this man. I booked in twice for the abortion and cancelled, but they still pushed me to this option. When I woke up after the operation I had such a need to re-create that it pushed me back to him.*

*There were no refuge beds in Victoria at that stage! There was a big shortage.*

*The hardest thing is living with the kids in shared accommodation. 'This shelf's yours in the fridge and this shelf in the cupboard'. It's not a nice way to live but at least you're safe and secure and don't have to worry.*

Counselling for children was identified as an urgent need. In most cases, it is unmet in any satisfactory way. For children who live in remote, or even small towns, there are difficulties getting to a counsellor. Even within a provincial centre, transport is a problem for families without cars as public transport is often limited and sometimes non-existent. Mothers had to be resourceful in knowing how to access funding to enable access to counselling.

*It's two hours in the car to see [a counsellor]. It's the same with the counsellor for the kids. My four-year-old daughter needed counselling even back then and my daughter, who is only two, remembers 'Daddy hurt your nose'.*

### **DHS Child Protection Unit**

The notion of 'welfare services' emerged as something women feared. This was apparent from women who had no involvement with the Child Protection Unit (CPU) as well as from those who had. Women were fearful about losing their children – either as a result of Department of Human Services (DHS) intervention to take the children into protection, or a result of the ex-partner using all his power to continue harassing them. There was a suspicion of becoming involved with family violence services and the Department of Human Services, and a feeling that this would bring negativity into their lives.

*I have nightmares of the kids being taken away. You feel like you can't look after them and that someone will come and take them away. I had a nightmare that someone would come and take my son away. I don't know why I had this dream. You want to be protective and you don't want your kids to be hurt anymore.*

*[After we left, he kept making] all these veiled threats so I'd be scared to complain or object to any arrangement [or I] wouldn't get to see my kids at all.*

*We lived in the car, moving from friends' homes for two weeks ... I spoke with some services, but decided not to go to a refuge. I wanted to protect myself and my children from all negativity.*

Some women who did have an involvement with Department of Human Services felt blamed and judged, and some felt there was no recognition of them as competent and loving mothers – even in the face of great difficulties. Youth and inexperience in CPU workers is a

disadvantage when they advise women on how to bring up their children. Women felt insulted and offended by this.

*Human services had, somewhere along the line, turned things around. I was placed on a supervision order. I was unsure as to why ... I had to fight to get my kids back. I was shocked. The Department claimed I wasn't able to provide a safe environment for the children. I flipped. I had tried very hard to protect my kids and myself from being hurt.*

*It was humiliating to be involved with the Department. If there was anything I was sure of, it was that I have always been a good mother to my children.*

*My children and I found ourselves stunned and confused as the people that once seemed to be helping us, were now placing extra stress and complications on our everyday life. My children feared the Department of Human Services taking them away again and felt apprehensive about their visits.*

*I love my children, and they certainly didn't need protecting from me.*

Poverty is a significant issue in the lives of women and children leaving violence. Women felt that Department of Human Services workers had little understanding of the practical difficulties of their lives. It was evident that Department of Human Services workers need to raise their awareness of the circumstances of women and children. One woman was expected to take her two young children from school to a counsellor (separate appointments) and then back to school. She had no car, and the round trip (walking from her home to school to the counsellor and back again) would have been around 8 km, with the children walking about 4km. Public transport was not an option, and a ride by Department of Human Services was not offered to her.

Women felt the protection offered by the Department of Human Services was misplaced, with a focus on the mothers rather than the violent partner. Some felt their children were placed in direct danger by departmental workers who underestimated the danger for children during contact visits with their fathers. Often the women did not feel they were listened to in advocating for their children. They spoke of flaws in the system of hearing testimony from the children themselves and of children making decisions about access visits. Children's words can easily be misinterpreted and it can be hard for a young child to speak against the father.

*The Department put my children in danger and did not report the threats he had made towards them.*

*The child herself has to say 'I don't like it here any more'. She was only seven at the time. When she was 14, on a weekend visit, she said she didn't want to go back. She had been in the business of protecting her father. Maybe it's got something to do with being female.*

## **Where the system works**

All of the women sought assistance of some kind from the broader formal support system, such as income support from Centrelink or housing support from Rural Housing. About half of the women had a direct and ongoing relationship with family violence support services through refuge accommodation or outreach workers. Most women had accessed some form of counselling. Generally their experiences were very positive.

There was a consistently good experience of involvement with the family violence sector. Family violence outreach workers offered counselling as well as practical support and women felt enormous emotional support from workers. There was a sense that they 'were in

it together'. The outreach workers listened to the women, did not judge them, were patient with them, and were available for them.

*The domestic violence outreach workers were fantastic. At one stage we had no hot water when the hot water service blew up. We lived for four weeks with no hot water. The domestic violence worker helped by applying to the Department of Human Services and they put a new service in.*

*I rang the refuge and said, 'Can I stay the night?'. They asked why, and I said, 'Because my boyfriend's been trying to kill me for five hours'. The worker was calling the police on the other phone when I saw that he was coming back towards me. I said, 'He's behind me'. They said 'Shit'. He saw me on the mobile, and he just took off.*

*At one stage I rang the domestic violence service to see how to handle the situation if he comes up to the house, or up to me.*

Refuge accommodation is often unavailable. In these cases, women and children are placed in a motel without the kind of support and protection offered by a refuge. Refuge accommodation can be taxing with very little privacy and other challenges of shared living spaces. Yet women seemed appreciative and very willing to overlook the inconveniences. When seeking refuge accommodation women were in crisis so their experience was often one of trauma as they were fleeing with their children and fearing for their lives. Understandably, women who used refuge accommodation were quick to organise more suitable long term housing. This initial contact was useful in linking women to ongoing services and with family violence outreach workers.

*Refuges offer a necessary safe haven for women and children desperate for safety.*

Most women had sought counselling – either privately or through the Centre Against Sexual Assault or other community services - and found it to be useful. Perhaps what was most useful was the understanding that counsellors would be there to support the women no matter what. Both counsellors and family violence workers conveyed a sense of acceptance of the women's decisions and a willingness to offer unconditional support.

*Even if you come back in a year or six months, she would make me feel comfortable to do that, she said to ring her anytime.*

*I gradually became aware of CASA somehow ... it was the only thing that was helpful.*

*The counsellors listened.*

Women spoke of counsellors helping them to clarify where they were not moving forward.

*I can remember her saying once, months down the track, ... 'I don't think you have emotionally left him. You're still worried about his welfare and not yours'.*

*And having had a lot of counselling, I realised from the psychiatrist that there's nothing wrong with being alone. We think there's something wrong in being on your own.*

For some, counselling sessions were weekly. This suggests that there are long-term ramifications of family violence on women and children, and there are costs implicated in dealing with it simply as a response. Resourcing for crisis response to family violence is minimal.

In this research, the implications of family violence in purely economic terms is clear. The stories give numerous examples of service use, including medical, psychological, housing, police and courts. Furthermore, costs escalate where men use extreme violence. One man

had to be 'guarded' by nursing staff and doctors; for another, 11 police cars attended the scene where he was threatening lives.

Other organisations offering valuable services to women were Rural Housing, Centrelink, free financial counsellors and community legal workers. For one woman in a small town the community health nurse was her first point of contact for information and practical assistance.

*I think I focussed on the community health nurse in terms of getting help. She was warm and easy to speak to, supporting me, offering me services, getting me food parcels and vouchers.*

Housing and income are clearly basic needs for all of us. Most women experienced Centrelink as helpful in providing access to income support quickly. Centrelink staff understood that women were not in a position to obtain maintenance payments from their partners. One woman observed, however, that unless you knew about additional benefits you were entitled to, such as a one-off establishment grant for women leaving violent situations, staff would not offer this advice. This applied to certain legal entitlements as well, such as Victims' Compensation. Women who had friends who worked in the system, as police or social workers, had an easier time. Rural Housing workers were found to be understanding and efficient.

*[Rural Housing staff] are amazing and relaxed. They make you feel like it's just so normal for you to come in and need a house. I thought I'd be looked upon as someone unworthy or not able to cope, but they have the attitude that, 'Of course you need to come in here'.*

*What we do for our clients where I work makes me realise we're a lucky country to help people in need with services. You take it for granted I suppose but if you don't need it you don't know how important services are.*

### **'You've gotta have friends' – what friends and family can do**

Informal support was critically important to all the women. It was this expression of love, compassion and human kindness that helped them through.

While there were disappointments for some women with sisters or mothers letting them down, overwhelmingly, family and friends were a lifeline for women and their children leaving violent men. But, there were dangers in this loyalty. Some have been victims of the man's violence themselves and continue to live with the threat of it. For this reason some community members refused any assistance to women whose partners were known to be violent.

*There were a couple of other ladies that lived near who I was allowed to see anytime. One of them said if I ever needed help she'd call the police for me. A lot of people who know him wouldn't open their door to me.*

Mothers have played a central role for most of the women in offering support. Despite the pain of watching their daughters and grandchildren being systematically abused - for one woman, seeing her pregnant daughter being pushed from a moving car - mothers have provided unwavering emotional support. They have listened and sought to understand and always been there.

*When I was pregnant, Mum tried to put in place safe strategies. She said to him, 'Next time you're angry, call me'. She knew I wasn't going to leave.*

*Mum was a big, strong support because she'd seen me suffer for so long - and the children too. She stood by me the whole time. She came to court with me.*

*[Mum] supported me by saying she's so proud of me. We talked for half an hour last night. I was telling her about my new job. She says she's so proud of me constantly.*

*Really, it's only Mum who supported me. She could give me support as a mother and, because of the field she's in, I got all the support I needed through her.*

*Mum and I painted this [house] before I shifted in.*

Parents often provided short term and permanent accommodation and financial assistance. Grandmothers and brothers helped too.

*Mum helped me more financially – she helped out when my car broke down.*

*So I took in a cheque - from my mum - to pay off the rest of the money that we owed.*

*I stayed with Mum for five months.*

*I'm still with my parents. I have lived with Mum and Dad from when I left. Its two years now. Dad has built a house where I have my own living space with my daughter. They're upstairs. I've always been close with my family. It's nice to have my own space and just pop upstairs when I'm a bit lonely.*

Daughters, although quite young, gave women a real sense of having an ally. In this society it is often easier to disbelieve women and to pretend that family violence does not exist. In the mother/daughter relationship there is shared experience and corroboration of what has happened. Even so, complexity can exist in this relationship as some daughters feel pulled by loyalty or pity towards their fathers despite the cost to them. Some cut ties with the whole family to make a life without violence. Some repeat the cycle and are drawn to violent men.

*There were so many times she'd share her feelings with me and I could validate that - we could validate it for each other ... Once she moved here, she tried not to cut her father off like the boys did ... Three years later she wrote a letter to him saying she didn't want to have anything to do with him, his games, threats, lies and manipulation. I could totally identify.*

*When my daughter started sharing her feelings, I was finally able to say [that] it wasn't just me after all. She is an intelligent person and she's reacting the same way.*

The young sons of some of the women tried to protect their mothers, adding to the heartbreak as they, too, were punched or humiliated by the men. Some of these boys have grown up to be particularly understanding of the circumstances women can be in. Some have grown up to repeat the violence.

*Initially I felt a little apprehensive about coming to this particular refuge because they told me over the phone that my eldest son would not be able to stay with me because of his age. They thought that he may display anger ... due to living with violence and that he was sure to turn out violent. I eventually convinced them that he was very compassionate and loving. He has a very gentle nature.*

*There was one time when [my son] was punched into the wall. Paul was yelling abuse at him calling him a 'maggot dog'. His reason was because [he] rang the police when Paul was yelling at me.*

*My son has gone off the rails. He's thirteen now and trying to be my protector. It didn't matter what I did he was there beside me and there was no privacy. He didn't fall into the old habits of the ex as in violence but in watching me.*

*It goes in families, and now what happened to him is affecting my life and my kids.*

*He didn't have a good family life, he had learnt from his father who was also a control freak.*

*He grew up with it – his father raped his mother in front of the kids.*

*His father was like this too.*

Friends were a consistent source of strength for women. While some turned to friends they had known for decades, or friends they shared daily life with, others chose more distant friends. This was because of safety - their partner didn't know them. Women sought out friends who were assertive and strong in the face of violence and some women found support in friends who had also experienced family violence.

*I stayed with people [he] didn't know so he couldn't find where I was, especially to begin with.*

*Having someone who knows what it's like and has been in that situation is good, because having to explain yourself over and over again is bad. You don't want to have to rehash it each time. They'd understand because they've been there.*

*I moved in with two very assertive and strong women, which kept him away.*

*My cousin is gay and I went to his partner's house and they put me up ... These people didn't ask questions, they just helped me. They gave me a bed and I had showers at their place.*

*Instead I got support with more anonymous friends ... I was staying two days here and there.*

*I have long-term friends. I have another girlfriend ... and we go back a long time, our kids went to kinder together.*

*In the first year, the neighbour who was in the house behind mine was a girlfriend of twenty years as well ... We took a panel out of our fence so we could easily see each other. She was a huge emotional support. I'd always go and have a coffee.*

Most of the women had received unexpected help from people in the community. These included a neighbour, a school principal, a pastor's wife, a nun at the local school, a naturopath and a publican. The help came as advocacy with real estate agents, police and court registrars or it was practical help in looking after children, accommodation and buying essentials to re-establish the family.

*We had a reciprocal arrangement [with friends] swapping children, gathering wood, food shopping – practical, positive, community things. Neighbours would do small jobs for me. Living in a rural community was good, not imposing.*

*My friends helped a lot. I had a lot of stuff given to me.*

*[The] school principal and his wife put me up for a couple of days.*

Friends and family helped in the crisis times of actually packing and leaving, in intervening in the violence, and in taking the woman inside their houses to phone the police. Some were in a position to rent houses they owned or to renovate their homes to accommodate the woman and her children.

*So [my friend] came within an hour and a half... and we started packing.*

*The next-door neighbour intervened, and it took him an hour to get Jack off the property.*

*The publican hid me in the kitchen and they were trying to get through to the kitchen to kill me.*

*So my friend had a house he rented, and the tenants were moving out. I asked him about it, and he offered the house to me.*

Equally vital was the emotional support offered by friends and family in confirming that it was abuse, and it was not her fault. They believed, listened and accepted her. Women spoke of the value they felt in being encouraged to be independent. They were able to make decisions and to take charge of their lives again.

*My friends were talking to me, encouraging me to see the relationship from a different point of view and just talked to me about what's happening to the kids, the relationship, and me. That really helped - having some people to talk to.*

*...but when I talk to people like my family and friends, they'd say you only had to watch how he stood and how he looked at me. They had suspected something was going on.*

*I was learning how to make a decision and stick to it.*

*Friends saying, 'We know you're telling the truth', that's all that matters.*

*Concentrating on having family and friends around was the most important thing. If I had not had that, I would have been in trouble.*

*They've always been there to help me. My friends. I don't know what I'd do without them.*

## **Discovering strength**

When we asked women what personal strengths they drew upon in leaving and staying out of violent situations, we observed that this did not seem to be something they had thought about. Yet in their stories there were many examples illustrating their extraordinary strengths.

The women had reflected on themselves and their situation and the bigger picture of how family violence fits in our communities and our rural context. They spoke about every aspect of the violence and its effects rippling through children, parents, friends and crossing generations. They understood different reactions to the violence. They knew what they needed in the way of support.

*I go into myself and work myself out.*

*My yogic stuff has been my strength. I wanted tools to help me to resolve my situation and in the end it was up to me. I always think back to my own practices, to breathe deeper. I was hardly breathing at all before.*

*In this hour or so a week, I would stay at home or go for a walk, do nothing, just be quiet. This really worked for me.*

They remained hopeful and positive, and identified pride in not allowing the violence to embitter or change them. There was a sense of the invincible spirit beneath the hurt.

*Another strength I have had is that I stayed the same, didn't change my personality. I didn't get bitter, or angry, or change.*

Most of the women had compassion for the men and wished for them a less troubled life.

Many had encountered bigotry and discrimination from people in their communities – school teachers, health and community workers, real estate agents and business people. Many had faced insult and injustice within the legal system.

Not being believed caused great personal hurt. As did being thought of as the cause of the violence. 'Mother-blame' is endemic to the thinking around family violence and protection of children. In taking this research into the field and the community, we observed people focus on the mother as at fault to the extent where the violent man is absent from the discussion. The explanation from sector workers is that it is too difficult to engage with the man. Yet we demand this engagement of the women these men are physically and emotionally abusing.

The women showed courage in standing up to the violence in leaving or (more rarely) in asking him to leave. Some had been forced to escape, having prepared for weeks ahead. One woman had packed the essential documents, clothes and shoes in plastic bags in the bottom of the wardrobe, telling her partner they were for the Op Shop. When an opportunity arose, she knew she could quickly get them, the children and go. Another organised her children to pack their bags before school, so she could bring them after school, collect the children, and leave.

*I said to him, 'You've got to let me take the things that were mine'. I said to him, 'You can't have everything'.*

Simply surviving ongoing physical, sexual and emotional violence and the unpredictability of its occurrence shows incredible strength. When people ask, 'Why doesn't she leave?', it displays ignorance, and is a question of naivety. One woman described her husband's response to her wanting to leave:

*The day before, he was really sick, and was half out of it, so I asked him if he would let me move out ... He started laughing and said, 'You're not fucking getting your own place ... the only way you're getting out of here is in a body bag'.*

Negotiating this kind of relationship was perhaps good practice for the self-advocacy women demonstrated in dealing with the bureaucracies that exist within the legal system and the welfare system.

*When I got here, there were no fences around the house. Maybe the Housing Commission thought I wouldn't care but I've got kids and an eight month old baby. A lot of people who live in the commission [areas] are rough, but I wouldn't put up with it. The back yard was disgusting. I had to fight to get them to move the rubbish. I took half a car out of there! Without fences I couldn't let my kids go outside to play. Imagine six months without being able to let your kids out. I said to the woman at the housing office, 'If my kids get killed or taken by someone, I won't sue, I'm coming after you'. It's my responsibility to see I've got adequate fencing so my kids are safe.*

There was sheer hard work involved in establishing a home for their children in poverty, under the threat of surveillance, and often in explicit danger. But without exception, the women took charge. They created a safe haven, took pride in achievements like paying off their mortgage, paying their bills and having food on the table. They looked after themselves and their children and their friends. They believed there was a better life to be led. They believed in themselves. They loved their children.

*I had a strong desire to improve, not just for me but so I can be a better person, parent and member of the community.*

*I'd do anything for my kids. I drove a truck for six hours, loaded all the furniture, and unloaded it myself.*

*He was always saying, 'You'll never get anywhere' and I realise now he was wrong. I have built a house. I'm paying off my housing loan on my own. I am working.*

*I always have food in the house for the children and then the bills get paid one way or the other.*

*I felt strong and independent enough to believe I could go on without him.*

*I don't want child support. If at the end of the day if he doesn't want to pay it he doesn't have to. Because of his tax situation, I couldn't make him. I think to myself, I don't need you. I will support the girls myself.*

*I have two jobs now and have bills for moving here. I have to pay back friends for petrol used when I was shifting. I owe the schools and electricity, but I'll pay off the school, and deal with the bills one by one.*

*I worked part time picking chestnuts then doing other work for friends as well. The one with the chestnuts asked if I wanted to do the wood selling and delivering with her, too, so I did that.*

*I started phoning TAFE and at the last minute I got into the course and did it for a year. I'd leave at 7am, drive here, and go to TAFE from 9am 8:30pm. A couple of times a week, I'd stay overnight. I did a work placement later in the year. I organised for the girls to be in after school care. I'd be there between 5 and 5:30 to pick them up and take them back home.*

*But what I found was that being by yourself, you get back your identity and do things you want to do ... So I got my life back in my own hands.*

*I've got a car and a new life.*

*If I can go through all of this and be moving on with my life, other women can ...*

## **Staying strong - women leave for good**

The impetus to leave was mostly an episode of extreme violence from the man. For some, it was the sudden or gradual realisation that they and their children had been suffering abuse. All the women left for the sake of their children.

*I plan to do the best I can for my kids.*

In a practical sense, what helped women leave were family and friends who provided short or long-term accommodation, assistance to move furniture and belongings, and emotional support. Women spoke about becoming a daughter again, and being cared for by their mothers.

*You forget you're a daughter when it happens. You've left home, you're a mother and wife, and don't realise you're still a daughter. Parents come back to you all over again ... They come to your rescue in a big way.*

For those without this support, specialist services offered a lifeline to women in crisis. Family violence outreach workers, refuge workers, and Centre Against Sexual Assault counsellors were all essential supports to women escaping violence. The women spoke of these services and the women who provide them in a very positive and appreciative way. For some women, they could not have left without these services.

All the women used services from Centrelink and the Rural Housing Network and free legal and financial advice. All the women accessed counselling services at some stage, and many

have ongoing counselling. While counselling for children is considered important, it is difficult to access.

The most compelling reason behind the women's decision to leave, and the motivation for them to stay out, was their children. The children needed to be out of situations where they were being abused - physically, mentally, emotionally, sexually. They needed to be out of situations where they saw their mother being abused. And out of an environment that encouraged the development of violence within them. A driving force for women was to be a strong and positive role model for their children.

All of the women were motivated by the desire to create a haven for their children. They focussed their energy on creating a house full of love. They spoke of feeling camaraderie with their children.

*And then my home. Creating a nice environment, putting nice things in the garden, getting nice things in the house was good. The house had a nice warm feeling. People say that when they walk in, 'This house has a lovely feeling'. You have to do that - create a nice environment for yourself.*

*My house is quiet now except when I have the stereo on and I can listen to what I want. It's full of love. There's not an ounce of hate. Even when I get mad with the kids we're still OK.*

*I love this house.*

Like war stories, they remembered horrific situations and sometimes laughed that they were free of that now.

*We have a laugh though! The kids will say, 'I've got the cheese container open and the lid's not done up'. It was things like that that would make him very angry. We joke now.*

This sense of humour helped women and children cope with their memories of violence and fear, and celebrated their new found freedom to have fun. Rituals offered another avenue to a new life. One family pulled up all the paving stones in the path to the front door 'because he put them there'. Taking off wedding rings, signing divorce papers, throwing out reminders 'of him' signified liberation. Some women found it helpful to write about what had happened, and one wrote a letter addressed 'to him' stating it was his responsibility. She gave it to him because that's where it belonged.

*One thing that helped was writing my story. I wrote thirty pages and it was painful, hard, agonising.*

*I wrote everything, every little incident from the day I was married. The only things you can't recall are the words. I wrote everything. It was good when it was finished. It got it out of my head, out there, outside of me.*

The weeks, months and years after leaving can be very tough. It was the knowledge and acceptance that the road to recovery is long that assisted women to keep their resolve. They needed to recognise the milestones and the small victories as an indication that things were getting better. They had to accept the 'two steps forward and one step back' reality of starting again.

*I got to a stage where everything's crumbling, and then it falls into place.*

*Even with support I have certainly had my good and my bad days.*

*You do have lapses. They are when you're feeling low and things trigger off your memory of everything that has happened. Also, maybe it takes a few years to get over it. It's been years and I'm getting there.*

*As time goes, the wounds heal but I don't think it ever leaves you ... it's always in the background.*

*There were times when I wanted to give up. I'm really glad I did it.*

It appeared that the longer the period out of violent relationships, the easier it was for women to identify the reality of violence and abuse. A women could look back at how it affected her, and at the person she was forced to be then. Distance in time helped clarify the unhealthiness of the relationship and the extent of the physical or mental danger she and her children were in.

*Now I can sleep and eat like I did before I met him ... I had a partial stroke and a clot in the lung and a breakdown. All from the stress and worry of living with him all the time... But I'm fine now. It's the first time I've been able to go to the toilet without having diarrhoea.*

*You don't feel as scared as you should be when you see him all the time. The thought of him coming home now terrifies me. We don't have any contact now. We haven't for one-and-a-half years.*

*The longer I was away from him the more I realised how repressed I had been.*

*It wasn't until I left that I realised he had such control over me.*

*It was hard coming home and not knowing what was going to happen next. I was on a high all the time, stressed by the uncertainties all the time... I always wound up wondering what was going to happen next.*

The contrast of then and now helped women identify positive changes in themselves and their children. They spoke of feeling physically well (or at least, better), being able to sleep and eat, and of being without the constant sickness of fear, anxiety, or recovering from broken bones. Routine activities were experienced very differently now, like eating a meal together or going on an outing as a family.

Perhaps the hardest thing of all in the time after leaving is the struggle to rebuild self-esteem.

*There was a time in my life where I was overflowing with happiness, high on life. I was a positive, carefree, and contented person. Slowly I am returning [to that].*

*Self-esteem is the key to our undoing, but it is also our key to a better life with confidence and self-respect. We don't take everyday criticisms so seriously, or to heart when we like ourselves and are confident in ourselves.*

*It is great to see [my son's] confidence being restored and I only hope that it keeps building.*

*Self-esteem builds confidence, self worth, and a ground for your two feet to stand on. It allows you to be upright instead of falling down.*

The women had spent many years being told that they were at fault, they were inadequate, they were wrong, they were worthless. The effect was that they started to believe it. Again the distance of time allowed them to see that they were not to blame.

*I have moved on and my memories are still there but have little effect on me emotionally and I find my experiences a lot easier to talk about. I can be honest and am no longer ashamed because it wasn't my fault. I was a victim.*

*It took one and a half years of more threats and abusive behaviour... and treating me badly ... for me to realise and let go... and to realise it wasn't my fault.*

The women could point to what was good about being out of the violence. They enjoyed the freedom – freedom to live a peaceful life, to see family and friends, to determine their own finances, to make decisions.

*I like my new life without dramatic scenes, no fear, very few inhibitions, and the freedom to be whoever we want to be.*

*I remember after that, driving down the highway crying, feeling happy and sad, and thinking, 'I'm free'.*

*I had also felt a real sense of freedom, a start to a new life.*

*Everything is a lot more peaceful now. I still live in fear ... but at least he isn't in our home and running our lives ... We have choices now.*

*I love being able to buy things for the kids for Christmas. I had an amazing feeling of power the month before Christmas not having to justify myself. I wasn't extravagant but could buy things they didn't need. I wouldn't have to explain, and walk around worrying about what was in my shopping bag.*

*The other night we did our groceries at 9pm, got pizza, just hung out. It was really good. We couldn't do that when I was with my husband.*

*Now it's wonderful because I'm not scared.*

*We were left with [no money]. But I was relieved and the children were relieved that it wasn't going to happen anymore.*

*You're walking different, not being dragged down anymore.*

They regained their human rights. They saw their children as happier and more confident. And they had space to think about themselves.

*After a year and a half I started thinking about me.*

This was the critical first step in starting again. Women had to look after themselves in order to look after their children. They developed strategies for coping with the demands of starting a new life with children, mostly in poverty, without a house, without furniture, and with few belongings. All had (and continue to have) scars from their experiences. Some had (and continue to have) ongoing fears for their lives.

*He said to me, 'If you leave me and don't come back, I'll get you. But it won't be when you are down. When you're happy, that's when I'll come and get you'.*

Being around strong and uplifting people, going out with friends, staying close to family were vital. Others needed to spend time alone and to keep in touch with their own feelings. Natural therapies and creative art allowed some women to be aware and manage their feelings.

*Aromatherapy has helped me enormously. I use it on the kids – a calming blend.*

*I bought some oil pastels and now I'm doing something for me.*

*I wanted to be around uplifting, positive people. I went to the ashram to be around positive people who were self reliant and independent.*

Work and study played an important part for some women, who found that staying busy and building a career were critical. Work colleagues provided support. One woman stressed that

it was important to leave it all in the past – to recognise it had happened, but it was over now.

*Yeah, shit happens but don't waste time dwelling on it. Accept that what has happened has happened and can't be changed, so deal with it. When we wake every day it is our day. We don't have to let anything bring us down. We can say what we feel and why we feel this way. We are entitled to express our opinions.*

All of the women were able to identify changes in themselves – as more confident and independent. They conveyed a strong sense of their right to fair treatment within a relationship now and in the future.

*My Dad gets teary and cries when he thinks about it, and about my situation. I say 'Don't worry, it's better than going back to him'. We can't go back to a life like that.*

*I never could go back to the same situation.*

*I have respect for myself. I believe I am a good person and should be treated as such...*

## **Appendix 1 – Research questions and interview schedule**

### Research questions

1. What helps women once they decide to leave a violent situation?
2. Who helps women once they decide to leave a violent situation?
3. What are the variables that complicate leaving?
4. (Thinking about the 12 month period after leaving) What are the factors contributing to staying out of the situation?
5. What are the personal strengths that women draw upon during this time?
6. Where women have used the service system, what have been their experiences?
7. Where women have not used the service system, what are the reasons?
8. What are the critical points where women need support?

### Interview schedule

1. Can you tell us about leaving your situation – what it was like?

What helped?

Who helped?

2. What were the things that made it hard to leave?

3. Tell us about your new home situation.

What was hard?

What worked for you?

Who helped?

4. What did you draw upon in yourself that helped you make this move?

5. Tell us about your experience of service provision.

6. (If no use of local services) How come you didn't use local services?

7. If you had a friend in the same situation as you have been in, what would you do for her?

## Appendix 2 – Literature review about family violence

Understanding what enables women to leave violent situations is a relatively undeveloped area of knowledge, with much of the previous work concentrating on what stops women from leaving (Patton 2003). It is important to identify and consider the factors that enable a woman to leave so that we have the means with which to strengthen service sector and informal support systems (Patton 2003).

Between one in three and one in four women experience family violence in Australian households (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996 in Taft 2003; Bulbeck 1993; Stafford & Furze 1997). In a domestic setting violence is largely perpetrated by men and the victims are usually women (Indemaur, Atkinson & Blagg 1998). Many authors agree that men use violence to take control in relationships and to take control during an altercation (Indemaur et al 1998, National Committee on Violence Against Women 1994 in Keys Young 1999, Scutt 1991). Men using violence in their homes feel it is a necessary and justifiable means with which to exert control in their relationship (Indemaur et al 1998). Violence in the home has effects beyond physical injury and is defined by the National Committee on Violence Against Women (1994) as:

*Behaviour by the man, adopted to control his victim, which results in physical, sexual and/or psychological damage, forcing social isolation or economic deprivation, or behaviour which leaves a woman living in fear.*

Further to professional definitions of violence, we present a description of violence from Violet Roberts (in Genovese 1997 p. 91) for consideration:

*On that day I was extremely depressed and miserable. I was also very tired and I had a sore and swollen right hand. Eric had broken a bone in one of my fingers two days previously when we were staying overnight at a motel in Sydney, by wrenching and twisting my hand. We had gone down to Sydney to collect our dead son David's gear. I was still numb from his death and collecting his clothes made all the grief come back. On that day we were up at 6am and spent the whole day travelling by public transport from Sydney back to Pacific Palms.*

Violet's account of her experience informs us of the merciless nature of family violence and the accompanying effects such as depression, tiredness and physical injury.

Violence is a behaviour that is produced and reproduced within the norms of male culture, a culture wherein dominance of men is a norm (Patterson 1991). Family violence occurs in the context of male domination and power granted to men by our history and social structures (Poole 1994). Social mores continue to insist that women and men should exist within the confines of 'appropriate' roles (Scutt 1990). The paradigm of patriarchy powerfully affects women as well as men (Stout & McPhail 1998; Robinson 1997). Within this paradigm women struggle to understand their experience of sexism because it is part of their cultural history and it can be difficult to locate - at times invisible. At the same time women oppose gender based power differences in ways available to them according to the information, consciousness and personal power they can access at particular points in time (Sachs 1996). In contemporary society women are understood as wives, as partners and as mothers (Stout & McPhail 1998; Robinson 1997). As mothers, women are expected to be responsible for children and face restrictions of freedom associated with child bearing (Stout & McPhail 1998; Robinson 1997). The media continues to portray women with images that put them down. They are portrayed as sex objects or victims. Alternatively women are portrayed stereotypically as wives, mothers or secretaries in caring roles. Women are expected to be

body beautiful. Significantly, the media frequently portray violence against women (Stout & McPhail 1998: Robinson 1997).

Women are not equal to men in terms of the type of work they do, their security in it and their ability to earn an income equal to men. These social and economic factors contribute to the existence of violence in intimate relationships.

This project has gathered stories from women in the Hume region. The stories offer opportunities to consider the women's personal strengths, the service sector strengths and the informal support system strengths that have made a contribution to women's ability to leave violent relationships. This work will contribute to a strengthening of local environments in order to further support the ability of women living with violence to regain personal power and safety. Consulting with women who have experienced family violence to discover what kind of support has been helpful privileges their views and is an important goal of feminist research (Reinharz 1992).

However, there are other aspects of hearing the stories of women experiencing family violence that have equal importance and we cite them here to acknowledge that they too are significant to this work. Hearing women's stories offers women an opportunity to have support and to make public what has been confined to the privacy of a relationship (Genovese 1997: Scutt 1990: Radford, Kelly & Hester 1995). This can be cathartic. For a woman to have an opportunity to tell her story is a consciousness raising experience, another aspect of feminist work that is highly valued (Reinharz 1992). Furthermore, stories of family violence are an important part of women's history and should be included as part of our public discourse, helping us to move forward (Genovese 1997: Scutt 1990: Radford et al 1995). We asked women about their experience of participating in the research and telling their story. We have evidence of the benefits cited and present it here for consideration. Further to the benefits of participating, women inform us of their motivation for the work and it is clearly to help other women.

*I have really looked at my life and seen how far I have come. I feel really proud of myself as a person. Also I hope to be of help to someone else who is suffering.*

*I felt I was making a contribution towards changing the future for women. Society needs to be informed of domestic violence.*

*It helped me to tell what happened to me. There must be more women and children out there that are being mentally abused and not know that it is abuse just like me. I felt like I was believed finally.*

*It gave me a chance to reflect and realise I had survived and created a better life for Ruby and I. I got a sense of pride for my courage to leave. I feel united at last with other women, knowing they have similar stories.*

Keys Young (1999) explains that there are particular risk factors pertaining to physical and sexual assault that are noteworthy. Women are more likely to experience violence between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. Violence is likely to occur early in relationships or when a woman first becomes pregnant. Another time of high risk for women experiencing violence from their partners is at separation (Keys Young 1999). These risk factors provide valuable insights for practitioners with regard to critical points in women's lives. They might also provide clues about when it is most difficult for women to leave. Perhaps it becomes easier for women to leave when they are in their mid-twenties or later, when their relationship is not new and when they are not pregnant for the first time. Conversely, if separation is a high-risk time for women, staying with a violent partner might be a strategy

employed to preserve safety. The risk factors Keys Young (1999) has identified have been useful to data analysis, helping us to understand the timing of a leaving decision.

Family violence has devastating effects on women. Women experience isolation as a consequence of their partners controlling behaviour and/or as a consequence of unhelpful responses from friends, families or support services (Jackson & Dilger 1995: Tiezen Gary 1991: Bagshaw 1995). Women may experience a loss of confidence and self-esteem and find anxiety a constant companion. Physical injury may be suffered. Women may feel grief and loss for the relationship they once had or for the dreams they've held for a happy relationship (Jackson & Dilger 1995: Tiezen Gary 1991: Bagshaw 1995). Women may feel guilt about their own situation, somehow taking on responsibility for their perceived failure to make the relationship work. Women experience depression and generalised fear. They may feel angry (justifiably) about the family violence and its effect on their life (Jackson & Dilger 1995: Tiezen Gary 1991: Bagshaw 1995). The effects of family violence on women give insight into the reasons women stay with violent partners.

Women stay with their partners despite experiencing violence because they love and feel loved and because they enjoy other aspects of their relationship (Bagshaw 1999: Stout & McPhail 1998). Women face the prospect of considerable economic hardship as leaving (for many) is associated with living on a state provided income, which is meagre and can lead to a life of poverty. Women stay believing their partners will change. Women stay because they feel a sense of shame about their experience and feel responsibility for the relationship (Bagshaw 1999: Stout & McPhail 1998). Women stay because they worry about not being believed. Women stay because their partner has threatened their safety if they try to leave (Bagshaw 1999: Stout & McPhail 1998). Finally, women stay because they experience confusion about the degree of violence and how much is within the realms of normality and where to draw the line (Bagshaw 1999: Stout & McPhail 1998). Some of the points cited are clearly described by Lisa (in Barnett & La Violette 1993 p. 2):

*I believe that you stay with your partner for better or for worse. I didn't know what 'worse' was when I made that promise, but I promised. I believe my husband loves me, and I'm starting to believe he could kill me. I'm not sure how long I should stay and how 'bad' is 'too bad'. I know I don't believe I should be hit. But I do believe if my relationship is a mess I should stay to make it better.*

Our research confirms this and suggests another major reason for staying is the erosion of self-esteem that is a consequence of the experience of violence.

Patton (2003) has found that women are 'enabled' to leave when formal support (from the service sector) and informal support (from family and friends) are available. The foundations of a woman's ability to leave are laws, access to resources such as housing and income and access to information. She identified five phases of leaving. The first is pre-contemplation, wherein a woman is living with the violence without planning to leave. The second phase is described as contemplation, when a woman is considering leaving and talking about her options. The third phase is deciding to leave, a time when a woman is making specific leaving arrangements. The fourth phase is actually leaving, and this may be temporary or permanent leaving. The final phase, during which a woman is establishing a new life free of violence, is the most challenging. It is a time when women seek '...non-directive practical and emotional support and where access to resources was crucial'.

At the point of leaving it is critical that women receive 'enabling' responses from formal supports including family violence services, generic counsellors, Centrelink, police and adult education institutions, lawyers and general practitioners. It is equally important that women experience enabling responses from friends and family. It is also critical that the foundations

mentioned previously are available to women - foundations such as housing, childcare, income and access to justice. Access to information is important and usually drawn from media, books and family violence specific information strategies. Finally, women are supported in their leaving by enabling beliefs and feelings. For example, if a woman can feel a sense of hope and ability to create safety for herself and her children she is supported by such feelings and beliefs to leave. Alternatively, if she has given up hope of safety, this is a belief that hinders her leaving (Patton 2003).

In conclusion, there is a gap in knowledge about the factors that enable women to leave violent relationships, though Patton's (2003) recent work offers a substantial contribution to new knowledge.

### **Appendix 3 - Literature review about feminist research**

Writers on feminist research suggest that women's voices must be heard and that these experiences represent a privileged insight into reality (Trinder, 2000). Within this standpoint research framework, mothers, children and professionals would be interviewed whilst men's stories would be intentionally excluded. The rationale offered is domestic violence is mainly committed by men towards women (p45).

While Trinder acknowledges that all research accounts are a product of a particular time and place and there are no whole truths, standpoint research in this context appears as insufficient. A woman's account is accepted as truth, her innocence a given, whilst the male remains a brute, though unrepresented. Thus the voices of the oppressed have a privileged status.

Postmodern feminist analysis offers a different perspective. Its emphasis is on how masculinity and femininity are constructed and their relationship to each other, as opposed to notions of victims and oppressors. From this point of view a researcher would take a particular interest in analysis of the gendered discourses research participants use in the context of time and place as well as the intersection with other discourses. This is a shift away from the notions of woman and man. It also 'moves us away from attempting to articulate or capture women's voices to examining what voices are used within the context of gender and other social relations' (p51).

The interview is then regarded as a local accomplishment; a topic in itself, rather than an interview that with the empathy and trust of a researcher reveals the truth. Trinder (2000) concludes by suggesting that more weight (and recognition) is given to the interpretive role of the researcher, whose primary methods are analytic narrative analysis and discourse analysis.

Millin (1997) presents two key concepts within feminist research; the empowerment of women and the equality of the research relationship. The author identifies feminist research more by the values it upholds than the various techniques that may be used within that research. She identifies some problems with feminist research, including, 'doing feminist research on unsympathetic populations can lead to conflicts between the researcher and participant's construction of the meaning of gendered experience'. But concludes that both feminist standpoint and feminist postmodernism are useful justifications for the decisions taken in research. Because feminist research has insisted on research about women, the nature of feminist research, states Millen, is gendered rather than generic.

Humphries (1997) asserts that, on the whole, feminists are united by two basic ideals regarding power. Firstly, she believes feminists are committed to 'ways of knowing' that avoid subordination. Secondly, that feminists question the accepted dichotomies about issues to do with knowledge creation, specifically notions of subjectivity/objectivity, reason/emotion, grand theorising/lay theorising and researcher/researched.

Those theorists which Humphries labels 'emancipatory', argue that all research is value laden and is inevitably political since it represents the interests of particular (usually white, male groups). Neutrality is seen as problematic.

'What it requires', writes Humphries, 'is research which 'brings to voice' excluded and marginalised groups as subjects rather than objects of research and which attempts to understand the world in order to change it'.

She draws attention to Foucault's (1993) argument that there may be projects whose aim it is to modify some constraints 'to loosen or even break them, but none of these projects can

simply ... assure that people will have liberty... Liberty is a practice'. The reference here is to the feminist attempts to empower or emancipate those who are oppressed.

Finally, Humphries warns that feminist frameworks need to be interrogated, that the tensions and contradictions in our own (feminist) research need to be identified. Paradoxically, researchers need to be aware of their own complicity in what they critique, because 'emancipatory intent is no guarantee of emancipatory outcome'.

In the paper 'Conducting Qualitative Research on Wife Abuse', Chatzifotiou, (2000), identifies some key issues paramount to undertaking research with abused women. Chatzifotiou locates the sensitivity and needs of the abused woman at the centre of concerns as well as acknowledging the anxieties of the researcher. Research should be designed with awareness of the possible stresses on all parties and the researcher must anticipate this prior to undertaking any fieldwork.

Feminist research, according to Chatzifotiou, is not about methodology or technique, but a critical perspective which aims to change the oppression of women and correct the invisibility of their experiences in ways relevant to ending women's unequal position in society. She supports the value of being open (as a researcher) and using one's own subjectivity to produce more valid data.

All research is political, and feminist research into family violence gives a particular view of social relations. It is not possible to study it apolitically. Feminist research has developed a theoretical perspective of women in society and locates men's violence as part of men's structural power within that society.

Chatzifotiou suggests that in-depth interviews are one of the most powerful qualitative research methods used by feminist researchers to enable women to tell their stories. She emphasises the importance of keeping the interview equal, non-hierarchical and non-exploitative and suggests the researcher use open ended questions because this encourages woman-to-woman discussion, defining their own experiences from their own points of view.

Possibly a contentious area for some researchers, Chatzifotiou believes the researcher has an obligation to talk through questions and to share her own thoughts with the researched. Self-disclosure (from the researcher) is a possible feature of this research, which would result in a level of trust and equality.

## References

- Alston, M. (1997) 'Violence against women in the rural context', *Australian Social Work*, Vol 50. No 1.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996) in Taft, A. (2003) 'Promoting Women's Mental Health: The Challenges of Intimate/Domestic Violence Against Women', *Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse*, Issues Paper 8.
- Bagshaw D., Chung, D., Couch, M. , Lilburn, Wadham, B. (1999) *Reshaping Responses to Domestic Violence*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Barnett, O. and La Violette, A. (1993) *It Could Happen to Anyone*. California: Sage.
- Bulbeck, C. (1993) *Social Science in Australia*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, in Hamilton, I. and Ferry, J. (1997) 'The Family in Australia' in Stafford, C. and Furze, B. (eds.) *Society and Change*. South Melbourne: Macmillan Education.
- Chatzifotiou, Sevaste. (2000) 'Conducting Qualitative research on Wife Abuse: dealing with the issue of anxiety', *Sociological Research Online*, 5 (2), <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/2/chatzifotiou.html>
- Dobozy, Eva. (1999) 'The Researchers move to the Centre of the Research Process', *Outskirts Online Journal*, <http://www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts/archive/VOL5/article1.html>
- Genovese, A. (1997) 'The Battered Body', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 12 (25), pp. 91 – 102.
- Humphries, B. (1997) 'From Critical thought to Emancipatory Action: Contradictory Research Goals?', *Sociological Research Online*, 2 (1), <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/2/1/3.html>
- Indemaur, D. , Atkinson, L., and Blagg, H. (1998) *Working with Adolescents to Prevent Domestic Violence*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Jackson, M. and Dilger, R. (1995) 'An Empowering Approach to Women's Domestic Violence Groups', *Australian Social Work*, 48 (1), pp. 51 -59.
- Keys Young (1999) *Against The Odds: The needs of women experiencing domestic violence who do not use domestic violence and related crisis services*. Canberra: Office of the Status of Women.
- Keys Young, 1999, *Against the Odds: the needs of women experiencing domestic violence and related crisis services*. Canberra: Office of the Status of Women.
- Laing, L. and Bobic, N. (2002) 'Literature Review: Economic Costs of Domestic Violence. *Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse*, <http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au>

La Nauze, H. and Rutherford, S. (1997) 'Women's work against violence: community responses in a rural setting' in *Women Against Violence*, Issue 2 pp 14-21.

Millen, D. (1997) 'Some Methodological and Epistemological Issues Raised by Doing Feminist Research on Non-Feminist Women', *Sociological Research Online*, <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/3/3.html>

National Committee on Violence Against Women (1994) *Position Paper*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Nicholson D. (1988) 'Only a Domestic: a rural perspective on police responses to violence against women', *Women Against Violence*, Issue 4 pp.15-24

Patterson, R. (1991), 'Counselling Violent Men: fraudulent virility and coercive power among men' in Batten, R., Weeks, W. and Wilson, J. (eds), *Issues Facing Australian Families*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Patton, Shirley. (2003) *Pathways: How women leave violent men*. Hobart: Women Tasmania, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Poole, M. (1994) 'The Status of Women in Australia', in *Family Violence in Australia. Everybody's Business. Somebody's Life*. M. Draper, M., Kirkby, D., Nolan, C. and Orr, L. Sydney: Federation Press.

Radford, J., Kelly, L., and Hester, M. (1995) *Women, Violence and Male Power: feminist activism, research and practice*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Reinharz, S. (1992) *Feminist Methods In Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Robinson, M., (1997) 'Gender' in Stafford, C. and Furze, B. (eds) *Society and Change*. South Melbourne: Macmillan education.

Sachs, C. (1996) *Gendered Fields*. USA: Westview Press.

Scutt, J. (1990) *Even in the Best of Homes: Violence in the Family*. North Carlton: McCulloch Publishing.

Scutt, J. (1991) 'Criminal Assault in the Home: Policy Directions and Implications for the Future' in Batten, R., Weeks, W. and Wilson, J. (eds) *Issues Facing Australian Families*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Stafford, C. and Furze, B. (1997) *Society and Change*. South Melbourne: Macmillan Education.

Stout, K. and McPhail, B. (1998) *Confronting Sexism and Violence Against Women*. Melbourne: Longman.

Strategic Partners and Research Centre for Gender Studies, University of SA. (1999) *Current Perspectives on Domestic Violence: A review of National and International Literature*. Commonwealth of Australia.

Tiezen, G. L. (1991) 'Feminist Practice and Family Violence' in Bricker-Jenkins, M., Hooyman N. & Gottlieb N. (eds), *Feminist Social Work Practice in Clinical Settings*. California: Sage.

Trinder, Liz. (2000) 'Reading the Texts' in Fawcett, B., Featherstone, B., Fook, J. and Rossiter, A. (eds), *Practice and Research in Social Work: Post Modern Perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Victorian Police (2002) *A Way Forward: Violence Against Women Strategy*.