



Support Help & Empowerment (SHE) Inc.

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry  
House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee  
Inquiry into the Child Support Program 2014  
Compiled on Behalf of SHE by Amy Baraciolli



## About Support Help Empowerment (SHE) Inc.

SHE is a not for profit organisation that provides specialist counselling services for women who are currently or have previously experienced family and domestic violence. Our mission is to provide women with support and information in a safe and secure environment. As a feminist service, SHE believes people are disadvantaged by gender roles, cultural, social and historical inequalities. We work towards the elimination of abuse and violence by providing an integrated response to domestic violence, and we are the only organisation in southern Tasmania that offers this specialised service.

SHE was established in 1989 by members of the Domestic Violence Action Group Inc., who believed violence against women to be a violation of human rights. SHE's establishment developed from the acknowledgement of the long term effects of violence on women's lives, and the decision to set up a women's service was based on a philosophy of equity and empowerment.

When SHE officially commenced, it was staffed by trained volunteers and supported financially by community groups, businesses, and individuals in the local community. Later on, the Departments of Community Services and the Premier and Cabinet began to provide funding, as well as basic equipment and library resources. In 1991, funding had increased enough that SHE was able to employ workers and expand the service.

Since its establishment, SHE has operated under the belief that women are entitled to a life free from violence. Ongoing funding from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has enabled us to continue our work in supporting this belief. SHE is built on the belief that people have the right:

- To live free from violence and in safety
- To equality and respect
- To recognise their potential
- To make informed choices regarding their lives

SHE believes that an end to violence against women and children is possible, and that women and children are entitled to live their lives free from violence.

## Parliamentary Inquiry into the Child Support Program: Overall Comments

SHE would like to thank the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal affairs for the opportunity to provide a submission to address the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Child Support Program. SHE endorses the submissions made by Hobart Women's Health Centre, the National Council of Women of Tasmania, Women's Legal Services Australia, WIRE Women's Information, and the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children, particularly the Hobart Branch.

Given SHE's specialisation in working with women who have experienced domestic or family violence, our response to the Inquiry is primarily focused on their specific experiences with Child Support, and the experiences of women generally, most of whom are in the role of 'payee'. While we acknowledge that some men also have negative experiences with the Child Support system, we believe it is our role to address the specific issues that are faced by women, who are disproportionately disadvantaged because of current and historical gender inequality.

SHE would like to express disappointment that the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry do not specifically address domestic or family violence, or the role of the Child Support system within abusive environments. It is both inappropriate and reductive to conflate 'high conflict' families with families within which abuse is occurring. It erases the complexity in the lives of women and children who are experiencing abuse, and fails to ensure that their specific needs and issues are addressed. The safety of women and children must be a priority, and the safety of women and children who are experiencing domestic or family violence requires special consideration by the Child Support Program, and by this Inquiry. The Program must reflect the realities of domestic and family violence, taking into account the potential for financial abuse to be perpetuated through the Child Support system, and recognising the impact that the Child Support system can have on the lives of women and children who have experienced violence or abuse.

One of our main concerns with the current Child Support system is that by failing to adequately provide policies and processes that address domestic and family violence, women who have experienced such violence may not receive the specialised services that they require. Women who have experienced domestic or family violence are often uncomfortable self-identifying as a victim or asking for special assistance. Their own safety and wellbeing, and that of their children, is typically their priority, often to the detriment of their financial security, which may lead to reluctance in pursuing options that risk exacerbating an already dangerous situation. The likelihood that women will notify Child Support workers of an abusive situation is further minimised because of the widespread lack of awareness that financial, psychological, and emotional abuse constitute family violence, so that women may not even recognise their situation is abusive. Further, some women have reported having their claims of abuse ignored or disbelieved by workers at Centrelink and the Child Support Program. Given the lack of evidence around women falsifying claims of abuse, there is absolutely no justification for such unsupportive and potentially dangerous responses to claims of domestic and family violence, and it is clear that a cultural shift within these organisations is necessary.

Because of the low rate of self-disclosure by women who have experienced violence or abuse, the onus is on Child Support workers to be able to recognise cases where domestic or family violence exists, and to provide the information, support, assistance, and referral that may be required. Specialised training about domestic and

family violence is thus needed for all frontline Child Support staff, and this training should be provided according to international standards of best practice, incorporating the expertise of trainers who have worked extensively with people who have experienced violence or abuse. It is also vital that Centrelink frontline staff receive the same training to ensure that people who have experienced violence or abuse are informed as early as possible of their rights and options throughout the Child Support process, such as the option to seek exemption from 'reasonable maintenance action' requirements, and to ensure that they are also fully informed about the potential implications of their choices.

Finally, SHE would like to emphasise how crucial it is to seek out the input of women who have experienced violence or abuse in the development of any policies or procedures that may impact on their lives. Women who have experienced abuse are often significantly disempowered, and may not be able to engage in the kind of community participation that is necessary to ensure that their voices are heard and their concerns addressed. While the Inquiry's call for submissions is an excellent opportunity for organisations to advocate on their behalf, most individuals do not have the resources or knowledge about the submission process to be able to engage in this process. In order to ensure that Child Support Program adequately addresses the needs of women and children who have experienced family or domestic violence, more research into the lived experiences of such women and their interactions with the Child Support Program is necessary. Such research must be inclusive of vulnerable populations, such as culturally and linguistically diverse women, Indigenous women, LGBTI women, and women with disabilities – including women with mental health issues, to ensure that their specific needs and concerns are considered and addressed. Research should also include a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, to allow women to use their own words and include their own personal experiences.

## Recommendations

1. That the Child Support Program holds the safety of people who have experienced violence and abuse as the priority when working with them.
2. That Child Support policy differentiates between 'high conflict' families and families that have experienced domestic or family violence.
3. That the definition of 'high conflict family' specifically excludes those families within which violence or abuse has occurred.
4. That Child Support policy and practice reflects the realities of domestic and family abuse, in particular:
  - a. That financial abuse is a common feature of domestic and family violence,
  - b. That abusers may use the Child Support Program as a tool through which to perpetuate abuse, and
  - c. That women may feel forced to choose between Child Support payments and the safety of themselves or their children.
5. That specific policies and processes are developed that address cases that involve domestic or family violence.
6. That these policies and processes are developed according to international standards of best practice, and in consultation with specialists in domestic and family violence.
7. That a domestic violence screening tool is developed for the Child Support Program, and that all Child Support and Centrelink staff are trained in screening for and identifying domestic violence according to international standards of best practice.

8. That Centrelink and the Child Support Program promote a culture within which disclosures of domestic and family violence are believed and supported.
9. That research is funded to investigate the experiences of women with the Child Support Program, and that such research is inclusive of women who have experienced domestic or family violence, women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTI women, Indigenous women, women with disabilities, and other vulnerable or marginalised groups.