



## Support Help & Empowerment (SHE) Inc.

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry  
Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee  
Submission to the Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia 2014



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## 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 believes 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.

# Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia:

## Overall Comments

Domestic/Family violence is a complex and serious social problem which affects individuals, families, communities, the workplace and the economy. SHE would like to thank the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee for allowing us to present our submission to the Inquiry into Domestic Violence.

## The prevalence of domestic violence in Australia

Domestic violence is widespread throughout the Australian population. Domestic violence is a gendered crime. It is overwhelmingly committed by men against women. Research from the ABS Personal Safety Survey (2012) highlights the alarming prevalence of domestic violence in Australia. Since the age of fifteen, one in six Australian women had experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner. One in four Australian women had experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner. Sixty one percent (61%) of women reporting violence in the ABS study stated that they had children in their care when the violence occurred. Domestic violence is under-reported to the police. Fifty eight percent (58%) of women who had experienced violence by an ex-partner reported that they had never contacted the police. The Australian Institute of Criminology found that, on average, one woman is killed every week in Australia by a current or former partner (Chan & Payne, 2013).

Family violence is a very serious issue for women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Indigenous women experience violence at far higher rates than non-Indigenous women (Willis, 2011). Indigenous women are as much as 35 times as likely to sustain serious injury and require hospitalisation as a result of domestic violence (Al-Yaman, Van Doeland & Wallis 2006). Indigenous Australians are over-represented as victims of intimate partner homicide. Forty two percent (42%) of indigenous homicide victims were killed by an intimate partner, compared with 20% of non-indigenous victims who were killed by an intimate partner (Chan & Payne, 2013). This violence must be understood in the context of colonisation and disadvantage in which it occurs.

There is also a high incidence of violence against women with disabilities. Women with Disabilities Australia (2013) suggest that over a third of females with disabilities experience some form of intimate partner violence. Such violence is likely to be more severe and continue for longer than that experienced by women without disabilities (Morgan & Chadwick 2009).

## The impact of domestic violence

Domestic violence results in significant social, emotional and economic costs to victims, their families and the broader community (Laing & Bobic 2002). The costs to society generally are significant and ongoing. Domestic violence has a profound impact on physical and mental health. It can lead directly to serious injury, disability or death. VicHealth (2004) found that among women under 45, domestic violence contributes more to their poor health, disability, and death than any other risk factor.

Domestic violence often has very severe negative impact on the well-being of the whole family. These effects may affect the family for the rest of their lives. Children's physical health, learning, cognition, social and emotional development can all be impaired by experiencing domestic violence (Chadwick & Morgan, 2009). Exposure to the trauma of domestic violence can harm the child's brain development (Perry, 2001). The secure attachment between a child and their carer can be disrupted. The World Health Organisation highlights the ongoing impact of childhood abuse; "some children from households where there is intimate partner violence may exhibit increased rates of behavioural and emotional problems that can result in increased difficulties with education and employment, often leading to early school drop out, youth offending and early pregnancy" (WHO, 2010, p.5). Older children may also have an increase in health-risk behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse and dependence (WHO, 2010). Adolescents who experience violence at home are at risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence in their own dating relationships (Flood & Fergus, 2008).

From an economic point of view, it has been estimated that the cost of violence against women and their children to the Australian economy would be \$13.6 billion for the 2008-09 time period (KPMG, 2009).

## The factors contributing to the present levels of domestic violence

Complex and interactive factors contribute to Australia's present levels of domestic violence. The ecological model of intimate partner and sexual violence conceptualises violence as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in interplay among individual, family, community and societal level. Key determinants of violence against women include gender roles and relations, social norms supporting violence and access to resources (VicHealth, 2007).

While women may be perpetrators, the vast majority of domestic violence is committed by men against women. Consequently, gender is a significant factor in domestic violence. Unequal power relations between the genders are deeply embedded in Australian political, legal, occupational and religious domains. Men tend to have greater access to resources and therefore greater access to power.

Australian culture has many values, norms and beliefs that support greater male power. Models of manhood tend to emphasise insensitivity and aggression rather than nurturing and sharing power. Societal norms regarding families and gender roles can provide men with leverage for coercive control and shape the options that women believe are available to them (e.g. attitudes that men are 'bread-winners' and the 'head of the household'). These factors can also contribute to the humiliation and shame women experience and make it difficult for them to reach out to supports. This further reinforces the isolation of the victim from friends, family and other sources of assistance.

Attitudes towards violence correlate strongly with exposure to violence and may be transferred across generations via learning processes, schools, the media and experience of violence. Whether

a person acts on their attitudes depends on their assessment of what others think and the presence of factors in the social environment that either sanction or condemn violent behaviour (VicHealth, 2006). Exposure to, and experience of, family violence during childhood may lead to learnt models of behaviour regarding the use of violence. Additionally, absence of parental encouragement in regards to emotional regulation and self-esteem can lead to a child to respond to emotionally distressing cues with assertion of power and violence or, alternatively, learned helplessness. These responses have impact on their future adult relationships.

## Goals for policy decisions and community responses to domestic violence

Policies aimed at reducing domestic violence must address the contributing factors to domestic violence in society, including the influence of family and early childhood experience, unequal power relations between the genders, the value of women's work, negative attitudes regarding women, religious, institutional responses and support networks. Adequate policies must aim to reduce the tendency for men to have greater leverage for coercive control, strengthen early intervention initiatives to decrease intergenerational transmission of violence and strengthen the capacity of victims to leave domestic violence and avoid future abusive relationships.

## How the Federal Government can support the shifts required to eliminate violence against women and their children

### Women's economic independence

The Federal Government can support the shifts required to eliminate violence against women by using public health approaches that address the individual, family, community and societal factors contributing to domestic violence.

One of the key areas for achieving gender equality is increasing the number of women in leadership (Australian Human Rights Commission's Gender Equality Blueprint, 2010). The Federal Government must contribute to initiatives that address barriers to women's participation in senior leadership positions including parliamentary positions, senior corporate positions and senior public service executives (see Australian Human Rights Commission's Gender Equality Blueprint, 2010). The Federal Government can also strengthen policies that assist women and men to balance family responsibilities with paid work (e.g. paid parental leave, flexible work culture, accessible & affordable childcare).

Polices can address ways to ensure women's economic security (e.g. pay equity, gender equality legislation, protection from workplace harassment & bullying). Women who are experiencing financial hardship are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of domestic violence. Lack of financial independence is a powerful barrier for women attempting to leave and may limit the ability of women to care for themselves and their children, to pursue legal matters, and find appropriate accommodation. The abolition of the provision of wage increases for childcare and aged-care workers ensures that the female workforce of these sectors remain grossly underpaid. Proposed changes to Centrelink Newstart and Disability payments, Family Tax Benefits, university fee deregulation and health 'co-contribution' fees will also have further negative consequences for vulnerable Australians. Victims of domestic violence also report that transport difficulties, including barriers to obtaining a driver's licence, also may prevent them from finding employment and financial independence from an abusive partner. Workplace provisions can support employees experiencing domestic violence such as the Tasmania Family Violence- Workplace Provisions for State Service Employees can be expanded.

## Housing

The Federal Government must strengthen the availability of alternative accommodation for women wishing to leave abusive relationships, including access to emergency accommodation and



affordable rental properties. Vulnerable women (particularly single women and those with children) are often forced to choose between whether to stay in an abusive relationship or to become homeless. Risks of homelessness to people facing increased hardship will force women to stay in unsafe environments or go into situations that may be a risk to their safety and wellbeing.

Women's opportunity to live a life free from domestic violence is also supported by the availability of suitable public housing and affordable private rental housing. The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) can help ensure that women have access to emergency accommodation. The National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) may assist indigenous women who are victims of family violence access safe housing.

## Legal

Criminal justice-based approaches must ensure that victims have adequate protection and that perpetrators must be held to account. Victims of domestic violence need access to information regarding their legal rights. Legal services such as the Women's Legal Services, Community Legal Services and the Family Violence Prevention Legal Services are critical for many women who are experiencing violence. The Federal Government must prioritise funding for services. Budget cuts to Legal Aid will have significant negative impact on victims of domestic violence seeking legal protection. The Family Law system must address the challenges faced by victims of domestic violence attempting to establish physically and emotionally safe arrangements for their children. Without legal support women remain impoverished and economically disadvantaged.

## Service provision

The Federal Government needs to ensure that there is adequate funding for domestic violence services, including services that provide longer-term counselling. SHE provides long-term counselling for women who are in, or have been in, abusive relationships and believe that this is a vital service for families recovering from domestic violence. Clients report that they often find that counselling regarding the impact of domestic violence is more effective once the personal crisis or safety risk has passed. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has emerged as a considerable barrier to women reintegrating and recovering from domestic violence.

## Primary prevention programmes

The prevention of domestic violence requires long-term, integrated strategies such as national education and awareness campaigns. SHE would like to see respectful relationship and consent programs become part of the curriculum in all schools nationwide. Schools are ideally placed to implement evidence-supported strategies to promote attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that support respectful relationships and establish an intolerance of violence as the norm among children and young people. Furthermore, SHE would like to see respectful relationships and consent campaigns, including social marketing and awareness campaigns, being implemented more broadly across other community groups, such as sporting groups, community organisations, workplaces and the media.

## Recommendations

The Federal Government must:

1. Contribute to initiatives that address barriers to women's participation in senior leadership positions as recommended by the Gender Equity Blueprint (2010)
2. Strengthen policies that assist women and men to balance family responsibilities with paid work including flexible work culture, accessible & affordable childcare & paid parental leave
3. Address women's economic security including pay equity, gender equality legislation, protection from workplace harassment & bullying
4. Strengthen policies that assist women to access safe emergency accommodation, appropriate public housing and affordable private rental housing
5. Increased funding for critical legal services such as Women's Legal Services, Community Legal Services and Legal Aid
6. Increased investment in specialized services for women and children affected by domestic violence including trauma-informed longer term counselling services for women and children

7. Implement respectful relationships and consent campaigns as part of the school curriculum nation-wide and more broadly across other community groups, such as sporting groups, community organisations, workplaces and the media

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