![Engender Equality logo]

Submission in relation to

Systems abuse, patriarchy and the institutional production of harm

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Engender Equality is Tasmania's statewide specialist family violence organisation.

WARNING: This submission includes sensitive and distressing material

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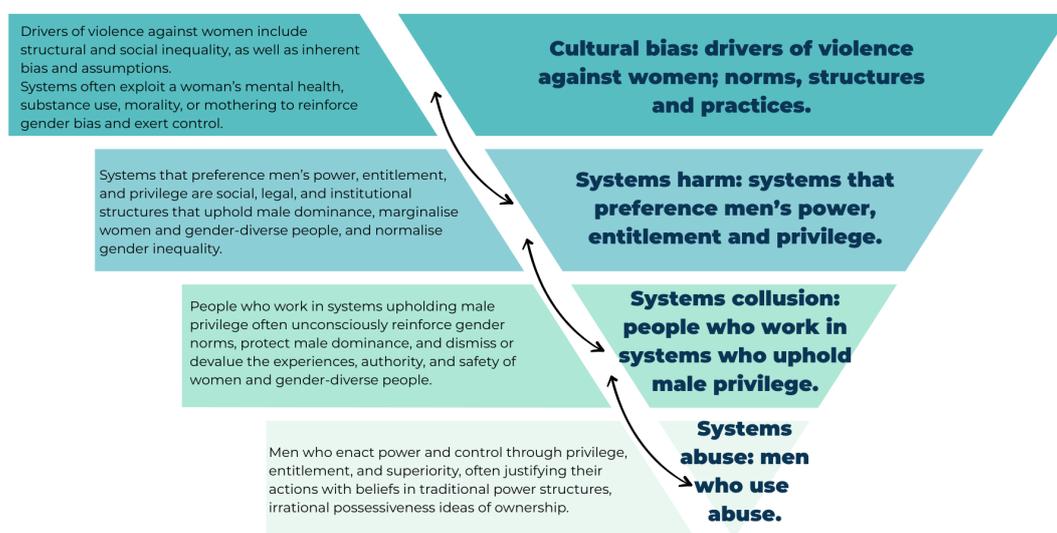
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Violence against women, gender diverse people and children does not occur in a vacuum. While acts of violence are often enacted by one individual against another, violence occurs within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape both the conditions in which violence occurs and the responses available to those experiencing it. Gender-based violence is therefore not solely an interpersonal issue; it is embedded within systems.

Institutions — including legal systems, child protection, policing, social services and workplaces — can inadvertently sustain the very harms they are designed to prevent. Violence occurs within structures, practices, policies, and expectations that make abuse not only possible but, in some circumstances, predictable. Systems may condone violence, collude with it, facilitate it, permit it, or enable it through their design and operation.

Understanding this dynamic requires moving beyond an exclusive focus on individual perpetrators and examining the institutional and cultural contexts that shape responses to violence. When systems fail to recognise coercive control, misinterpret victim-survivor behaviour, or privilege procedural neutrality over safety, they risk becoming part of the architecture that allows abuse to continue.

This paper explores how institutional responses to intimate partner violence can inadvertently produce harm. It outlines three interrelated forms of institutional involvement in abuse: systems abuse, systemic harm, and systemic collusion. It also situates these dynamics within the broader framework of patriarchal social structures and argues for systemic reform grounded in gender equity, relational accountability, and victim-survivor expertise.

Cultural bias: drivers of violence against women; norms, structures and practices.

Drivers of violence against women include structural and social inequality, as well as inherent bias and assumptions.
Systems often exploit a woman's mental health, substance use, morality, or mothering to reinforce gender bias and exert control.

Systems harm: systems that preference men's power, entitlement and privilege.

Systems that preference men's power, entitlement, and privilege are social, legal, and institutional structures that uphold male dominance, marginalise women and gender-diverse people, and normalise gender inequality.

Systems collusion: people who work in systems who uphold male privilege.

People who work in systems upholding male privilege often unconsciously reinforce gender norms, protect male dominance, and dismiss or devalue the experiences, authority, and safety of women and gender-diverse people.

Systems abuse: men who use abuse.

Men who enact power and control through privilege, entitlement, and superiority, often justifying their actions with beliefs in traditional power structures, irrational possessiveness ideas of ownership.

Victim-survivor experience and institutional failings

Victim-survivors of intimate partner violence often occupy a position that is fundamentally at odds with the systems intended to assist them. Their lived realities frequently involve conditions of entrapment—financial, emotional, cultural, and social. Coercive control operates through a range of tactics designed to restrict autonomy and undermine agency, including economic abuse, isolation, surveillance, and psychological manipulation.

Within these conditions, shame and self-blame are not merely personal emotions but socially produced responses. Cultural narratives about "good women", "good wives", "good partners", and "good mothers" shape expectations about caregiving, loyalty and sacrifice. These norms can intensify pressures on victim-survivors to maintain relationships, protect children, and minimise disruption within families.

Victim-survivors may therefore engage in strategies that prioritise harm reduction rather than separation. They may placate abusive partners, negotiate risk within relationships, or remain in the household to protect children. What appears to outside observers as complicity or inconsistency is often the result of careful risk calculation within highly constrained circumstances.

These realities frequently clash with institutional frameworks that assume rational, linear decision-making. Systems designed to identify discrete incidents of violence struggle to recognise cumulative patterns of coercive control. As a result, victim-survivors are often required to translate complex relational dynamics into simplified narratives that fit bureaucratic and legal processes.

This mismatch between lived experience and institutional design is a critical driver of systems-related harm.
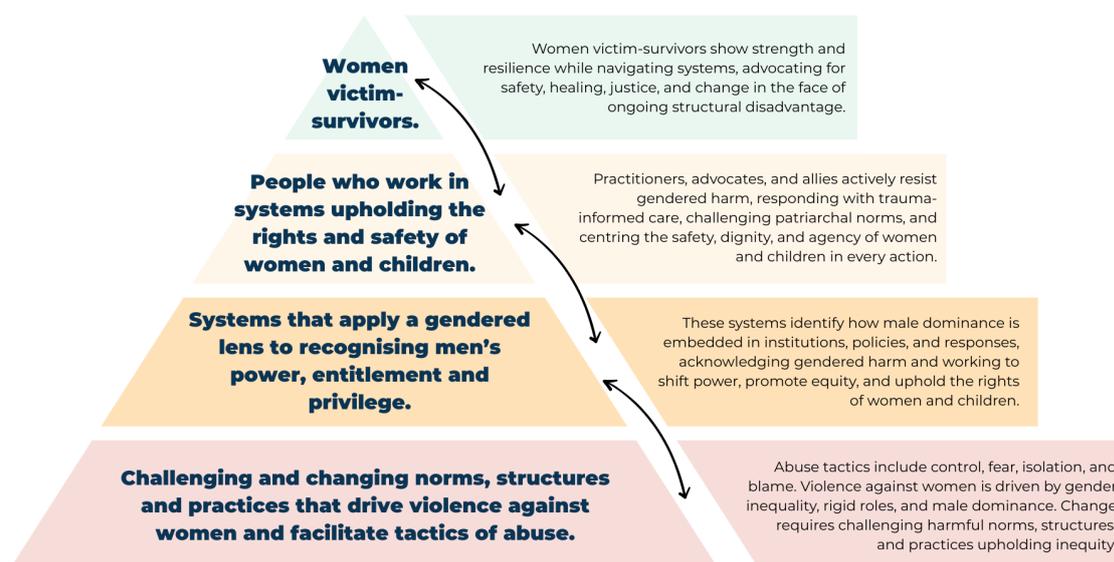
Systems abuse

The term 'systems abuse' refers to situations in which one person deliberately manipulates institutional processes to gain power over another. In the context of intimate partner violence, perpetrators may weaponise legal, administrative, or service systems to intimidate, control, or punish victim-survivors.

Systems abuse can occur across a wide range of institutions, including family law courts, child safety services, police processes, immigration systems, housing authorities, and community services. Tactics may include repeated litigation, false allegations, manipulation of child contact arrangements, misuse of reporting

mechanisms, or strategic complaints intended to undermine a victim-survivor's credibility.

In these situations, institutional processes become extensions of the abusive dynamic. Procedures designed to ensure fairness and accountability can be exploited by individuals who are able to manipulate them. Because these actions often occur within the formal rules of institutional systems, they may be difficult to identify or challenge.

Significantly, systems abuse does not occur solely within legal frameworks. Service systems—including those designed to support victim-survivors—can also be drawn into these dynamics when people who use violence use them strategically to maintain control.

Women victim-survivors.
Women victim-survivors show strength and resilience while navigating systems, advocating for safety, healing, justice, and change in the face of ongoing structural disadvantage.

People who work in systems upholding the rights and safety of women and children.
Practitioners, advocates, and allies actively resist gendered harm, responding with trauma-informed care, challenging patriarchal norms, and centring the safety, dignity, and agency of women and children in every action.

Systems that apply a gendered lens to recognising men's power, entitlement and privilege.
These systems identify how male dominance is embedded in institutions, policies, and responses, acknowledging gendered harm and working to shift power, promote equity, and uphold the rights of women and children.

Challenging and changing norms, structures and practices that drive violence against women and facilitate tactics of abuse.
Abuse tactics include control, fear, isolation, and blame. Violence against women is driven by gender inequality, rigid roles, and male dominance. Change requires challenging harmful norms, structures, and practices upholding inequity.

Systemic harm

While systems abuse involves deliberate manipulation by individuals, systemic harm arises from the design and operation of institutions themselves. This concept, articulated by the Victorian organisation *Flat Out*, highlights the ways in which policies, regulations, and practices can produce harm when they fail to account for male privilege and the dynamics of gender-based violence.

Systemic harm occurs when institutions assume that their procedures are neutral and therefore incapable of producing bias. In reality, institutional rules and practices often reflect broader social power dynamics, including gendered assumptions about credibility, caregiving, and responsibility.

When systems are not attuned to coercive control, they may misinterpret victim-survivor behaviour as irrational, non-compliant, or inconsistent. For example, victim-survivors who remain in relationships for safety reasons may be judged as failing to protect their children. Survivors who struggle to provide linear narratives may be seen as unreliable witnesses. Individuals who prioritise economic survival or housing stability may be interpreted as being insufficiently committed to help seeking.

In these ways, systemic harm is embedded within institutional design. It emerges through routine procedures, evidentiary requirements, eligibility criteria, and professional norms that fail to recognise the structural realities of gendered violence.

Systemic harm therefore reflects the deeper assumptions embedded within institutional frameworks.

Systemic collusion

A third dimension of institutional application of abuse is systemic collusion. This occurs when professionals or organisations, intentionally or unintentionally, enable or compound abusive dynamics through their actions or inactions.

Systemic collusion may occur directly—for example, when professionals take actions that collude with people who use violence, escalate risk, share information in ways that compromise safety, or minimise the significance of coercive control. However, it can also occur indirectly through failures to recognise patterns of abuse, failures to ask appropriate questions, or failures to respond effectively when disclosures occur.

Institutional cultures that emphasise neutrality and procedural impartiality can inadvertently contribute to collusion. When professionals treat abuse as a mutual conflict between two parties rather than a pattern of coercive control, they risk reinforcing the power imbalance that defines intimate partner violence.

Collusion is also present when victim-survivors encounter disbelief, scepticism, or excessive scrutiny. In contrast, people who use violence may benefit from institutional caution, assumptions of credibility, or procedural delays.

In these instances, the system does not remain external to the violence. Instead, it becomes part of the conditions that allow abuse to continue.

Patriarchy and institutional design

These dynamics cannot be fully understood without considering the broader ideological framework within which institutions operate: patriarchy - a system of belief, values and organising that shapes laws, policies, and cultural norms.

Patriarchal systems privilege hierarchy, authority, competition, control, and punishment. They often prioritise procedural fairness over lived experience, demanding evidence before belief and placing burdens of proof on those who seek protection.

When responses to intimate partner violence are designed within this framework—legalistic, adversarial, and criminalised—they reproduce elements of the dynamics they aim to address. Processes may involve surveillance, disbelief, institutional control, and punitive responses that mirror aspects of coercive control.

For example:

- Police responses are often structured around identifying discrete incidents of violence, despite evidence that intimate partner violence is typically characterised by ongoing patterns of coercive behaviour.

- Research suggests that a significant proportion of male police officers report having used violence in their own intimate relationships, raising complex questions about institutional culture and accountability.

- Legal systems frequently prioritise procedural neutrality and evidentiary thresholds, requiring victim-survivors to provide extensive proof while perpetrators benefit from institutional caution.

- Child protection systems sometimes interpret mothers' inability to avoid violence as "failure to protect", effectively penalising victim-survivors rather than holding perpetrators accountable.

- Family law processes may prioritise parental contact over safety concerns, placing survivors and children at continued risk.

These examples illustrate how patriarchal assumptions about authority, credibility, and family structure can shape institutional responses to violence.

The limits of criminal justice responses

The criminal justice system plays an important role in addressing serious violence. However, it is not well designed to respond to coercive control.

Legal systems tend to conceptualise harm through incident-based frameworks. They seek clear events, identifiable evidence, and linear narratives that can be tested through adversarial processes. This approach aligns poorly with coercive control, which is cumulative, relational, and often subtle.

Victim-survivors may therefore be required to translate complex patterns of intimidation, surveillance, and psychological manipulation into isolated incidents that meet criminal thresholds. This translation is often impossible.

As a result, survivors may experience disbelief, scrutiny, and humiliation within institutional processes that are intended to protect them.

Recognising these limitations does not mean abandoning criminal justice responses. Rather, it highlights the need for broader institutional reform that addresses violence as a social and structural issue rather than solely a criminal one.

Towards non-patriarchal institutional responses

As patriarchal systems contribute to the persistence of gender-based violence, meaningful reform requires the development of alternative institutional approaches.

Non-patriarchal systems would prioritise relational accountability. They would value transparency, collaboration, and care alongside legal accountability. They would recognise that gendered violence is fundamentally about power and control, and that addressing it requires structural as well as individual change.

Such systems would elevate attributes historically associated with femininity—care, empathy, relational awareness, and collaboration—qualities that have often been devalued within institutional culture despite their central role in sustaining communities.

At the same time, reform requires critical examination of institutional norms that privilege competition, hierarchy, emotional detachment, and punitive reflexes.

Transforming responses to gender-based violence therefore involves not only policy change but cultural change within institutions.

Reform priorities for Tasmania

Addressing systems abuse and systemic harm requires deliberate institutional transformation. Several key priorities emerge for reform within Tasmania.

1. Research and Evidence Development

There is an urgent need for rigorous research examining the nature and impact of systems abuse within the Tasmanian context. While anecdotal evidence from victim-survivors and specialist services is substantial, systematic research is necessary to identify patterns, measure impacts, and inform policy reform.

2. Coordinated Data Collection

Institutional responses to gender-based violence are currently fragmented across multiple agencies. Coordinated approaches to data collection and reporting are essential to identify systemic patterns and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

Victim-survivor expertise must be embedded within these processes to ensure that data reflects lived realities.

3. Victim-Survivor Leadership

Self-determining victim-survivor groups and networks play a critical role in identifying institutional failures and proposing reforms, especially those who have been subject to systems failings. Their knowledge should inform system audits, policy reviews, and professional training across government agencies.

4. Family Violence Impact Audits

All government policies and services should be subject to family violence impact assessments. Decisions about funding, policy design, and service delivery should be evaluated through the lens of safety, gender equity, and dignity.

Just as institutions routinely assess financial or legal risk, they should systematically assess the potential impact of policies on victim-survivors.

"We don't have a system that doesn't work. We have a system that works perfectly - it just produces the wrong outcomes."

John Clarke

Transforming systems

Violence against women does not occur in a vacuum. It is sustained by social norms that privilege male dominance and female compliance. When these norms are embedded within institutions, reform initiatives risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

If we are serious about addressing gender-based violence, we must examine the actions of individual people who use violence alongside the institutional ecosystems that enable and sustain harm.

This requires acknowledging that neutrality does not exist within contexts of inequality. Systems that claim impartiality while ignoring structural power dynamics may inadvertently reinforce those dynamics.

Transforming institutional responses therefore requires honesty, and sustained commitment. It requires listening to victim-survivors, following the leadership of specialist services, and confronting the structural biases embedded within our systems.

Ultimately, we need to eliminate men's violence but we will not do this until we are willing to redesign the system that condones and enables the violence.

If we want different outcomes, we must be willing to design different systems.