



**Support Help & Empowerment Inc. (SHE)**

PO Box 300, North Hobart TAS 7002

Submission to the Review of Australia's Welfare System 2014

Australian Government Department of Social Services



**Contents**..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

About Support Help Empowerment Inc. (SHE).....4

Review of Australia's Welfare System: Overall Comments .....5

    The impact of domestic violence.....5

    The factors contributing to the present levels of domestic violence.....6

    Women's economic independence .....6

    Housing .....7

    Legal.....8

    Service provision.....8

    Health .....8

The prevalence of domestic violence in Australia.....9

Recommendations..... 10

References ..... 11

## About Support Help Empowerment Inc. (SHE)

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.

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

## Review of Australia's Welfare System:

### Overall Comments

Domestic/family violence is a complex and serious social problem which affects individuals, families, communities, the workplace and the economy. SHE is concerned that changes to the welfare system coupled with cutting back relevant support services will ultimately lead to an increase of domestic violence and abuse. SHE would like to thank the Reference Group for allowing us to present our submission to the Review of Australia's Welfare System.

### 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 are significant and ongoing. Domestic violence has a profound impact on physical and mental health. It can lead directly to serious injury, permanent impairment, 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 severely impaired by experiencing domestic violence (Chadwick & Morgan, 2009). Exposure to the trauma of domestic violence can harm children'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).

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.

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**

Poverty, unemployment, mental health and stress are all known contributing factors to the prevalence of domestic violence. Reducing resources will directly increase the stress families in poverty and near poverty already have to endure. It is expected that reducing people's abilities to comply with Centrelink requirements and reducing access to welfare support will increase stress on families and lead to an increase or an intensification of women's experience of violence. The threat is that this will happen concurrently with a reduction in support services as we have already witnessed with women's legal services and specialist shelters (for example).

These factors will increase incidences of violence, the vulnerability of women to the impact of domestic violence and abuse as well as increase children's exposure to violence in the home.

### **Women's economic independence**

Efforts to escape domestic and family violence can have devastating economic impacts. Safety planning often means significant life changes for example moving house and relocating interstate. Women in these situations need access to appropriate accommodation, civil legal services and legal representation as well as emotional support and financial assistance.

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

Domestic Violence is a leading cause of homelessness. 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 must be 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 (NPAIHH) 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 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 services 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.

## Health

According to Guth and Pachter (2000), intimate partner abuse by a current or former partner is the most common cause of injury to women. "Injuries range from cuts, bruises, and black eyes to miscarriage, bone injuries, splenic and liver trauma, partial loss of hearing or vision, and scars from burn or knife wounds. Injuries to the breast, chest and abdomen are more common in battered women, as are the presence of multiple old and current injuries. Defensive injuries are common. For example, fractures, dislocations, and contusions of the wrist and lower arms result from attempts to fend off blows to the chest or face." (Guth & Pachter 2000, p. 135)

Furthermore there is increasing amount of evidence that shows that “domestic violence has long-term negative consequences for survivors, even after the abuse has ended. This can translate into lower health status, lower quality of life, and higher utilization of health services”. (Campbell et al. 2002, p. 1157)

The GP co-payment will be a barrier to women on low incomes accessing medical support which is huge concern considering the physical and mental toll of domestic violence which can extend years beyond the end of the abusive relationship.

## 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 (Wallis, 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).

## Recommendations

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.

Essential to working towards a society free of violence is to provide adequate social, financial and emotional support mechanisms to assist men, women and children through times of hardship and transition.

Women and their children need access to safe emergency accommodation, appropriate public housing and affordable private housing.

Women need access to legal services such as Women's Legal Services, Community Legal Services (including Aboriginal Legal Services) and Legal Aid

Women and men need mechanisms to balance family responsibilities with paid work including flexible work culture, accessible and affordable childcare and paid parental leave in order to enable meaningful engagement workplaces.

Women affected by domestic violence need specialised services for themselves and their children including trauma-informed longer term counselling services.

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