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# Hear Me Out

Women's experiences of seeking help  
for domestic violence in the ACT:  
A qualitative research report

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**Angela Carnovale**

April 2016

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you to the 17 women who took the time to participate in the research. We recognise that it can be difficult to participate in studies such as this, and to answer questions that deal with domestic violence. We hope that the results honour your valuable insights about your experiences and your views about how to improve responses in the ACT.

Thanks also to the specialist domestic violence service providers who assisted the Women's Centre for Health Matters (WCHM) throughout the research process, from design and dissemination through to commenting on the final report. These included, in particular: The Domestic Violence Crisis Service, Inanna Inc. and Beryl Women Inc. We would like acknowledge the high regard that many of the women who had accessed their service had for their specialist support.



ISBN 978-0-9944342-1-0

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## **About Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc.**

The Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc. (WCHM) is a community based organisation which works in the ACT and surrounding region to improve women's health and wellbeing. WCHM believes that the environment and life circumstances which each woman experiences affects her health outcomes. WCHM focuses on areas of possible disadvantage and uses research, community development and health promotion to provide information and skills that empower women to enhance their own health and wellbeing. WCHM undertakes research and advocacy to influence systems' change with the aim to improve women's health and wellbeing outcomes. WCHM is funded by ACT Health.

## **About the Author**

Angela is a Health Promotion Officer at WCHM. She has a Bachelor of Arts / Asian Studies from the Australian National University and is currently completing a Masters of Social Work (Qualifying) with Monash University. Angela is interested in research and advocacy processes that are undertaken collaboratively with the people they represent. She strives for this in her work at WCHM.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report presents a summary of findings from WCHM's research into women's experiences of seeking help for domestic violence (hereafter referred to as DV) in the ACT.

The *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children* recognises that Australia has a prevalence of DV that is "unacceptably high".<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to say definitively whether there has been an increase in the prevalence of DV in Australia over the recent years, or if we are simply seeing increased reporting. The one thing that is certain is that the intensity of the spotlight on the issue has been accompanied by significant increases in women seeking help for the first time.

The *ACT Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children Strategy 2011-17* articulates the ACT Government's commitment to end violence against women and children. It recognises that in order to address violence against women and children, it is critical that "there is a provision of responses across a continuum that begins with prevention and continues through to post crisis situations, whilst addressing repeat use of violence".<sup>2</sup>

WCHM acknowledges that there have been improvements in systemic responses to DV in the ACT. We also know from previous national and local consultations that there is room for improvement and greater flexibility in responses. This is because DV manifests in a range of coercive controlling behaviours, be they physical, sexual, emotional, economic, psychological, or verbal. It is also because victims of DV are diverse. They may be any age, and have vastly different cultural, social and economic backgrounds. Victims may experience one form of violence, or multiple forms. The same is true of perpetrators of DV.

Despite the diversity of the women who participated in the research, their experiences of seeking help for DV were remarkably similar. In the women's words presented through this report readers will recognise a great deal that has already been documented elsewhere, through research, policy reviews and national plans.

This makes it no less important to hear directly from ACT women regarding the service responses designed to meet their needs. In fact, this is an important opportunity to ensure that any reforms are based on the tangible and concrete suggestions made by women based on their direct experiences of utilising services, and not by abstract ideals and well-meaning generic statements and responses. Hearing directly from women in our community will help to ensure that we build systems that can respond flexibly to their individual needs, and not systems that women are expected to flexibly fit within.

Research like this has not been undertaken with ACT women before. We hope that it will provide detail and depth of understanding of what helps and hinders those seeking help for DV.

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1 Council of Australian Governments, *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children*, Department of Social Services [website], 2011, <<https://www.dss.gov.au>>.

2 ACT Government, *ACT Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children Strategy 2011-17*, ACT Government [website], 2011, <[http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/women/office\\_for\\_women](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/women/office_for_women)>.

## Key Findings

Despite the incredible diversity among the 17 women who participated in the research, their experiences of seeking help for DV revealed the same three themes:

- ❖ A spectrum of violence needs a spectrum of responses.
- ❖ Responses need to ensure that victims feel protected, not punished, and that perpetrators are held to account.
- ❖ Help-seeking journeys change over time, so too do women's needs.

Embedded in all three of these themes were four key ideas:

1. All parts of the ACT human service system need to take greater responsibility for identifying and working with victims and perpetrators of violence, this work must be informed and coordinated by those agencies with specialist knowledge and expertise of DV.
2. Resources must be maintained for existing responses to DV, and investment made to fill the gaps identified through this and other research.
3. DV help-seeking is a process, not an event. Responses would be most effective if tailored to the type of violence a victim is experiencing and the particular point in the journey they are at.
4. To be effective responses must trust women, fully inform women, and then listen to what they say is best for their lives.

The findings presented in this report reveal stories in which women were well supported. In these stories the women talk of the support provided by ACT's specialist domestic and sexual violence services and other women's services who had the most comprehensive understanding of the spectrum of violence and, therefore, provided the most supportive and appropriate assistance to the women. The findings also reveal stories in which women could have been better supported. In these stories the women talk about the need for non-DV related services to acknowledge the role that they have to play in identifying, asking about and offering information on DV, and the difference that makes for victims.

The findings highlight the following areas for improvement:

- ❖ Current formal responses to and the community's understanding of DV are overly oriented toward physical violence. This can make it difficult for women experiencing non-physical forms of violence to receive appropriate help and support, and can sometimes mean that women do not even recognise that what is happening to them is DV.
- ❖ There is a lack of a systemic focus on those who use violence, with the women reporting that those who use violence are often not held to account for the harm they cause to others.
- ❖ Many of the women felt that some formal responses to DV hold them responsible for ensuring their own and their children's safety.
- ❖ There are a range of factors—particularly isolation—that contribute to women remaining in DV relationships. These factors were identified by the women as reasons for wanting help pre-separation that is: unambiguous—services explain what they can offer, why they offer it, how they work and why they work the way they do; consistent—services always work in the ways they say they will; and instructive—services clearly define the violence they perceive is being perpetrated, they provide frank advice on the risks to women and children of remaining in the violent relationship, they provide a range of options for service utilisation dependent on whether

a woman's decision is to stay or leave, and they provide follow-up contact and information whether the women feel that they need it or not.

- ❖ During and immediately following separation women identified that they need support that is practical and flexible. The most obvious and pressing needs talked about were those related to safety, housing, and access to finances. The most common frustration experienced by the women was having to navigate the same bureaucratic processes as any other time, despite their situation being more time pressured than usual. Services need to be able to immediately respond at this time, with flexibility in what they can provide and how they can provide it depending on individual women's needs, and the needs of their children.
- ❖ Current formal responses to DV need to move from being primarily focused on 'post-violence' crisis support to providing medium and long term support that will enable women to rebuild their own and their children's lives, and prevent homelessness and poverty.

The findings reinforce that responses for ACT women leaving DV will only be effective if they are mapped against what victims are actually saying they need, rather than requiring victims to fit within the current system responses. Such tailored responses will enable the right services to be offered to women based on the type of violence they have experienced, the point they are at on their journey, and their specific individual needs.

## Important messages from the participants

Many of the women who participated in the research wanted to share a particular message about what is needed to improve systemic responses to DV in the ACT. They relate directly to the findings explored throughout the report, and included: the need for service providers to challenge their assumptions about victims; the need for a system based around reasonable community standards; advice on directive action and advice that can be offered to women pre-separation; and the need for flexible responses post-separation. Two women also summarised eloquently the feeling that was shared by many, which is the need for a more integrated system of responses that are simpler to navigate and ensure no victim falls through the gaps. The women also shared examples of what worked well for them, and why.

*The community centre was there always. Because my brain doesn't work in that stressful situation, I used to always wonder: "Am I doing the right thing, should I do this, should I do that?" They used to just provide me with the information, they never gave me direction, but they gave me all the cards. So it was giving me options, giving me information, it was more valuable. From the Belconnen Community Centre. And it's kind of, maybe at the time I was receiving that support from that lady she was kind of assertive, right to the point, if I was backing off at any stage then she would have been at the back of me, kind of just supporting me: "You are going in the right direction, you just need to think about it. Maybe take a rest and I'll come back tomorrow".*

Rosa

*Probably the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre. I think they are honest with you. They are honest with their timeframes. So I'm on their waiting list now, and they're like, "you won't see us for six months." But there's no false expectation. I suppose when they saw my daughter, they'd always give me respect when I dropped her off, and she enjoyed going there. I think that they just show respect to people.*

Frances

*But the DVCS were brilliant, absolutely brilliant. So because of them I got through the process. I mean the DVCS were really good because they gave me the words as well. Like, "it was an escalation of verbal and emotional abuse", "a deterioration of relationship", "he's in crisis".*

Dimity

*Whenever I had an issue with the kids I would speak to DVCS because they actually understood what was going on in terms of the domestic violence and the impact on the kids, and the impact on me. And I haven't called them in over three years. If I called them up, they would have all my details again, they would be able to ask about how the kids are going. They would know their names, they would know everything. And that was the thing that made it so much easier to speak to them, was that, you're not a number. You are an actual person, a human being. And they want to help you. And that was the big difference between them and the courts, Legal Aid and the police. They work very long hours, and they could have fifteen different people call them in the space of an hour, but they actually take that time to make sure that you're ok. They are doing a brilliant job.*

Anne

*She was very good. She basically didn't tell me...I said to her: "Look, my last solicitor basically told me that I was going to be able to get supervised access visits after three or four months. They told me...and then they said they couldn't. I want to know today whether that's going to happen, because if it's not going to happen then I'm not going to go for it. I'm not going to get the kids up, do all this stuff, think that this is going to happen this way, and then it's not." But she said: "I'm sure due to past history there's going to be supervised access visits". So she was very good, because I didn't want her to tell me something that wasn't going to happen. She was very good, she didn't tell me any—for want of a better word—bullshit. Because some of them do. So I was very happy with her. And then she changed and went on maternity leave and I had to deal with someone else from the same firm, but she was quite good. She didn't tell me anything that wasn't going to happen either. She didn't want to give me false hope, it was really good. So Legal Aid has been really good.*

Rowena

*One support network that I really thought was amazing was the St Vincent De Paul. I had two absolutely lovely ladies come to my house and they brought me flowers ...So they helped me with some food vouchers and nappies and stuff like that, and they came to the house to bring them. And they both gave me a hug and made me feel really important and that they really cared about me, which was really, really good. And they talked with the kids and gave them a cuddle. And I remember they brought me this little bunch of flowers and it just made me feel so happy. It was really good. Yeah, that's what it was. They took their time. Like they came in and sat down and really wanted to make sure that I was ok and ask if there was anything else that I needed. And I had a cry with them, and she started crying and it just made me feel really important. I think they came to the house again and brought something and then just said that if I need anything else to call them again. Just people that take the time like you said, and really show that they care about what they're doing. It makes a whole world of difference when you're feeling that bad.*

Susan



## A note on the title

The common thread running through all the findings—into what worked well and what did not—is the desire of women to be heard. It is so simple that it is mundane, almost imperceptible in its significance. But there it is. Fundamentally, we need to do better at hearing women and understanding their individual experiences. The stories presented in this report tell us why it is important to hear from women who are experiencing DV. It means listening to what women say outright, as well as being attentive to that which they might not be overtly saying or comfortably able to say. It means interacting with women without preconception of the types of violence women might experience or the types of women who might experience violence. It means asking thoughtful questions and waiting to hear the answer. In giving feedback on the final draft of this report Rachel added the following:

*I would go one step further here and state that really hearing, as opposed to simply listening, means there is a direct show of action after having heard the story/need that demonstrates they have been heard. A tailored response if you will that is clearly directly linked to information received and issues raised. Such as a service or strategy that addresses directly something that has been repeatedly said to be needed, perhaps more specifically than some blanket cover approaches that lose clarity and effectiveness due to breadth of focus and an attempt to be a coverall approach.*

Rachel

We must start from the understanding that no person seeks to live under the control and fear of another, but that finding a way out of the violence is complex and determined by the particular set of circumstances surrounding each woman's life. In order to truly help meet the needs of these women, we have to actually hear them.

## Recommendations

1. That current service delivery reforms, such as the Better Services reform, integrate the model of assistance for those experiencing DV (delineated by specific support at pre-separation, during separation and post-separation) put forward by the women in this research.
2. That the ACT Government commit to implementing a dedicated DV funding stream that is separate to funding for homelessness and other social issues. This stream should maintain current specialist DV responses and further enable it to meet increased demand.
3. That the ACT Government invest in practical and flexible medium to long-term support for women leaving DV that is tailored to their specific needs.
4. That evaluation of the effectiveness of ACT's responses to DV includes both outcome measures and feedback from victims to ensure ongoing improvement of policy and practice.
5. That the ACT Government invest in evidence-based specialist responses for men who use violence, with a focus on early intervention and prevention programs, and improvement in the consistency of criminal justice responses.
6. That the ACT Government invest in building the capacity of and training non-DV services to ensure that they have a shared understanding about DV and the confidence to speak about DV with their clients, offer information and provide referrals.
7. That the ACT Government commit to funding local community DV awareness raising initiatives.

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# INTRODUCTION

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This report provides a summary of findings from a research project into ACT women's experiences of seeking help for domestic violence (DV). Through the stories we have collected, WCHM hopes to bring women's lived experiences to the attention of decision and policy makers, in order to improve legislative, policy and service design and reform processes within the ACT and to challenge and inform change to existing responses where they have been shown to be lacking by the women who utilise them.

For some years now there has been a sustained focus on DV in Australia. The statistics tell us why:

- In Australia a woman dies at the hands of a current or former partner almost every week.<sup>3</sup>
- One woman in three has experienced physical violence since the age of 15.<sup>4</sup>
- One woman in five has experienced sexual violence.<sup>5</sup>
- One woman in four has experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner.<sup>6</sup>
- Women in Australia are three times more likely than men to experience violence from a partner.<sup>7</sup>
- Economic abuse is widespread but often not recognised as DV, including by those who are experiencing it.<sup>8</sup>

DV is more than single acts of physical, sexual, emotional and financial violence. It is a pattern of abusive behaviour, used by one partner or family member—current or former—to gain or maintain power and control over another. DV can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person, including behaviours that intimidate, humiliate, isolate, blame, threaten or injure. This pattern is often referred to as coercion and control.

The *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children* recognises that Australia has an “unacceptably high” prevalence of DV.<sup>9</sup> It is not possible to say whether there has been an increase in the prevalence of DV in Australia over the recent years, or if we are simply seeing increased reporting. The one thing that is certain is that the intensity of the spotlight on the issue has been accompanied by significant increases in women seeking help for the first time. We also know that the economic, social and physical and mental health costs of DV for individuals, families and communities are profound.

The ACT is no different. In 2015 two women were murdered by their former partners, and one woman allegedly murdered by her current partner. The Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS)—ACT's key specialist service for all people experiencing DV—received 21,361 calls for help in 2015, up from 16,270 the year before. Many other services across the ACT are also experiencing a spike in demand for help

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3 Australian Institute of Criminology, *Homicide in Australia, 2010-12*, Australian Institute of Criminology [website], 2013, <<http://aic.gov.au/>>.

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Personal Safety Australia, 2012*, cat. no. 4906.0, 11 December 2013, <<http://www.abs.gov.au/>>.

5 *ibid.*

6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends, 2014*, cat. no. 4102.0, 27 June 2014, <<http://www.abs.gov.au/>>.

7 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Personal Safety Australia, 2012*, loc. cit.

8 VicHealth, *Australians' attitudes to violence against women: Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS)*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, 2014, p. 59.

9 Council of Australian Governments, *op. cit.*

with DV that is overwhelming their ability to respond. This is happening at a time when the ACT Government is facing considerable budgetary pressure and implementing sweeping reforms to all human services. With trauma-informed, specialist services squeezed by these changes, there is concern that women will not be able to access the help they need, when they need it. This is a frightening prospect when we think about the many ACT women yet to reach out for help for the first time, and raises doubts about the ethical integrity of continuing to raise awareness about DV in our community knowing that the services most needed will struggle to respond.

In the women's words presented through this report—collated and summarised within the three key findings—readers will recognise a great deal that has already been documented elsewhere. This makes it no less important to hear directly from ACT women regarding the service responses designed to meet their needs. In fact, this is an important opportunity to ensure that any reforms are based on the tangible and concrete suggestions made by women based on their direct experiences of utilising services, and not by abstract ideals and well-meaning general statements. Hearing directly from women will ensure that we build systems that can respond flexibly to their individual needs, not systems that women are expected to flexibly fit within.

Research like this has not been undertaken with ACT women before. As a result we did not set out to review all the relevant literature and frame our investigation with ACT women upon it. Rather, we wanted to explore ACT women's experiences without any preconception informed by findings from research in other jurisdictions. The small amount of literature that was reviewed was done so only to provide surety in the exploratory qualitative research design we sought to undertake.

Throughout this report we refer to those who have experienced DV as 'victims' or 'survivors', and those who have used it as 'perpetrators'. At times, we use victims/survivors synonymously with women, and perpetrators synonymously with intimate partners. This is to reflect the fact that only women participated in this research, and that all but one spoke about DV experienced within a current or former intimate partner relationship. These terms are not used to suggest that only women are victims of DV, nor to suggest that the victim/perpetrator dichotomy is the preferred one. By 'formal responses to DV' we refer to the sum of current efforts by the many sectors offering primary, secondary and tertiary support and services to victims and perpetrators of DV.

The research design was underpinned by two key assumptions. Firstly, that qualitative research is valuable because it enables rich and nuanced stories of individual women that reveal the complex intersection of factors impacting upon help-seeking experiences. Secondly, documenting women's stories matters for both what they say and how they say it. The concrete accounts of their experiences provide insight into the design of formal responses, while the words they use provide insight into how those responses could be delivered. Both assumptions are inherent in the way we have chosen to present the research data. Rather than presenting snippets of quotes from the interviews to support the findings, we present large portions of text from the interviews with individual women in a case study style. It is their story, and therefore their voice that matters.

WCHM hopes that the insights and suggestions shared by the 17 women who participated in the research and presented in this report will help to inform the work already being done within the ACT to improve the responses to domestic violence.

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# LITERATURE REVIEW

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A systematic review of the literature was conducted via the ProQuest academic database and the ANROWS (Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety) database, using synonyms to the terms help-seeking, domestic violence and women. Results were further refined by: peer-reviewed; research categorised by 'help-seeking behaviour' subject; and omitting all but research on women's formal help-seeking for male violence in Western countries. Of the twenty-eight relevant articles, six were included because they: examined the issue of DV help-seeking through victims' own voices and expertise rather than pre-existing theoretical frameworks; maintained a structural, or ecological, perspective; and put forward an innovative theoretical framework or research methodology within which to bring victim's voices on this issue to the fore. The studies represent a range of disciplines, including: social work, criminology, health promotion, population health, and sociology.

Through in-depth interviews with a non-random purposive sample of 29 women in Southeast Queensland, Meyer applied a rational choice and moral reasoning framework to analyse women's decisions regarding staying or leaving. She found that, contrary to dominant assumptions, women undertake rational cost-benefit analyses based on their relational responsibilities—mainly to children—when making decisions about help-seeking.<sup>10</sup> Moe framed the findings of her in-depth interviews with 19 survivors recruited from a women's shelter in Michigan within Ptacek's (1999) social entrapment theory.<sup>11</sup> Through this she demonstrated that women's help-seeking for DV is hindered by the cumulative impacts of abuse and failed or inadequate social and systemic responses.<sup>12</sup> Each study provides useful examples of ways to explore and communicate findings on survivors' help-seeking.

Grauwlir undertook an exploratory phenomenological study with non-random purposive sample of 10 women accessing a program for families affected by DV in New York City.<sup>13</sup> This methodological approach was chosen to build knowledge using women's own expertise, and was a response to the dominant policy tendency of the time that was absent of input from women who remained in their own homes and communities.<sup>14</sup> Watt, Bobrow and Moracco compared the perspectives of 16 women recruited from a domestic violence shelter in North Carolina City and ten full-time nurses from a large hospital's emergency department on the types of support DV victims need at different stages of readiness to disclose and receive assistance using vignettes.<sup>15</sup> The findings of each study—while based on non-representative samples—provide useful insights into the multiple ways service design can benefit through survivors' input.

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10 S. Meyer, 'Why women stay: A theoretical examination of rational choice and moral reasoning in the context of intimate partner violence', *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2012.

11 A.M. Moe, 'Silenced Voices and Structured Survival: Battered Women's Help Seeking', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 13, no. 7, 2007, p. 683.

12 *ibid.*, p. 677.

13 P. Grauwlir, 'Voices of women: Perspectives on decision-making and the management of partner violence', *Children and Services Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2008, p. 312.

14 *ibid.*, p. 311-21.

15 M.H Watt, E.A. Bobrow & K.E. Moracco, 'Providing Support to IPV Victims in the Emergency Department: Vignette-Based Interviews With IPV Survivors and Emergency Department Nurses', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 14, no. 6, p. 717.

Fanslow and Robinson undertook an empirical exploration of women's experiences of DV help-seeking with a representative sample of 2855 women in New Zealand.<sup>16</sup> This study utilised the questionnaire developed for the *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women*.<sup>17</sup> Although the study accessed a broader cross-section of help-seekers than any of the other studies reviewed, it was limited by the fact that the questionnaire adopted asked only about incidents of physical and sexual violence, potentially silencing some survivors' contributions. Nurius et al. applied a person-oriented methodology to explore how five categories of survivors—organised around key biopsychosocial characteristics—differ in their formal help-seeking and protective actions.<sup>18</sup> This study builds on prior research with 448 survivors' in Seattle, where the five categories of survivors were originally developed, which included: women with comparatively better physical and mental health, high social support and lower vulnerability; women struggling with high levels of depression; women with relatively high levels of vulnerability but also high levels of social support; women who experienced the highest levels of vulnerability and depression; and women characterised by severe functioning impairment.<sup>19</sup> The value of person-oriented approaches to test for subgroups with particular needs holds great promise for targeting practice and policy responses and the authors put forward pragmatic service design and policy suggestions for each group.<sup>20</sup>

All studies found that women's experiences of help-seeking for DV were overwhelmingly negative. Survivors reported their help-seeking process as shaming, stressful and isolating and felt that the burden was overwhelmingly placed upon them to ensure their own and their children's safety.<sup>21</sup> They felt a disparity between their wishes and the options offered to them, and that there were negative "unspoken consequences" associated with service utilisation.<sup>22</sup> Even when women did disclose experiences of violence, many received no assistance or poor quality assistance<sup>23</sup> and experienced a lack of coordination across services.<sup>24</sup> Watt, Bobrow and Moracco revealed that nurses would forgo providing emotional support where survivors would consider it valuable, and would define decisions as based in denial where survivors would consider them fear-driven and strategic.<sup>25</sup> These findings suggest that the real challenge lies in developing and maintaining systemic responses to DV that ensure that women receive the help they need, when they need it.<sup>26</sup>

Acknowledging the expertise of women's lived experience of DV is critical to designing appropriate, responsive and effective policies and services. Policy, legislative and service design processes need to be based upon the nuanced and unique experiences of survivors<sup>27</sup> and not discard women's decisions as

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16 J.L. Fanslow & E.M. Robinson, 'Help-Seeking Behaviours and Reasons for Help Seeking Reported by a Representative Sample of Women Victims of Intimate Partner Violence in New Zealand', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2010, p. 932.

17 *ibid.*, p. 933-50.

18 P.S. Nurius et al., 'Intimate Partner Survivors' Help-Seeking and Protection Efforts: A Person-Oriented Analysis', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2011, p. 541.

19 *ibid.*

20 *ibid.*, p. 542.

21 P. Grauwiller, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

22 *ibid.*, p. 316.

23 J.L. Fanslow & E.M. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 948; A.M. Moe, *op. cit.*, p. 692.

24 P. Grauwiller, *op. cit.*, pp. 315-20.

25 M.H. Watt, E.A. Bobrow & K.E. Moracco, *op. cit.*, p. 724.

26 J.L. Fanslow & E.M. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 948.

27 P. Grauwiller, *op. cit.*, p. 321. P.S. Nurius et al., *op. cit.*, p. 561.

irrational or irresponsible.<sup>28</sup> This would ensure that: services are able to be provided to women irrespective of their decision to remain in their own homes or seek shelter;<sup>29</sup> there is coordination across the range of services needed by survivors;<sup>30</sup> different types of services understand the particular needs of the survivors accessing them and provide responsive and appropriate services;<sup>31</sup> and professionals have an understanding about and are able to provide services that meet the expectations and needs of survivors.<sup>32</sup>

This work is a matter of urgency, because one helpful response can become the foundation for future successes.<sup>33</sup> Given the importance of research that incorporates local context into understanding women's experiences we can assume that the ACT cannot rest on existing literature alone.<sup>34</sup>

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28 S. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

29 P. Grauwiler, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

30 A.M. Moe, *op. cit.*, p. 694; J.L. Fanslow & E.M. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 948.

31 P.S. Nurius et al., *op. cit.*, p. 554.

32 M.H Watt, E.A. Bobrow & K.E. Moracco, *op. cit.*, p. 725.

33 A.M. Moe, *op. cit.*, p. 694; P. Grauwiler, *op. cit.*, p. 319. M.H Watt, E.A. Bobrow & K.E. Moracco, *op. cit.*, p. 724. J.L. Fanslow & E.M. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 945. P.S. Nurius et al., *op. cit.*, p. 561. S. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

34 J.L. Fanslow & E.M. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 948. Nurius et al., *op. cit.*, p. 561.

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# METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

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## Methodology

WCHM undertook a qualitative methodology. As research like this had not been completed in the ACT before, we chose to conduct the research via unstructured in-depth interviews as this approach would enable women to be unrestrained in their exploration of the topic. However, mindful of the fact that different methods work for different women we also offered the possibility of focus group discussions. In total, we conducted 14 unstructured in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion with three participants.

Embedded in the rationale for this research was the idea that who the respondent is *matters*; that the socio-cultural context of each woman is likely to have informed her experiences of DV help-seeking and that capturing the intersections of these factors would add to the richness of the data collected. This choice was made in the knowledge, and embrace, that although the data would not be able to be generalised to all women seeking help for DV, they were likely to highlight experiences and needs that are transferable to other women in the ACT. As the purpose of the research was to contribute women's voices to the service reform and legislative process—rather than claiming that we can speak for all women in the ACT experiencing DV—a purposive sample of women was considered likely to contribute to this aim more robustly than a randomly selected one. As a result, we employed a non-random purposive sample for this research. Women were free to nominate to participate in the research provided that they lived in the ACT and had sought help for DV in the past five years. This time limit was imposed to ensure that, if any of the women accessed housing and homelessness services for DV, their experiences took place after major reforms to these services in the ACT.

Of the 17 women who participated in the research: three self-referred via the WCHM website; five self-referred via the DVCS website or Facebook page; three were referred by DVCS; two were referred by Beryl Women Inc.; and four women were referred by Inanna.

The interviews and focus group discussions were voice recorded with the participants' consent. A verbatim transcript of each recording was prepared and shared with each participant for their verification and feedback. The researcher sought to maintain contact with participants throughout the research process, including by seeking their feedback on the draft of this summary report. This was done to maximise the opportunity for women to feel part of the research process, and for consent to be maintained, changed or withdrawn. Unfortunately, the researcher was able to maintain contact with only eight of the research participants post interview, and only four participants provided feedback on this summary report.

We adopted a thematic analysis informed *from* the data, rather than overlaying a theoretical framework *onto* the data. Once the key themes were identified, the researcher selected key individuals through whose narrative the main revelations within each theme could be presented. The narratives are constructed using each participant's own quotes. This style of presenting the data was chosen as it

supports the underpinning philosophy of the research that the nuance in each individual's story tells us a great deal about that which we seek to know about. The researcher felt that the experiences and views of the participants could most vividly be brought to the reader through a case study style narrative, rather than through individual quotes. It should be noted that there is not a case study for each research participant, and there were many insightful and poignant quotes that could not be included. This was only due to lack of space.

## Limitations

As this is a qualitative report with a small sample size, extra caution should be used when making generalisations about the findings. In addition, the sample is one of convenience, and therefore not representative. Given that women self-selected to the research, it may be the case that participants were motivated to share their stories for particular reasons that may not be shared generally with others. We have attempted to mitigate this through the presentation of case study narratives, to afford the reader the greatest possible transparency about the women's experiences and reasons for participating in the research.

Despite these limitations, qualitative studies such as these provide an important opportunity to add detail and depth of understanding to issues. When we view the results in context with other qualitative and quantitative studies, we start to build a picture of what helps and hinders those seeking help for DV.



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# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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This chapter examines three key themes that emerged from the interviews. These are:

- ❖ A spectrum of violence needs a spectrum of responses.
- ❖ Responses need to ensure that victims feel protected, not punished, and perpetrators are held to account.
- ❖ Help-seeking journeys change over time, so too do women's needs.

Embedded in all three of these themes are four key ideas:

1. All parts of the ACT human service system need to take greater responsibility for identifying and working with victims and perpetrators of violence, this work must be informed and coordinated by those agencies with specialist knowledge and expertise of DV.
2. Resources must be maintained for existing responses to DV, and investment made to fill the gaps identified through this and other research.
3. DV help-seeking is a process, not an event. Responses would be most effective if tailored to the type of violence a victim is experiencing and the particular point in the journey they are at.
4. To be effective responses must trust women, fully inform women, and then listen to what they say is best for their lives.

Each participant chose a pseudonym at the time of the interview. These are the names assigned to the women through this report.

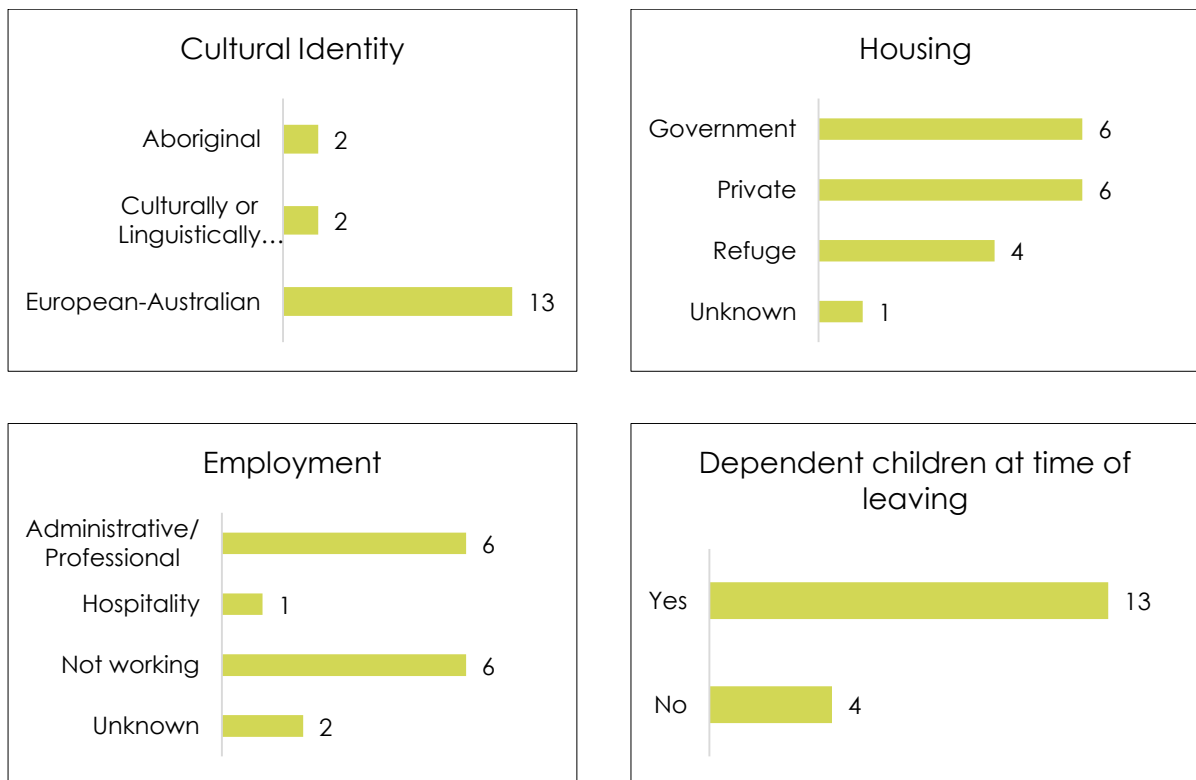
To begin we have presented some information about the women who participated in the research and the types of violence they experienced. This will provide useful context when reading the subsequent sections of the report.

## A general overview of the women who participated in the research

The details presented in this section show just how diverse the women who participated in the research are, from the socio, cultural and economic conditions of their lives through to their experiences of violence. The diversity of the women presented here sits in contrast to the findings of the research presented below, because although the women were so different from one another, their experiences of seeking help for DV in the ACT were remarkably similar.

### A few demographic details

Participant age range: 25 - 50



### Factors influencing reaching out for support

*"Something goes off in your head"* Falling out of love *"I didn't recognise the man I loved"* Negative impacts on children *"I wanted quiet"* Isolation from children *"I saw no love"* Escalation of violence *"What would happen to the children without me?"* Fear *"There was no resolution"* Worsening mental health *"I could see that he needed to change"* Worsening physical health *"I think I became more assertive. I think I changed within myself"*

## Overview of each participant's experience with DV and help-seeking

Experienced violence from	Relationship length	Details of separation	Types of violence experienced	Help-seeking story overview
Intimate partner	12 years	Left once, did not return	Financial Physical Psychological Sexual Social Technological Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personally contacted police and Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS) pre-separation</li> <li>• Personally requested ongoing police and courts contact post-separation</li> <li>• Felt most let down by police, Family Court, and laws around technological violence</li> <li>• Felt most supported by DVCS, Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC) and Victims Support ACT (VSACT)</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	4 years	Left and returned twice before leaving permanently	Damage to property Financial Injury with property Physical Psychological Social Technological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personally contacted police on two occasions pre-separation, and had neighbours contact them on two occasions</li> <li>• Post-separation decided to forgo further legal action to focus on rebuilding / healing</li> <li>• Felt most let down by police and Magistrates Court processes</li> <li>• Felt most supported by DVCS and Women's Legal Service</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	5 years	Left once, was forced into cohabitation post-separation due to parental supervision orders	Financial Physical Social Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Married a man from her country of origin who moved to Australia under her sponsorship. Did not seek help pre-separation for fear that the partner would be deported, which she thought would impact negatively upon their child. Neighbours called for police assistance on two occasions</li> <li>• Post-separation experienced ongoing vulnerability until a childcare worker connected her to services</li> <li>• Felt most let down by not being informed that there were options available to her while still wanting to remain in the relationship</li> <li>• Felt most supported by Woden Community Service, Beryl Women Inc. and Inanna</li> </ul>
Housemate	Several months	Nil	Psychological Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced repeated victimisation throughout life as a result of homelessness and housing insecurity</li> <li>• At the time of interview was considering making a report to police and finding alternate accommodation</li> <li>• Felt most supported by the practical support offered by friends</li> </ul>

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felt most let down by the lack of affordable housing options for people on small, but not low, incomes</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	9 years & Unknown	Unknown	Physical Psychological Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussed two violent relationships</li> <li>• Due to the extreme nature of the physical violence had extensive involvement with police and other services pre- and post-separation</li> <li>• Felt most let down by lack of directive support pre-separation, Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS) and Secure Adult Mental Health Unit for failure to hold perpetrator to account</li> <li>• Felt most supported by Legal Aid ACT and DVCS</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	13 years	Left once, did not return	Damage to property Financial Physical Psychological Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personally called for assistance from police pre-separation. Also connected with workplace and community counselling</li> <li>• Post-separation maintained ongoing contact with DVCS</li> <li>• Felt most let down by the lack of opportunity to work toward resolving the relationship while the relationship was still intact, including the lack of accountability prompting help-seeking in her partner</li> <li>• Felt most supported by DVCS</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	10 years	Left and returned twice before leaving permanently	Damage to property Injury with property Psychological Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Due to the escalating nature of the DV and perpetrator drug misuse and mental health had extensive contact with police and other services pre- and post-separation</li> <li>• Felt most let down by burden of evidence for Domestic Violence Order (DVO) breaches placed on victims, and lack of housing availability for those leaving violence</li> <li>• Felt most supported by Legal Aid ACT and DVCS</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	12 years	Partner ended the relationship	Physical Psychological Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Due to the extreme nature of the physical violence experienced, victim mental health issues and perpetrator alcohol misuse issues had extensive contact with police and other services pre- and post-separation</li> <li>• Continued to experience violence via perpetrator's new partner post-separation resulting in frequent requests for police assistance</li> <li>• Felt most let down by lack of systemic accountability of perpetrator</li> <li>• Felt most supported by Inanna</li> </ul>

Intimate partner	8 years	Relationship ending at the time of interview	Injury with property Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personally sought assistance from police, DVCS and the Magistrates Court early in the development of violence</li> <li>• Felt most let down by the lack of consistency of DV definitions between DVCS, the police and the Magistrates Court, and treatment from one police officer and the Magistrate</li> <li>• Felt most supported by DVCS</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	9.5 years	Left once, did not return	Financial Physical Psychological Sexual Social Sexual Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shame and embarrassment prevented help-seeking pre-separation</li> <li>• Separation precipitated by life-threatening violent incident. Family and friends provided links to practical and therapeutic services</li> <li>• Felt most let down by lack of access to flexible funding for rebuilding</li> <li>• Felt most supported by West Belconnen and Gungahlin Child and Family Centres</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	30 years	Attempted to leave once, left permanently ten years later	Psychological Verbal Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not seek help throughout the relationship due to her lack of understanding of DV</li> <li>• Talked into staying by a friend roughly ten years before separation, ultimately left due to worsening mental health issues</li> <li>• Felt most let down by lack of information about psychological aspects of coercive controlling relationships</li> <li>• Felt most supported by Inanna, Peer Helpers and Mentors (PHaMS) and job provider</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	3 years & 1.5 years	Left once, did not return  Partner took out DVO and had her removed	Physical Sexual  Perpetration of violence through the legal system Sexual Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussed two violent relationships</li> <li>• Personally sought assistance from police prior to separation in both relationships</li> <li>• Ongoing contact with the legal system a result of counter allegations by perpetrator</li> <li>• Felt most let down by the lack of consistent information provided by different agencies, ability for perpetrator to perpetrate violence through the legal system and CYPs</li> <li>• Felt most supported by CRCC</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	3 years	Left once, did not return	Psychological Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not seek help prior to separation</li> <li>• Sought assistance from police post-separation</li> <li>• Felt most let down by the lack of recognition of victims who do not experience physical violence within service system responses</li> <li>• Felt most supported by colleagues</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	20 years	Felt that the relationship came to a	Damage to property Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not seek help prior to separation, although neighbours called for police assistance on several occasions</li> </ul>

		semi-natural end	Injury with property Psychological Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not seek help post-separation</li> <li>• Extended family paid for repairs to property security and private security system, despite being government housing</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	8 years	Left once, did not return	Financial Psychological Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sought help frequently pre-separation from informal sources</li> <li>• Sought help for housing immediately following separation</li> <li>• Felt most supported by Beryl Women Inc.</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	12 years	Relationship ended several times in complex circumstances such as prisons, partner leaving or conditions of CYPS	Physical Psychological Social Stalking Verbal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Due to the complexity of the family dynamics and extreme nature of violence experienced, had extensive contact with police and other services pre-separation and during periods of separation</li> <li>• Felt most let down by CYPS</li> <li>• Felt most supported by Barnardos</li> </ul>
Intimate partner	6.5 years	On and off relationship, broke it off but was unable to prevent ex-partner from coming and staying in her home	Perpetration of violence through the legal system Physical Psychological Sexual Stalking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not discuss episodes of help-seeking pre-separation</li> <li>• Personally sought assistance from police and ACT Housing frequently post-separation</li> <li>• Felt most let down by lack of follow-up of DVO breaches, ACT Housing, and by systemic failures to offer protection</li> <li>• Felt most supported by CRCC</li> </ul>

### Factors contributing to feeling supported

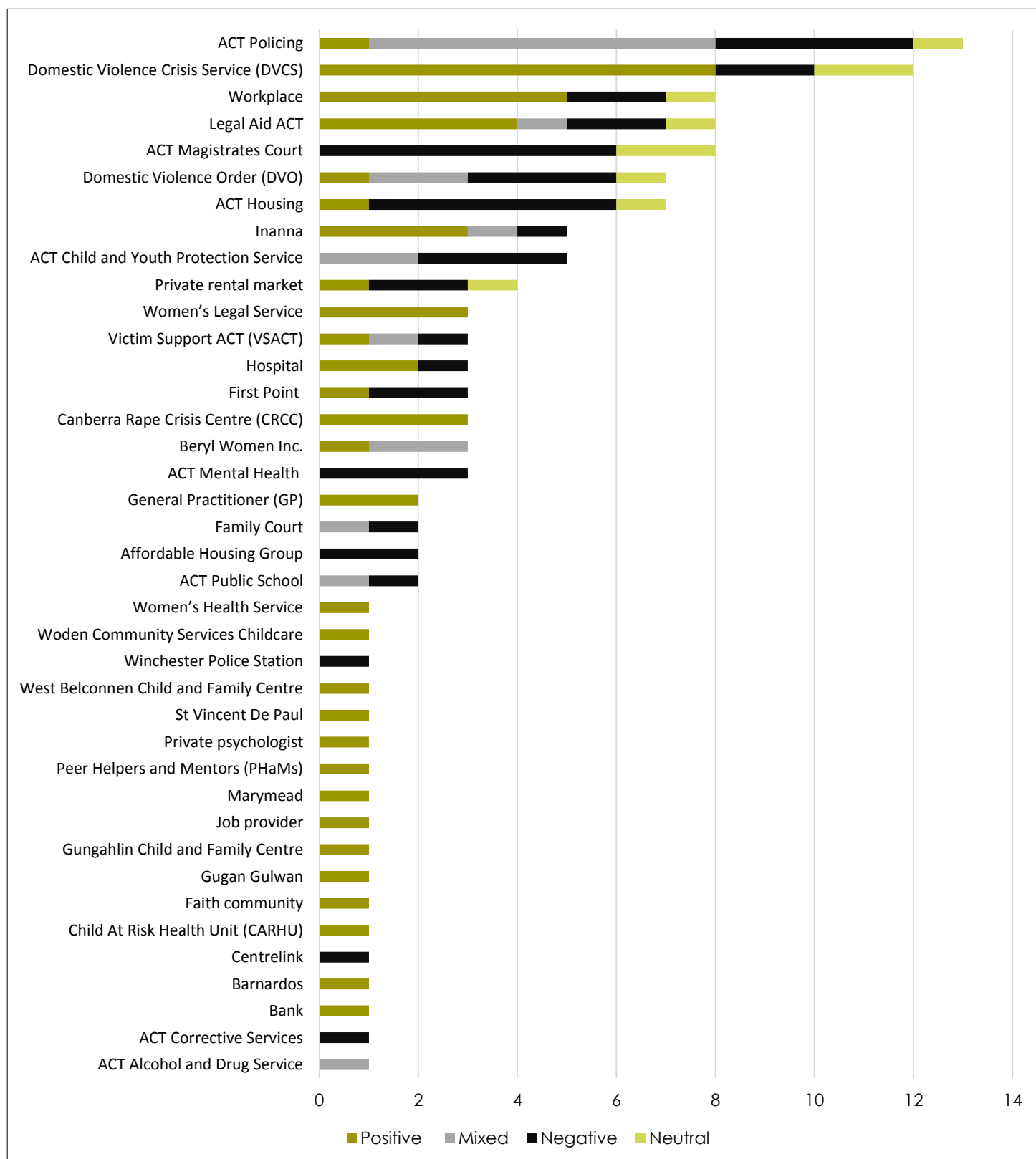
being taken seriously *“A series of positive responses helped things really get going”* collaboration between agencies *“they really acted as both a source of support directly, as well as a link to everything else you might need”* professional competence having a shoulder to lean on *“giving me that little bit of space to get on my feet, not pushing me too much”* patience honesty respectfulness promptness encouragement *“you need someone who has dealt with DV who knows all about it, who gets everything that you’re saying”* assistance to navigate systems good quality information thorough follow-up

### Factors contributing to feeling let down

*“They tried to rule me and I understand they had a job to do, but they didn't have to treat me like I was a little child”* inconsistency *“I wasn’t being validated, I was being totally disrespected”* unanswered calls for help *“this is to you a job number, but this is my life and I want to be left alone”* not feeling protected *“I just want the one person”* lack of financial and housing assistance *“I had to stand there and defend myself”* lack of understanding and empathy *“I just fell into everything”* conflicting responses from different agencies *“it just feels like I've gone through all these hoops”* not being listened to too many demands

## All sources of support mentioned by participants and perception of outcome

The following graph shows all the sources of support mentioned by the women. The bars show the total number of women who accessed each support. The colours within each bar represent whether each of the women who accessed the support perceived the outcome as: positive, negative, mixed or neutral.





## A spectrum of violence needs a spectrum of responses

There is widespread acceptance of the idea that coercive control can manifest in a range of violent behaviours from verbal and psychological abuse, to financial and social control, through to damage to property and physical and sexual violence. Despite this, the case studies provided in this section demonstrate that formal responses to DV in the ACT are felt by women to be overly oriented toward physical violence. Put more simply, the women felt that there is an enduring understanding about DV within the community and among some service systems that DV involves the perpetrator actually hitting the victim.

This dominant (mis)understanding can make other forms of coercive control invisible. In fact, such a narrow understanding of DV is so dominant that several of the women themselves struggled to identify some of the experiences they endured as DV, including having objects thrown at them. The sentiment that only dramatic physical injury would see justice served, legitimacy offered and protection assured, resounded through many of the interviews. Women who do not experience physical violence can have difficulty accessing police and other support services that define need upon imminent risk to safety. The snippets of the four stories presented in this section provide insight into how this bias impacts upon women's decisions to seek help, and their experiences of help-seeking.

### Responses are lacking for early help-seeking

During the interviews several women spoke about thwarted attempts to seek support for their partners and themselves earlier in the relationship. At this point in the relationship, women were motivated toward finding greater help and support for their partner and finding services to work with them, as a couple, to assist in attempting to end the violent behaviour. Dimity's story is a good illustration of the dead-end that women can encounter when seeking to prevent a strained and abusive relationship deteriorating further. Through Dimity's story we read how women can feel both a sense of being a burden on 'crisis' services, such as DVCS, or the police and the courts, and yet at the same time that there is no other place for them to seek the support and protection they need.

#### ***Dimity's Story***

Early in 2015 Dimity's partner's behaviour changed for the worse. He was going through a worker's compensation process that together with his physical injury had caused a serious decline in his behaviour and coping and resulted in him being increasingly abusive toward Dimity. On her partner's behalf, Dimity made several attempts to seek help for his deteriorating mental health. Along the way, Dimity and her partner were offered support from a Catholic counselling service. She expressed concern that a Catholic service would not be appropriate but an alternative referral was not offered. It was at this point—when Dimity didn't feel that she could predict her partner's behaviour—that she reached out to the police for assistance...

*If he'd said to me: "I didn't mean that", I'd go: "I don't want to take the girls away can you leave". But I couldn't rely on his reactions anymore, I didn't quite know how he was going to react to things, so that's why I thought I really need the police...the police are who you ring when you need help, and it was Saturday night 8:30pm...*

*...The police talked to us separately. You know, we weren't drunk, there was no blood, the house was tidy because I'd cleaned it, they looked in on the two girls and saw that they were there in their room, he's out there watching tv, all looking very calm. And I think that's where I have the first problem, in that they see such horrible things...I think it didn't look serious to them...*

*So the cops, they said that no crime had been committed and that they don't have to make him leave...And when I asked about my property, they said it was either my safety or my property. So I feel that he was wrongly advised by the police that no crime had been committed and that he didn't have to leave my house. I thought well what, I needed a black eye and a split lip and smashed glass all through my house for them to take him away? I found I wasn't being heard, I wasn't being validated, I was being totally disrespected. Just because I didn't have bruises all over my face, just because I'm a well-spoken woman doesn't mean I don't need your support. I don't think they saw it as serious, therefore things weren't followed through as well they should have [been].*

*[This] made me go to the Magistrate to get an interim DVO... So I went to the Magistrate's Court, fully advised by DVCS, but I did not [connect up with them at the court and ended up facing the Magistrate alone]...They call me in and I don't know what I'm doing but I've written the thing saying that we need help. I'd written things like we are behaving very ugly towards each other, because I can't say I haven't been responding to him. And so the Magistrate was really nasty, she said things like: "The court's not here to manage your relationship".*

*So I did do a live-in DVO—I don't know if that's what made her really angry, but she was really not very pleasant, to the point where I got to the first set of doors exiting the courtroom and burst into tears and said to the woman there: "Have I done something wrong? Is she taking my kids off me? Am I going to be fined? Was that contempt of court?" I just didn't know what had happened. She basically said I'd wasted the court's time, how dare I use the court to manage my relationship.*

*...I'm trying to prevent where it could end up and I'm trying to minimise the damage done to my children, and minimise the damage done to our relationship due to external factors. [But the system's] not a preventative thing. You know how you've gotta be proactive not reactive? I'm trying to be proactive and I don't know if the services are there to be proactive, they're reactive.*

*...I need help with my mentally unwell husband. He needs mental health support and I couldn't get him there. What am I meant to do? None of the other services had worked, this seems to be the only alternative.*

*...But the DVCS were brilliant, absolutely brilliant. So because of them I got through the process. And I know I can ring them at any time, but you sort of think that you don't want to take away their resources, even though I'm in their system, because I'm not needing to just leave the house to go and buy undies and hand wash things in a friend's sink. It's not that. I have a job, I'm financially independent.*

### Dominant cultural understandings of DV can impact negatively upon help-seeking

Many of the women who participated in the research discussed the ways in which dominant understandings of DV—about what DV is, who perpetrates it, and who experiences it—impeded their

own recognition of DV within their relationships. Charlie's case study is included here because it demonstrates how the perception that DV is primarily about hitting (or even physical violence more generally) can impede women's help-seeking. It also shows the need for more information and awareness raising in the ACT about the spectrum of violent behaviours that can be experienced in DV relationships.

### **Charlie's Story**

Charlie was married for 30 years to a man who used verbal and emotional violence. She never sought help for the violence throughout the relationship, eventually leaving due to deteriorating mental health. After a period of homelessness, Charlie was connected into women's specialist support and mental health services through a job provider...

*It had gotten to that point where the last words to my ex were, "if I'm that bad a person, why did you marry me?" Then I left. I went and lived in my car for eighteen months...I left, and I was going to kill myself. [I thought] I was such a horrible person.*

*Mum didn't explain to me about contraception and stuff, so I didn't know. And also the way I was raised was that I was pregnant, so I had to marry him. You make your bed, you lay in it was my gran's big saying...I left mum and dad's and moved in with this person. I guess I'd been told what to do my whole life and I just got into the habit of it.*

*I didn't know that what was happening to me was actually classed as domestic violence and abuse. I had no idea. For me, domestic violence was someone who beat the crap out of their wife. Or husband.*

*I was also being isolated, slowly but surely. All my friends wouldn't come round. I mean, I don't even think that [my closest friend] would have known. She didn't know the full extent of it because I didn't say a lot.*

*It's only been in the last three years that I've actually managed to contact [services]. [I was] living in a carpark...and then I would couch surf too. Regardless of that, it was hard, but I didn't know anywhere else to turn.*

*I didn't know about verbal, mental abuse that he was doing to me, I didn't know that was a form of abuse. If I had, I might have been able to deal with it better. So if there is some way that women who are not being beaten, but are coping verbal, mental abuse, they might be able to find out earlier in their relationship and work out exactly what's happening.*

*Knowing what I could be doing, or how I could do things different would definitely have made a difference...The services I got were great. If I'd known they were there it would have been easier and happened a lot earlier...I didn't even know that there were services available.*

### Misconception about DV victims impact negatively upon help-seeking

Despite the now common understanding that anyone can be a victim of DV, several of the participants spoke about how misconceptions about victims had influenced their help-seeking. Misconceptions manifest in two distinct ways: firstly, as has been explored already is the idea that DV victims experience physical violence. Secondly, there is a perception that victims will not be 'articulate', 'forthright' or

'angry'. Rachel's story is an eloquent revelation of the impact that skewed notions of legitimacy in terms of victimhood can have on women's help-seeking. This intersects again with the additional feelings of disenfranchisement and isolation felt by women who have not experienced physical forms of coercive control.

### ***Rachel's Story***

Rachel came to the realisation that her partner was using coercive controlling behaviour in their relationship in perhaps the most unique of ways. It was through her post-graduate studies, which involved looking in-depth into the experiences of DV victims, that she identified herself as one. Methodically, intelligently, and equipped with a vast knowledge from the literature, Rachel set about preparing to exit her relationship, a process which included assisting her partner to apply for and take up work in another state. Once physically separated, she ended the relationship. She waited until this time in the knowledge that separation can be a particularly dangerous time. After the separation she received two serious threats from her former partner, which prompted her to report her experience to the police. This was the first time that she had sought formal assistance...

*[I was aware of] the "legitimate victim" complex, which a lot of law enforcement seems to have as well. Unless you turn up to the police station bleeding they're sort of like, "well you're not a real victim, so what are you whingeing about? You're calling each other names, there's a lot worse than that in the world."*

*[It] did impact my decision [to not seek help earlier] quite significantly, because although I knew that the spectrum existed, I also knew from case studies that I'd read that despite that being the case, there was a lot of that 'legitimate victim' perception around people asking for services. Like if I was to turn up to a refuge house and have no physical injuries, have no major threat to going home, it would be on an as-needs basis and it would be on a severity rating...And then the more negative thoughts you have around that go, "oh well, there's not really much point reporting it then because the services are needed by somebody who's in a more serious situation." Because there's always someone in a more serious situation.*

*[So] the external help was very late in the game...If for nothing else because the first time he did it I said, "If you threaten me again I will report you." And I'm a person of my word, so if I say I'm going to do something, [I'll do it]. I'm about 95 percent sure, I think, that he wouldn't hurt me. It's the fact that he said it. You have to draw a line in the sand and say, "no, you've said it, you can't take that back. You can't take those sort of things back.*

*So basically I'll run through what happened: My friend and I came straight from work, so we were dressed nicely. We turned up at the front desk and my friend approached the desk and said, "we just want to talk to someone about some questions relating to a domestic issue." And the guy behind the counter said, "what do you want to know?" And my friend was like, "we were hoping that we could go somewhere private and talk about it." And he said, "you'll have to wait while I talk to the Captain." So he went away and left us there—we were there for about ten minutes. People came and went in the meantime, but then he came out and with no regard to who was in the room said, "well if this is a domestic thing, you'll just have to wait because I'm going to have to call people in from the field. So you're going to have to come back in about half an hour." So we left and came back in the half hour, and he goes, "they're not back yet, just take a seat over there and we'll see you in a minute." It was very dismissive. It was already a daunting process, because I've not had any dealings with the police before. I had not been to a police station for any reason before...I felt almost like because I hadn't come limping in, or because I didn't have a broken lip or something, that I was just being, "oh yeah, we'll get to you in a minute." It was very, very dismissive and quite*

*hurtful. And we left the station for about 45 minutes, and then it was probably another fifteen minutes before they were there. And it wasn't explained to me why they needed a particular person, why they couldn't just take me into a room and [talk to me]. No information was given in case I didn't come back, like a crisis helpline or a pamphlet that detailed the procedure. Nothing was given to me, it was just, "come back and we'll talk about it then." And I literally wouldn't have gone back, I was embarrassed by that. I just felt completely dismissed. But my friend was like, "imagine how many people are in this sort of situation. You need this recorded in case it happens again, and you told him you would report it." And that's the only reason I went back. When we did go back they had a specially trained officer, who deals with domestic violence. If they'd said that to me in the first place—if they'd said, "I'm really sorry to hear there's an issue. If you come back in half an hour—we just don't want you having to sit in the environment here—we've got a specially trained domestic violence officer who deals with this sort of stuff." I would have felt a lot more empowered. It's really not hard...*

*People won't complain about three quarters of the spectrum if they're not aware that that's actually an issue. And then to be treated like that they would just feel stupid and they wouldn't go back. It was really disempowering...Even with the knowledge of what I was studying I felt like I wasn't a legitimate victim when I went to complain, and yet I knew the spectrum. If someone doesn't know that, they're just going to sit there and think that they're going to get laughed at or told that what has happened isn't really a crime.*

*I think there needs to be more attention paid to the advertising of the services, for everyone across the board of that spectrum. That it doesn't matter how seemingly insignificant something is, it's damaging in its own right. They need to debunk that 'insignificant' label. I was very sad for the people who don't necessarily go with somebody, because I can imagine how hard it is to go [on your own]. Especially when you don't know that you're a legitimate victim because you think domestic violence is what you've seen in the media.*

## Everyone has a role to play in broadening understanding of and responses to DV

Agatha's story is an entanglement of several of the ideas explored within this theme, particularly: the challenge to victims and others of labelling as DV violence that is not hitting; and the need for greater information and awareness raising that addresses the fullest experience of DV. Agatha's story also introduces the need for non-DV related services to acknowledge the role they have to play in identifying, asking about and offering information on DV.

### **Agatha's Story**

Agatha was with her former husband for more than 20 years. Emotional and verbal violence and damage to property began fairly early on in the relationship. Despite several people commenting on his behaviour over the years, and her husband coming into contact with a range of criminal justice and health services for mental health and substance abuse issues, no one ever spoke to Agatha about her relationship and she never actively sought help from informal or formal sources. Below is a summary of Agatha's story in her own words...

*I remember when I got pregnant with my first we got in the car, and, I mean, I was pregnant, am I not allowed to cry about something or be upset or vent my insecurities? But he slammed the door shut so hard that the whole window smashed... So it's not like you'd hear, say, really*

*bad [physical violence], but I'd get things thrown at me, or I'd get intimidated, "if you don't do this or this I'm going to smash your whole house." So you learn to be quiet.*

*You're probably yourself in the beginning, but then you learn ways to not provoke it and it doesn't happen as much. I just kind of put up with it... I would just put it away and get on with what I have to do for that day...All I could think of was trying to calm it down so that life would go on peacefully. But obviously you're kidding yourself.*

*Things were mentioned by others though. Like I remember moving from one place to another and he was snappy and even the removal guy told him, "You don't have to talk like that." And when he broke his arm there was a little old lady in the hospital bed across from him, I remember her telling him, "This woman really cares, you should treat her with more respect. You don't have to behave like that." Something like that. Or his friends would say, "You need a medal for living with this guy." One of my older children's pre-school teacher's assistant said that he had a bit of the devil in him.*

The stories presented in this section reveal that existing responses to DV in the ACT can struggle to meet the needs of women who do not experience overt forms of physical violence, such as hitting. This means that a vast portion of the spectrum of violence—including other forms of physical violence such as having items thrown and property damaged—need to become more pronounced in both cultural and systemic understandings of and responses to DV. Connected to this bias is the dominant assumption that DV victims are battered, bruised, vulnerable, weak and non-directive—sometimes they are, and at other times they're not. All together this means that women who present in particular ways—such as 'forthright' or 'angry'—and for particular forms of violence—particularly verbal and emotional—can feel disentitled to and isolated from services and can struggle to have their needs met when they do reach out to services. It can also mean that women delay help-seeking altogether.

If we acknowledge that victims of DV can be subjected to a range of violent behaviours, some very subtle and hidden, and can experience these at differing levels of intensity and progression over the course of a relationship, then we must also accept that the crisis and criminal justice systems will struggle to respond adequately in every instance. The stories presented in this section reveal that there is room for improvement in the quality of responses from these systems. However, they also reveal that there is a need for all other sectors, such as the health sector, to more deeply consider how they identify and work with victims and perpetrators of violence.

In all the women's accounts, ACT's specialist domestic and sexual violence services and other women's services had the most comprehensive understanding of the spectrum of violence and, therefore, provided the most supportive and appropriate assistance. These services were also not influenced by assumptions about the types of women who experience DV. The women's stories reveal the need for all parts of the ACT human service systems to take greater responsibility for identifying and working with victims and perpetrators of violence. They also reveal the need for workplaces, colleagues, friends and family members to have richer understandings of DV and the supports available in the ACT. This work, however, must be informed and coordinated by those agencies within the sector with specialist knowledge of DV.



## Responses need to ensure that victims feel protected, not punished, and perpetrators are held to account

Current systemic responses in the ACT are predominately oriented toward working with those who are experiencing violence, with a view to ensuring their safety. At times, however, this orientation means that perpetrators of violence fall from sight and when perpetrators fall from sight, they cannot be held accountable for the harm they have caused to others. The lack of systemic focus on those who use violence, from primary health care settings to criminal justice settings and everything in between, was a consistent point of discussion for the women. When perpetrators are not held accountable, their victims are left feeling unprotected and let down. Often, victims feel that they are instead held responsible by some service responses for ensuring their own and their children's safety. Many of the women in the research described this as being punished by the services that they sought help from.

*They don't have anyone to say you HAVE to stay, you HAVE to do this, you HAVE to do that before you get out of here. They don't have anyone saying that...There was no support for him, which meant there was no support for me.*

Lila

There is no doubt that systemic responses in the ACT are underpinned by the intention to get the balance right between providing protection to victims and holding perpetrators to account. In the women's experiences this balance has not yet been struck and, as a result, some participants were left with a complete lack of belief in the service system's ability to keep them safe. Women often asked: What more does this person need to do before somebody says that enough is enough?

### Formal responses can leave women feeling more punished than protected

The women reported that those agencies whose mandate it is to consider the best interests of children were those most likely to make women feel responsible for the violence they had experienced. The participants reported feeling that these agencies placed a greater set of demands upon them than their perpetrator, and that this meant they had to bear great personal and financial cost to meet the agencies' demands. Betsy's and Anne's stories are vivid examples of the multiple ways in which the women in the research spoke about feeling punished and held responsible for the violence perpetrated against them.

#### ***Betsy's Story***

Several of Betsy's children are in kinship care awaiting restoration with her. They were removed in part because of her violent former partner. In order to have her children returned Betsy has had to work intensively with Child and Youth Protective Services. Despite her best efforts to meet their demands, the agency's ongoing difficulties with Betsy's former partner continue to disrupt plans for their restoration...

*We just went to court last week and it was meant to be finalised, but the kids' dad chucked a big ball because he wanted to be able to go to the kids' sport and they were fighting—Care and Protection this side, him that side and me in the middle—because they couldn't agree on anything, they couldn't finalise things so that my kids could start coming home.*

*[I have] a beautiful, big four bedroom home, but I have to give it up, but they don't want me to give it up yet, so I've been paying full rent there, plus paying at the refuge, It's been a hassle.*

*[Care and Protection] want me to get a car and a new house for my kids to come and live with me full time, because when they start restoration orders I can't be in the refuge. But Housing won't give me a new [larger] house because I don't have the kids in my care. So it's a catch-22. And I can't get a loan because I have no income, and so I can't get a car. They said that they don't want too many changes for my children, but I just keep getting shipped around.*

*We've got a big meeting with Housing. Care and Protection are going to sit there and listen, but at this stage Housing is only going to give me a two bedroom.*

*They make it your fault. They make everything feel like it's your fault...My ten year old was counting down the days to court last week, and he knew he had his psychologist on the fourth, the court was on the sixth. So on the fifth he could pack the little ones' bags so he could come home, because he knew that they'd start with the little ones one at a time. So he was all ready for that. So on Monday he got suspended from school because he had a bad weekend because Care and Protection told him that it's not happening and he can't handle change very well.*

*For a lot of women, it's the same. Care and Protection, they say that they're there to help you but they're not. And it just feels like they're still blaming me because every time he chucks a patty, it makes it longer for me and I'm doing everything they've asked.*

*It feels like it's never going to end. I know sometimes I feel like it's all my fault because of the way the situation is, but I know deep down it's not my fault. But I just wish the system would realise that.*

### **Anne's Story**

Towards the end of Anne's former marriage the violence her former husband was using escalated to the point where he assaulted their son—an assault for which he was charged and provided with a probationary period of 12 months. Despite this and records of 13 separate incidences of DV requiring police attendance, after the separation Anne was ordered to facilitate her children's access with their father. Although Anne had initially secured legal representation for the Family Court through Legal Aid, this representation was withdrawn once Anne decided she wanted to challenge the access orders. Anne describes the pain this process caused her and her children in her own words below...

*Going through the Family Court system is horrendous....Having to sit in the courthouse, with him right there, was terrifying. This is a man who's nearly killed me; twice in the same year, once in front of my son... And I ended up self-representing—because [my lawyer at Legal Aid] said to me, "we're cutting your funding because you will not agree to access". And I'm thinking to myself that in my job if I did that I would lose it because I'm putting a minor at risk.*

*Then I had to get all my paperwork together. He wasn't doing things, not submitting his paperwork. He wouldn't turn up and have things done by a certain day, but the courts would give him an extension, despite them saying he would not get an extension in the first place. So they kept, in my eyes at the time, making excuses for him and it was extremely frustrating.*



*I'd have to give access to the children and my son went, but not my daughter, my daughter refused. So it was great—I'm having to deal with my abuser in court, and then I'm having to drive to his house to drop my child off and be forced to relive the situations repeatedly every fortnight, or whatever his schedule was. He took my son in lieu of a court date, so I had him for breaching the court orders, I had him for taking my child in breach of court orders, but the police did a welfare check and left my son there and we picked him up again at 7 o'clock and nothing happened.*

*[It] got to the point where my son, something happened at his father's house, and he refused to go, he refused point blank. He turned eleven two days later, and his father wanted to see him for his birthday and my son refused. That was the end of his visits. My son threatened to jump off the balcony and kill himself.*

*...I just constantly felt that the Family Court really wasn't listening at all. I know there are cases where people make things up and stuff like that, I get it. But when you've got legitimate cases, forcing people into situations, it caused a massive [problem]...I couldn't protect my kids, and the courts weren't helping me protect my kids. I had DVOs that weren't enforced and he openly admitted that he had breached it and he was on probation for the assault on my son, and the police did nothing. So, it can be extremely frustrating when you think things would be followed through, but they're not.*

A lack of consistency of information and effective partnerships between agencies, or between the same agencies in different jurisdictions, can also leave women feeling unprotected. Frances' story is chosen here as an example because it brings into focus the importance of ACT-based agencies collaborating, not only with each other, but their counterparts across the border in New South Wales (NSW). The way Frances' anger manifests about her lack of protection also brings to life the findings discussed in the previous section about the way victims present and are perceived.

### **Frances' Story**

*I was in a relationship for three years, probably from about 2011 into 2014. And that ended in Bateman's Bay area over Christmas. We were staying at a holiday house, and it ended in violence. The police were called and they came and took a statement and then they asked him to leave. He'd already smashed the door and strangled me, and there was also this realisation of [further violence perpetrated against my child].*

*The police took a statement at the house, and told me to stay and fix the door. In NSW they don't actually organise a locksmith for you, and [it was] at Christmas time [and] it's the middle of the night. So I felt a little bit upset that they just asked him to leave and left me in a house that was not secure.*

*So the door got fixed and me and my [child] left and when I got back to Canberra I was hoping to organise a DVO, but it was Christmas time and the courts were closed until the 3rd of January. I understand that the police can apply for one on your behalf during holiday periods, but they wouldn't because I hadn't had a statement taken by the Bateman's Bay police. I thought I had, but apparently I had to go to the police station. I attended the Woden police station and they told me I could go to Queanbeyan because it is in New South Wales and I could just do a statement there rather than going all the way back to Bateman's Bay. I rang Queanbeyan and they said that I had to go back to Bateman's Bay. So I rang Bateman's Bay and they confirmed that I would need to go back to Bateman's Bay. I was not wanting to go back to Bateman's Bay, it's a long drive, it's Christmas time and it's very busy, just to give*

*a police statement. I didn't think that it was worth it. So I didn't get a DVO until the courts reopened about a week later.*

*I suppose I get very upset. The [ACT] police ended up attending my house when I was complaining and hoping to get a DVO, and they arrested me in front of my daughter. So much to say they put handcuffs on me and then they changed their mind and let me go. Crazy stuff. I was very upset and probably took it a bit far, but it was annoying that you get told the wrong information and then at every point there's the wrong information, and you just bounce from one bit to the next, and you don't understand why.*

Many participants spoke of responses to their help-seeking that left them feeling invalidated or even equally responsible for their experience of violence. Most often, the women spoke about their concerns that service providers—particularly the police—were not able to see past the charming and sometimes victimised performance of their partners.

*I do want to make one point that I feel like every time the police were involved, I don't know, I know it's their job not to take sides, like they need to get information from both parties kind of thing, but I feel like the first few times they were called, it was [seen as] just as much my fault as it was his fault. And there was nothing really done about it because it was just an argument that had been blown out of control. So I kind of felt like the first few times I dealt with the police that it was my fault. And I think that helped in me feeling that it wasn't that bad.*

*Like I remember once there'd been some broken glass on the floor. I think while I was trying to run off I'd accidentally knocked over something and it smashed on the ground. And he [the police officer] asked me who did it and I said it was me, so he made me vacuum, like stand there with the vacuum cleaner in front of them and vacuum it up because he was worried about my daughter getting glass. So I'm standing there vacuuming up the glass while my ex is outside talking to the other police officer. You know, that was his most important thing. That I vacuumed up the glass, rather than finding out what's going on and am I ok? Just little things like that, where it could have been dealt with a lot differently.*

*I think the same police officers had been there about three times. I think back now and I'm like obviously, the police are called to your house that many times something's going on. They both just get our statements and that was kind of it. And my ex of course would make it all my fault. He was really good at that.*

Susan

*Because I got locked out of the house that many times, when he was inside with the kids, and I'd ring DVCS but they would want me to ring the police, but if I ring the police then I don't know how the kids are when he's unpredictable like that. The police come and he's been raving one minute and then he's calm and they're like: "Why are you ringing us? There's nothing wrong here."*

Rowena

## The system can fail victims when perpetrators are not held to account

Many of the participants in the research felt that the person who had perpetrated violence against them had been allowed to constantly flout the system without ever being held to account. There was a spectrum of responses on this issue, ranging from some women expressing frustration that the police would remove their partner only to allow them to return to the house within hours, through to women feeling that systemic responses failed to prevent their partners perpetrating violence against them, even after being charged and found guilty of an offence. Several women provided accounts of the ways in which their former partners would use others to continue to perpetrate violence, including the perpetrators' own new partners. Most commonly, the women lamented the ad-hoc and unreliable way in which breaches of DVOs are dealt with. Priscilla felt so utterly responsible for ensuring her own safety, and so bewildered by the extent she perceived her former partner to be able to pervert the course of justice, that at the time of the interview she had lost all faith in the ability of the system to keep her safe and bring her perpetrator to account.

### ***Priscilla's Story***

Priscilla separated from her partner early in 2015. For several months she tried, without success to have her partner prevented from frequenting her home. He would harass her persistently at some times, breaking into the house through every means possible, and then not at other times. There was a kind of rhythm to the haphazard harassment and Priscilla assumed she would have to get used to living with it. Several months later, however, Priscilla's former partner viciously assaulted her, causing profound physical, psychological and emotional injuries. He was arrested and held in custody. In custody he engaged very experienced and expensive legal representation, and sought to delay proceedings—including on Priscilla's DVO—through withholding instruction to counsel and other measures. Priscilla's experiences with ACT Housing and the ACT criminal justice system have left her feeling utterly unprotected, and devoid of faith in the system's capacity to protect women and bring perpetrators of DV to account...

*What exactly does he need to do? What exactly? Because myself, like many other Canberrans, believe there is a judicial system, and that should work, and it's not. There are men doing lengthy sentences for much less, so what is it?*

*I said to everyone: "What does this man need to do before something will happen?"*

*During that time I went to Housing and said: "What can I do? What options do I have? Is there a way to speed up moving or anything?" And they're like: "Oh well, you've got to do an application and you've got to..." And I said: "I feel time-poor. I feel that I don't have time to do an application and do all this." And they're like: "But he's incarcerated." And I said: "But nobody knows for how long. What if he gets bail tomorrow? What do I do? I can't afford to go to a hotel, I can't afford..." And they're like: "Why don't you move interstate?" And I said: "Why should I have to? Why should I have to go and hide when I didn't do anything wrong?" "Do you have protection orders?" and I said "I have an interim order. I can't get final orders." "Why can't you get final orders?" And all this stuff.*

*He started making applications for bail and employed this legal team, and was getting a barrister involved. I said "You know what? This Legal Aid lawyer is very limited time." And Housing were like: "Well, it's a process and we've got to follow a system." And blah, blah, blah. DVCS weren't particularly helpful...you know, they're like: "We can write you a letter."*

*And I said: "Okay, that's great. Thanks." I said: "I don't feel a letter is actually very helpful but is there anything somebody can help me do? Anything? I don't know what to do next, I don't?" "You can gather some support letters and you can see your GP and you could probably get something from the AFP." But I said "All of this takes time. What if he gets bailed tomorrow, what do I do tomorrow?" "You need a safety plan. You should decide are you going to [move interstate] if he makes bail." "That's not the point. I can move [interstate] every time he makes a bail application but what next? What next?" And nobody had the answers. Nobody could tell me anything.*

*...I met with the DPP not long ago because I actually wanted to attend case management hearings and stuff like that and they don't want me to because they don't want to upset [my former partner]. I said, "Throughout this whole process for more than a half a year, what I've found is that if you are a [name of former partner] with money and access to an endless supply of money, you can do whatever you want and where is that social justice or fairness and right and wrong? Don't we teach our children to go to the police because they will help you, go to this person because they will help you, go to this service because they will help you?" I said: "You have totally robbed me of social justice principles that I have had with a 20 year career in community services. I will never have faith."*

*You know, there's part of me that just thinks if he just came to the house and blew my face off then it's over. It's just because for all I know [he] already knows where I live. Nothing's going to [keep me safe]. I don't think there is a person or a service or an agency that's going to do that.*

*...I hope that the next person—well, there shouldn't be a next person but there will be—who has to endure just doesn't have to get to that point. That they just get, you know, what the average Joe thinks is fair. The average Joe thinks if you go to court and you apply for a protection order and have evidence that you get one. And that the fine men and women who say they protect us actually protect us. That Housing have a system where surely the most unusual of circumstances are considered and there is a response not a system. Honestly, in that six weeks following the assault, there is no way I could've completed an application and run around and got support letters and ticked off my to do list and made sure I was on track. I couldn't. There is no physical or mental or emotional way I could've done that but that's their expectation and I would hope that when someone, man woman or child, that they just actually have a system that is responsive. "Right, you want to move? Move."*

*[It should be] that there is a consistent approach to whether you are black, you are white, you are a refugee, you are a citizen, you should...you know, right is right and wrong is wrong. We need magistrates to have a consistent approach. If the penalty for breaching a DVO is five years imprisonment and \$75,000.00 fine then do it. If there is no consequence—you know, you teach a toddler consequences, but then when you're a grown up it's dependent, you know, if it's a Tuesday and the sun's shining and magistrate such and such is having a great day and believes that everybody deserves a fair go he will walk the street. How is that fair?*

Victim safety and perpetrator accountability are two sides of the same coin. The women felt that when the latter is not achieved it sends the message to perpetrators that it is ok to continue to use violence. It also often results in victims wondering why they engaged with the system at all, sometimes opting-out all together in the belief that they alone are responsible for ensuring their safety. At other times victims are themselves punished by formal responses, particularly from child-related services. Accountability is not the same as punishment. Accountability is about ensuring that the safety of victims and their children (together, not in isolation) is at the centre of responses and that victims do not unnecessarily endure

inconvenience and loss of resources in pursuit of their own safety and wellbeing. It is about ensuring that those who use violence are held responsible for that violence with consistent, certain and swift responses. Ambivalence in responses, or changeability dependent upon the differing philosophical orientations of agencies and individual workers will not keep women or children safe.

Like the support and assistance that is offered to victims, the business of holding perpetrators to account belongs to everyone. The complexity of the task at hand and the breadth of work yet to be done means that the law enforcement and criminal justice sectors cannot do it alone. Of course, these sectors have the most significant role to play in holding those who use some forms of violence to account and providing protection to victims—work that can be done with ingenuity and humanity all the while providing assurance for victims.

The stories presented in this section again reveal that there is a need for all other sectors, such as the health sector, to more deeply consider how they identify and work with perpetrators of violence. One thing is clear: a system that is coherent, consistent and which understands that the ultimate aim is to prevent those who use violence from continuing to harm others at the earliest possible stage, is the system that will keep victims of violence safe. It is a subtle, but monumental shift.

*Encourage men. The first thing is rather than helping the women, encourage the men to seek some support because they need to fix the situation too. They want to fix the situation, but they want to fix it in isolation where nobody knows about what's happening with our lives. But if you're not going to talk about it, if you're not being honest it doesn't help anybody.*

Rosa

## Help-seeking journeys change over time, so too do women's needs

Help-seeking involves a dynamic relationship between those seeking help and those providing it. At its best, help-seeking is experienced as the complementary coming together of the needs of those seeking help and the offerings of those providing it. The third key finding of the research is that more can be done by those providing help to match the needs of those seeking it according to the point they are at in their particular journey.

The women identified the need for a model based on the type of support needed at three different stages of their journey out of DV: pre-separation; separation; and building a new life. The model proposed from the women's accounts is one where: help offered pre-separation is unambiguous, consistent and instructive; help offered during and immediately following separation is highly practical, assistive and flexible, with the usual bureaucratic barriers to resources removed; and finally, the help-offered in the medium to long-term post-separation is open-ended and entirely determined by the stated needs of each woman.

### Women's suggestions for the help needed pre-separation

It is a generally held belief that women should be supported pre-separation until such time as they are ready to take action. This is sound logic, and is built upon the understanding that it may cause greater harm to force a woman into action that she is not comfortable with. Betsy's story about her experiences with child protection services from the previous section certainly highlights the potential for harm and victimisation to be caused by services not working with women as equal partners in the road to safety. But in supporting women to make decisions at all, there are a range of factors to address, including: varying levels of realisation that what they have experienced constitutes DV; a need for knowledge about what their options are and what services are available to them; a need for information about what different services can offer and why they work in the ways they do; navigation of complex and confusing emotions and challenges to previously held notions about relationships and family; the influence of fear and the desire to minimise future violence, embarrassment and shame; and the reality that women's inner resources, confidence and coping have been steadily worn down by the person using violence against them.

These factors were all identified by women in the research as reasons for wanting help pre-separation that is: unambiguous—services explain what they can offer, why they offer it, how they work and why they work the way they do; consistent—services always work in the ways they say they will; and instructive—services clearly define the violence they perceive is being perpetrated, they provide frank advice on the risks to women and children of remaining in the violence, they provide a range of options for service utilisation dependent on whether a woman's decision is to stay or leave, and they provide follow-up contact and information whether the women feel that they need it or not.

Many of the women also spoke cautiously about having greater action taken on their behalf against the person using violence; cautiously because while they felt action against their partners being taken out of their hands would be a good thing, they were wary about processes being poorly seen through and thus



creating greater risk to them in the long run. Susan's and Lila's stories summarise the sentiments expressed throughout the interviews about the type of support women need pre-separation.

### ***Susan's Story***

Susan left and returned to her relationship twice before leaving permanently the third time—a very common experience for women in DV relationships. On each occasion the separation was precipitated by an escalation in physical violence requiring police attendance and resulting in contact with DVCS. Susan believes she stayed longer in the relationship than she needed to because of her deliberate attempts to manage the violence herself, and doubts about whether what was happening to her constituted something outside the bounds of 'normal' relationship. She talks below in her own words about how services' responses during these times impacted upon her...

*Yeah, they said if I ever needed anything, or if I needed to talk or anything, just to call them. I mean they were very helpful and all really nice when I have dealt with them. But, yeah, I guess when you make the decision to go back, nobody follows up on it until you need them again, until you make that kind of cry for help again I guess. ...But I guess, like I said, unless you make the decision—even though you might want to make the decision but you don't at the time—I feel like maybe nothing is really done about it. I think it's a bit scary. Because at the time it's all confusing and I think you're trying to keep your partner as calm as possible and you don't want to escalate anything. You're more thinking about how to calm them down. So I guess like a couple of times when I called them I might have actually wanted help but I said no in the end anyway. I think [greater power for police to act] would actually be really good, because at the time when you're standing there saying that you don't want to press charges, you're probably doing that because you don't want to make them angrier. If he knows that you're pressing charges against him—because there's times when he's said to me: "oh, you've taken an AVO [Apprehended Violence Order] out against me, I'm never going to be able to get my security clearance now" and all this. So, they always put it back on you. And I guess it's just another thing for them to have to be angry at you about.*

*For me personally I feel like everywhere just let me go back way too easily. Whereas if they would have maybe made it harder, or had other things for me to think about. Like when they told me they were going to call Child Protection that scared the hell out of me. I was like: "oh my God, my kids are going to be taken off me", and that scared the hell out of me. But when they came to the house and saw that everything was ok, and my ex had his act on that he was a great father, they just left and that was it! So I guess it's hard, because if you can play a good acting role like I did for so long, then nobody can see what's actually going on.*

*... I think, like I said, the police are the first point of contact and I think a lot of the time when women make that call to the police it's because they're so desperate and obviously they're calling because they are scared and don't know what to do anymore. But then when the police actually turn up they're too scared to ask or say what they want done. I think, you know, the police need to give them some offers of what can be done, or at least leave them with the information they need. Because I found a couple of times when I did call the police because I was in that desperate need, when they actually go there, you don't ask for help and you don't, I don't know...So if they could give you some kind of options of what you can do. Because a lot of the time, once they get there and leave it's just like, now what?*

### ***Lila's Story***

Lila's former partner had serious mental illness and drug addiction. In addition to this, he was very physically violent towards her and often prevented her from leaving the house alone or leaving the house at all. As a result of the violence, the police were called to Lila's house with great frequency. Lila explained that the police grew tired of constantly attending her home and her never being willing to make a statement. On one occasion, the Sergeant attended and strongly encouraged Lila to make a statement, which she did. She was happy with the initial processes that were put in place for her partner, but found that within three months he was no longer accountable to the services he had been mandated to work with, and with a lack of follow-up soon become more violent than he had been previously. Lila describes the intensity of the demands placed on women's decision-making pre-separation in her own words below...

*It's probably half and half, I think that they just became sick of me I think. I got that feeling, because I was ringing them everyday. There was not a day that went past when the police were not at my house or at the school or something. So, I think they just got sick of it. ...And then, because I wouldn't make a statement—I wouldn't write a formal statement—they were frustrated. And then I think it became a situation where I'd ring them and they'd know it was me and they would be like: "We're there at your house everyday, you need to do this, you need to do that, otherwise we can't act upon it". You understand that, but if you're in that situation and you don't know any better, then that's not going to get through. That message isn't going to get through. ...A DVO, things like that. They'd say: "Well, tomorrow go and get a DVO so when this happens again then we can arrest him". It's not that easy to go to get a DVO on someone, especially if you're in that frame of mind.*

*It all comes back to the woman. Because you don't know how that woman's feeling, you don't know what she's gone through, you don't know how she thinks. For people to say to ring the police or to go and get a DVO, you have no idea the repercussions, you have no idea the situation. Even within yourself, even though I don't see that person, he still has so much power over me because of the way I think about myself. And it's hard for you to not think: "Maybe I should just speak to that person". Women need more support. I think if there's an incident with DV and police are called, usually DVCS come afterwards to see you. After that incident they ask you if you want them to come but I think they should come whether you like it or not maybe. Then you're asked if you want more help or if you want to talk to DVCS again or something like that, but maybe it should be that they come and see you. Because sometimes you wanna do things but because of that person that's there you can't. You can't do anything. You can't even talk on the phone. So if someone is actually forced to be at your house, or is forced to see you, even if you don't even feel like it, I think that that's a good thing. Sort of, and less damage done. The longer that you're with that person, the longer it takes you to get over it, and the more severe it can get.*

Just as Lila's and Susan's stories suggest, the women talked about the need for service providers in all settings to be curious and inquisitive about their clients' relationships. Again we hear from Lila.

*I think that there's so many times when I tried to reach out to people. When I went for my appointments with my daughter when she was a baby as well, and I had him with me, and I'm looking at them saying can you please help me? But he was very crazy, if I looked at another person, even if it was a lady, then he'd punch me in the face. Because I'm looking at them and conspiring or whatever. So I think that I was let down a lot with support.*

Lila



Several of the women provided simple but poignant examples of how transformative this can be when done well. Others provided advice on how this can be done well.

*But when I went to see [my long-term GP], he just looked at me and he said: "you alright?" And I said: "Yeah". And he looked at my ex and he said to him: "Don't you ever come in here with her again. Don't ever come in here with her again. She's not an idiot. She knows what she's talking about, so when she tries to talk to me, she doesn't need you in the background coaching her".*

Lucy

*During the time my son was at the childcare at Lollipop at Woden, so the manager she recognised that there is a problem because they understand from my son's behaviour, they asked me about my relationship and personal life and everything, and I explained to her, then she said she could help me with someone coming to my home to talk to me and give more information. So I got the woman, she came to my place and she talked to me during the time I was moving and those woman they worked with me and they took me to woman's refuge.*

Joy

*I think that there needs to be a program that addresses that so that they can look deeper than just what the person looks like. And to know how to ask the right questions, in the right way. Because you don't always know what your question is, you just know that you want to talk about it. Even just acknowledging that the person's upset or something like that would be useful. By all means ask the question, but then allow a person to take a moment to sit and think. Sort of ease people into it. You can't rely on the person to spontaneously break into dialogue. Sometimes people will, but other people don't. They don't know what they want to say. They don't know how to say it. I just think it could be done more smoothly, that transition from reporting to helping. And again that needs to be a spectrum: How helping does this person need you to be? How comforting does this person need you to be? How authoritarian? Different people need different things.*

Rachel

Rosa speaks with great clarity about how beneficial it can be for women to have greater understanding of why services respond in the way they do.

### ***Rosa's Story***

*The same thing happened with even my husband. When the police came in he was all good, stood up straight, even though he was drinking. And he was kind of giving the police statements as if to say: "See, if I was drunk would I be able to stand like this?" It was making him seem good to them that: "I'm not the one who should be in trouble. She is the one..." That's the situation, but then the police mentioned to the other support lady in DVCS that: "Her husband was clever enough to say all those things, that means he's very manipulative, so it's a bit of a worry for us". That's when I got an indication that they know the situation, but the only thing is that they can't just charge anybody just like that. These people are very manipulative.*

*...I think the police are the main or the first point of contact. But what I have heard from both stories, and even mine, is kind of that they are giving us that room where if we wanted to we could [repair] the relationship. They don't want to agree with the situation at the time, but that just drives us crazy. We think: "What is happening, they are just allowing us to be with*

him again". And you just go crazy. If it works it works, but if it doesn't work that kind of negative thinking makes us very scared. And that happened with me. I was thinking that everything would be fine after they have come, but I agree totally [with what the others have said]: "How come you called them? How come you did this to me? You are not going to survive, you are not going to". And that's where everything was made more drastic.

...And then as soon as he went out for a smoke, I thought: "I don't know what's happening but this is not the right situation and I shouldn't be here", and I just took my younger one and...because it was just happening like this and the phone was there, I just grabbed the phone and just left the home, without anything. With bare feet. My child didn't have anything. It was very scary, but I had to run to the police station. I'm glad it was close by so I could run. They were good at that time because they said: "If this is not the situation you want to be in, take some help. Take some support."

...They will be with us, but in a situation where we are comfortable, not in a situation where we are uncomfortable. I think they realise that if for any reason a woman has to stay with her husband, they shouldn't open the door for more conflict. So that's when they kind of said: "Ok, it's ok, he's fine." So they were kind of boosting him that maybe he is fine, he is good, so that he would be more comfortable. ...Sometimes maybe it's good. I don't know, it depends on each and every situation. So now I see that they are really good in some situations, but for us to understand their thinking, it takes time. It takes a long time.

Rosa

## Women's suggestions for the help needed around separation

During and immediately following separation women identified that they need support that is practical and flexible. The most obvious and pressing needs talked about were those related to safety, housing, and access to finances. The most common frustration experienced by the women was having to continue to navigate the same bureaucratic processes as they would have to do at any other time, despite their situation being incredibly time pressured and more urgent than usual. They felt that services need to be able to immediately respond to women at this time, with flexibility in what they can provide and how they can provide it depending on individual women's needs, and the needs of their children. Many individual services already do this work well, however, government agencies and the private sector can play a much larger role in affording the flexibility and generosity needed by women at this time. Anne's story represents many of the frustrations communicated through the interviews, and provides a creative starting point for thinking about how to offer better support.

### **Anne's Story**

Looking back, Anne believes she stayed with her violent ex-husband for longer as a result of not being able to easily find alternate accommodation. While married, the family lived in accommodation provided by her husband's employer. Anne always knew that ending the relationship would mean that she would be given an eviction notice of 28 days, which provided many obstacles for her to locate secure accommodation for her and her children. To compound the problem, once Anne did leave the relationship she was not entitled to any social support payments as a result of her decent income, despite the fact that she had left the relationship with her husband's debt and full responsibility for their children. She entered the private rental market and endured extreme housing stress for years paying full rent for a house large enough to accommodate her family. She details below in her own

words the type of flexible supports that might prevent women going through the same housing stress that she endured...

*So there's a lot of things that need changing, and now having come through the other end, and I think people are going through this now, and are still on that journey of hell—it's a journey of hell—who can't get the resources they need because they're not available or the waiting is too long because there's not enough funding or people or whatever.*

*I'm not saying the government is made of money, but at the end of the day we're talking about other human beings that need to take care of themselves who aren't able to do so. Why aren't we helping them?*

*Accommodation would be nice. A safe house for people. I know that there are places, but they're always full. If they're always full obviously there's a need. We've got old schools, why aren't we turning them into [accommodation]? You could fit people in. So there's all these things that they could do, but then it comes down to money. You know, I said to my [current] husband, if I ever win lotto I'm buying houses because I'm going to have them for women who are escaping this crap, who don't have anywhere to go, and stay because they don't have anywhere to go.*

*So there's all these great places out there, but, they can't always deal with the huge numbers, and now that it's coming out that there are a lot more women going through this you would think that there would be better options.*

*Calling government housing and going: "I've got 28 days, I've got three children, and I'm fleeing domestic violence can you help me?" "You earn too much" was the comment. With three children apparently I earned too much, but did they want me to quit my job?*

*Looking at the Affordable Housing Group, all their houses are in Gungahlin, so they don't help anyone who is [in] Tuggeranong, Woden, Weston Creek, even Civic. They're all out in Gungahlin. Housing is key for people trying to flee, because if they have somewhere to go, they're more likely to go. Whether it's affordable housing, or it's Department of Housing, or if it's private rental, which is a nightmare in terms of cost anyway.*

*[We need to] get someone from Housing and say: "This is how many people are here you need to build more, you need more stuff, we need more housing, or we need housing that deal with two or three families that are fleeing domestic violence". Because you can't just wait two years, three years. You may not have the money, you may be unemployed, you may not have any job skills because you're at home. How're you supposed to accommodate a job? And they'd be low paying jobs. How're you supposed to pay for a two-bedroom, three-bedroom house when you're working at Maccas? It's not logical. And they go: "Oh you can get Centrelink payments", again, it's still not going to be enough. And that's what people don't understand.*

*If I could've accessed my superannuation, I would have paid off my debts and bought a house for my kids. I would have had a deposit at least. That would have worked for me.*

*But I couldn't access my superannuation to help my children and keep stability in their lives. So the first two or three years afterwards was the raw bit of going I need a house, I need a house, I need a house. That would have helped.*

## Women's suggestions for the help needed when rebuilding for the future

Resounding through the interviews was the sense that, at this stage in the journey, women definitely know what it is that they and their children need to rebuild their lives. Support at this stage in a woman's journey would most usefully be open-ended and entirely directed by each woman. The women felt that the help offered at this stage of their journey ought not to be tied to rigid service funding arrangements between governments and service providers, or rigid assumptions about where resources ought to be directed. As Vivienne's story shows, the risks of not offering women this type of support at this stage in their journey is high. Her story captures the essence of what support at this stage of the journey would ideally look like in order to enable women to rebuild their lives and protect them against future homelessness, poverty and stress. —

### ***Vivienne's Story***

Vivienne ended the relationship with her former partner and moved back to Canberra, her home town. At the time of meeting, she was living in accommodation provided by a housing service provider awaiting placement in an ACT Housing property. As a result, she talked about her life feeling like it was on hold. In addition to this, she was working toward getting a licence, a process slowed by the expense of driving lessons. Not having a license, and having to rely exclusively on walking and public transport to care for her many children was weighing heavily upon Vivienne's physical and mental health and ability to cope. Vivienne felt that she was not provided the support she needed despite being clear about what it was...

*They got me into a counsellor and it did not feel ...I sort of got in there and the counsellor was like, "so how are you feeling?" And I was like, "well, how am I feeling today? Or in general?" And she goes, "well what do you want to talk about?" "What should I talk about? Should I talk about what I've just been through? Should I talk about what I'm going through now? Should I tell you how I have been feeling?"*

*I went to the doctor's and got on antidepressants and it was like an anti-stress, anxiety and depression. I took that for a month and then I went, no, I don't want that anymore. I don't want drugs to make me feel better. I was sort of like, "I want to do this. I don't want tablets to make me feel better. I need something to make me better."*

*I think at the moment I'm working really hard to try to get my licence. I've had a couple of lessons but they can be quite expensive. I need to be able to—I feel like I'm stuck. I need my licence so I can get the kids to school and day care and back. That'll make me feel a lot better in myself. I need to get my license—that will make me feel better. I need to get my Diploma back on track, get my career happening. Have a home.*

*And it's really hard here because it's not my home, I'm on the Housing list, but it's not my home...Inanna, they sort of, they wanna come over once a week and sometimes it can be—I'll be busy and they come over a go, "What have you been doing with the kids? What have you been doing?" And it's sort of like, hang on, can I just have a break? You guys come over a lot and I know it's part of their program but it's sort of like, I'm trying to get my life back on track, can't I just call if I need you or something? ...They're doing a great job in letting me have a home, good with support letters and stuff if I need them, which is great, but I don't need someone coming over every week to sit down here after I've had a busy day and say,*

*"So what's going on with the kids? And how's your [health issue]? Have you been to check that? Well you really need to do that. Have you been to the doctor to get your mental thing yet?" I'm just trying to work with one thing at a time here. I've been to the doctor about my [health issue], not my mental health yet, but I will.*

*...Getting my kids to school and back, that would be bloody awesome. ...Or being able to offer me some driving lessons to save a little bit of money in my pocket. That sort of thing you know, because they are expensive.*

*And you know, I have the bills and rent and food. I'm paying off my debts from my old place because [my former partner] wasn't working for so long I was getting behind in rent. I went and took out two loans, so now I'm paying back two loans. And I have things from Radio Rentals and when I left [the town I was living in] and came here, I stopped the payments for Radio Rentals, but they got a hold of me and told me that I owe them money.*

*It's this constant run around and you know ...Everyday I've gotta make sure I've got at least fifteen dollars for bus money to get to school and back. Sometimes I even ring a taxi to pick up the two big school girls. ...Most of the time the kids are at school late, because I can't do it. I've gotten up at six o'clock in the morning and by the time they get home from school, homework, dinner, then dishes after dinner, tidying up, they're in bed, then I get a bit of time to myself, then I'm in bed late, then I'm getting up tired.*

*I've gotta then get lunches together. I dress them all, do all their hair, do all their breakfast, pack their lunches, get their bags, get prams, then walk. There are days when I pull the blanket over my head and I'm like I can't do this today.*

*Weekends. What are weekends? I don't have money to take the kids out and do things. I don't have a car to take the kids out to do things. A license. You know, my biggest thing would be driving lessons. Or just help getting the kids to school. Anything. Even if Inanna could offer me two or three days of the week getting the kids to school that would just be so less pressure for me.*

*Because it is depressing waking up every day. My babies, they sleep in. They only have day care two to three days per week, I have to wake them up on the days that they don't have day care. Get them up and drag them out in the cold. You don't see anyone else walking around with all their kids at that time of the morning. Even just to go down the shops to get bread and milk, I have to drag them all down there with me, or I can leave them at home with my teen. I walk all the way there and back and it hurts.*

*If they could do anything to help me, that would be it. Because then I could get the kids to appointments and stuff. There's so many appointments. ...If I had my license, the running around wouldn't be so much.*

Anne offered a concrete suggestion on how to offer support to women in the medium to long term post separation.

*A grant for women. There is no grant for me to go: "Look, I have a fulltime job, I've been employed for nearly fourteen years in the same job, I'm not going anywhere, anytime soon, please give me a home loan". No, no, no, you're paying too much rent. You're paying too many debts. You're paying this, you're paying that. So you're screwed either way, whether you've got fulltime job or you're not employed at all as a DV victim.*

*Have a grant for women who are fleeing domestic violence, just so they can get a bond. Just go: "Here. Here's some money. Go get yourself sorted."*

*I think that if women who were fleeing domestic violence had that, and had somewhere to go, they're more likely to get employment. They're more likely to go back to school and educate themselves. Their children are going to be happier. There's less impact on their kids. So there's all these positive domino effects, but all it takes is this one thing to change. So they give back. That's what you do, you give back to people. I think that's important, that you give back.*

*You can add it in: grants for women!*

Anne

Systemic responses to DV in the ACT need to be collaborative, linked and working to provide women with the right type of support depending on where they are up to in their journey out of DV. These findings, however, make clear the urgent need for government to review the level of flexibility within their own business processes, and how this impacts upon service providers working with women experiencing DV, and indeed the women themselves—to ensure that they do not pre-emptively prevent how service providers can work with victims, particularly those who do not typically fall within the eligibility for targeted services. There is also a need for the government to create flexible responses for those not typically eligible for government programs, to help steer victims through DV crises, separation and rebuilding. The women's stories suggest that responses will be more effective if mapped against what victims are actually saying they need, rather than requiring victims to fit flexibly within existing systems. Such tailored responses will enable the right services to be offered to women dependent upon the type of violence they have experienced and the point they are at on their journey.

Yet again, the stories presented in this section reveal that there is a need for all other sectors, including the private sector, to more deeply consider how they identify and work with victims and perpetrators of violence. They also highlight the importance of all responses to DV being informed and coordinated by those agencies that have specialist knowledge of this nuanced and highly complex social phenomenon.

*I think they need the capability to cross boundaries between community grassroots programs, community medical-based programs, and the criminal system. Because one size doesn't fit all, and without that flexibility people will fall through the gaps. It's a really complex issue.*

Rachel



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# CONCLUSION

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The results of this study add depth of understanding to women's lived experience of seeking help for DV in the ACT. The findings echo that which has been documented in earlier research, policy reviews and consultations, while for the first time bringing ACT women's voices to the discussion.

Through listening to the women's stories three key findings emerged. Firstly, there is a need for more awareness raising initiatives to enrich the community's understanding of what DV is, who perpetrates it, and who experiences it. Secondly, there is room for improvement in the way systems hold perpetrators of violence to account as a means of improving the protection offered to victims. Thirdly, the type of support that is offered should be appropriate to whether a woman is still in a violent relationship, is leaving that relationship, or is rebuilding her own and her children's lives.

The stories also tell us about what works well. The high regard that many of the women had for specialist domestic and sexual violence services and other women's services shows the necessity of service providers with specialist knowledge and expertise of this complex social phenomenon. But it is also true that there needs to be investment from all parts of the ACT human service system, workplaces and the general community in identifying and responding to DV.

The findings also reinforce that responses for ACT women leaving DV will only be effective if they are mapped against what victims are actually saying they need, rather than requiring victims to fit within the current system responses. Such tailored flexible responses will enable the right services to be offered to women based on the type of violence they have experienced, the point they are at on their journey, and their specific individual needs. Tailored flexible responses will be a good investment for the ACT, as they will minimise the likelihood of women needing to access services over the long-term.

Most of all, the stories presented throughout this report are a testament to the resilience and insight of survivors of DV. WCHM hopes that their insights and suggestions will help to inform the work already being done within the ACT to improve the responses to domestic violence.

*Yes, yes, yes, one of my best friends asked me to go and visit her in 2013 in September. When she saw me and I was laughing and I was very happy to see her after a long time, very exciting, and she said: "Oh my God, I thought you will be like crying and scared, but you are the same!" And I said: "Why I should be like that? I didn't lose such a great person in my life. If he was a good person, and he passed, you know, he passed away, or he gets sick, I will be upset that I lost a good husband. But just a person not appreciate me, not understand me, why I would be like that? Why I should put myself in suffering?" I want to enjoy my life. I know that I am not doing such bad things, so why should I suffer and be crazy and cranky...I cannot even explain to you how terrible my life was, I was suffering. My story is really amazing...I give him lots of steps, but that is his fault he fell down, that is not my fault. It is that he couldn't hold himself.*

Joy

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

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1. That current service delivery reforms, such as the Better Services reform, integrate the model of assistance for those experiencing DV (delineated by specific support at pre-separation, during separation and post-separation) put forward by the women in this research.
2. That the ACT Government commit to implementing a dedicated DV funding stream that is separate to funding for homelessness and other social issues. This stream should maintain current specialist DV responses and further enable it to meet increased demand.
3. That the ACT Government invest in practical and flexible medium to long-term support for women leaving DV that is tailored to their specific needs.
4. That evaluation of the effectiveness of ACT's responses to DV includes both outcome measures and feedback from victims to ensure ongoing improvement of policy and practice.
5. That the ACT Government invest in evidence-based specialist responses for men who use violence, with a focus on early intervention and prevention programs, and improvement in the consistency of criminal justice responses.
6. That the ACT Government invest in building the capacity of and training non-DV services to ensure that they have a shared understanding about DV and the confidence to speak about DV with their clients, offer information and provide referrals.
7. That the ACT Government commit to funding local community DV awareness raising initiatives.



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