

Battle-scars: Long-term effects of prior domestic violence

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Preamble

Domestic Violence (DV)¹ describes a range of abuses perpetrated within a domestic setting, whether physical, financial, sexual, spiritual, social, or emotional, where one family member seeks to dominate another. DV does not describe a single incident but rather is a pattern of behaviour that often escalates over time, gradually undermining the victim's confidence and ability to leave the perpetrator (DVIRC, 2005). DV also increases the risk of depression, substance abuse and suicide in victims, especially for women (Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). Women are the victims in about 90% of all identified incidence of DV (NSW Lawlink, 2005). Given that men are the majority of perpetrators and women (and children) form the majority of the victims, the aetiology of DV can be seen as directly linked to the relationship between gender and power (Gilmore, 1989). Thus, for good reason, violence against women in its entirety is increasingly being acknowledged as a gender-based violation of human rights, with Amnesty International (2004) calling it the greatest human rights scandal of our times.

The repercussions of DV are not limited to the timeframe of an abusive relationship itself. Instead, as the Australian study *Against the Odds* (1998: 90) found, it is important to view DV as a "continuum" that has a lingering impact long beyond the point of separation and/or divorce. This continuum can be complex and far-reaching. It has the potential to impinge on ongoing issues such as finances, employment, overall health, effective parenting, inter-familial relationships, and the need for ongoing support services. Yet there has been little research directed exclusively at this area and how these long-term effects can influence the ability of survivors to rebuild and rejoin society to their full potential. Instead most contemporary literature dealing with DV tends to treat the post-relationship period as a finite period marked by resolution and restoration, rather than as an ongoing experience marked by continuing repercussions.

This situation appears to have arisen principally from the logical focus of DV research on those periods where immediate danger is the central or most explicit issue. This has resulted in a concentration on the abusive relationship up to, and including, the crisis point of separation (for example, Ferrante, 1996; Hegarty & Roberts, 1998; Stubbs, 1999). Given this focus, there is a lack of acknowledgement of longer-term effects in a range of policy and service responses to DV and its effects on families, women and children, and this potentially diminishes the benefits and outcomes of those policies and services:

Many agencies that work with battered women provide services up to the point where the woman has left her batterer and secured independent housing and income. Whilst these are critically important steps for battered women, they are not the end, as many would see them. Instead they mark the beginning of a profound struggle for battered women to come to terms with their

experience, build a positive sense of identity, and achieve a sense of wholeness.
(McHugh, 2001: 1)

Battle-scars: Long-term effects of prior domestic violence specifically focuses on the impact that an experience of DV can have on the lives of survivors *after* separation from the abusive relationship and onwards. Currently, much of the community service response to this period is based on expectations of 'recovery' of the women from the experience and her re-establishment outside of that relationship, and this does not commonly include an understanding of or focus on the potential continuing ramifications of prior abuse on the long-term post-relationship journey. This report takes up the view that DV does have long-term impacts that should be taken into account in recovery service provision and support, and has comprehensively examined the ongoing costs both to the community and to individuals of these impacts.

The report is based on a research project (Evans, 2005) conducted in 2003-2005 with 134 female DV survivors. Both the project and this report emphasise the survivor-perspective and identify the voices of research participants as legitimate and fundamental sources of knowledge (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). Methodological choices for the project were made on the basis that DV is a gendered violation of human rights that works to suppress its victims, and that the experience of women post-separation need to be heard. DV survivors often find that their experiences and difficulties are diminished or reduced by the attitudes and processes of the services with which they interact. For these reasons a qualitative approach was selected as the primary method with which to interpret the experiences of the women and address the data.

The findings of this report address an empirical and conceptual gap in available knowledge. An acknowledgement of the long-term impact of prior DV is important to our overall understandings of this "multifaceted phenomenon" (Smith, 2003: 544), and the ways in which such a history continues to impact on a survivor's experiences needs to be fully appreciated to enable an effective response. The long-term impacts of DV have significance for a range of government departments and community groups, such as family services, justice, health or community support organizations. This report proposes that government policies and services will be most effective in responding to and redressing the impacts of DV when services are coordinated across all relevant departments through a policy framework that aims to recognise the full spectrum of needs of survivors and to provide early intervention and access to support for the long-term post-DV and separation impacts for survivors.

¹ Also known as 'Family Violence'

Executive summary

Domestic violence (DV) is one of the most serious social issues facing our society and is increasingly recognised as a human rights issue, defined and protected under international law, and as a criminal issue (DVIRC, 2005). In 2002-2003, the total number of current Australian victims was estimated at 408,100, with an annual cost to the economy of approximately 8.1 billion dollars (Access Economics, 2004: vii). The majority of victims are women, and the majority of victims eventually leave their abusive relationship (Seddon 1989). Policies and services within Australia have been long established to support women as victims and to assist women to leave abusive relationships. However, leaving an abusive relationship does not end the impact of DV – instead, a personal experience of DV carries into future experience a range of long-term repercussions that have a continuing impact within the lives of survivors.

This report examines these repercussions for women survivors in terms of six broad service areas: health, justice, income, child support, parenting, and social support services. It does this primarily through the analysis of a comprehensive study of 134 women survivors of violent relationships. The overall findings are that, in each of the above areas, past experiences of DV have an ongoing impact that needs to be understood if the policies and services currently provided by governments are to be effective. Currently, existing service responses are closely linked to expectations of ‘recovery’, and do not align with the experience of most DV survivors. In this study, women survivors identified the lack of services and supports that recognise long-term effects for women as resulting in additional and unnecessary trauma for the survivor, increasing the long-term impacts of DV overall.

Health

In terms of health, study participants reported enduring a range of psychological, physical and sexual abuse during the abusive relationship, and that this abuse had long-term repercussions. Respondents not only carried tangible scars of past abuse, there was also strong evidence to suggest an ongoing susceptibility to a range of negative health outcomes, such as depression, PTSD, eating disorders, arthritis, early menopause and cancer. As the women recorded a higher than average long-term GP-attendance rate, however, there exists the opportunity for health professionals to identify such vulnerable patients. This identification, especially whilst the women are still within an abusive relationship, would enable health professionals to provide information, guidance, undertake appropriate health assessments, including for post-traumatic stress disorder, and provide clinically and psychosocially appropriate treatment and support. Currently, this rarely appears to be the case.

Justice

Few of the study participants found their contact with the legal system either beneficial or empowering. It is a paradox of our legal system that the adversarial conflict that characterises abusive relationships is actually replicated within the pursuit of a judicial decision in contested cases. This clearly favours perpetrators rather than victims, by providing a context more suited to those skilled in tactics and the exercise of power. This was strongly reflected within this study where, as a result of manipulation and/or intimidation by the perpetrator, most participants had settled for less property than was their entitlement. Nevertheless, those who accessed legal channels received more property overall than those who elected to negotiate without legal recourse.

Overall, the study participants exhibited a lack of faith in dealings with the family court and justice system in terms of child residence and contact. The majority found that, rather than neutralise the oppositional nature of the relationship, the system potentially provided the perpetrator with a legally sanctioned avenue through which to vent his aggression. This often led to significant, and ongoing, difficulties for those women with dependent children that made a mockery of expectations of ‘recovery’, and severely compromised their attempts to rebuild, both economically and psychologically.

Income

The long-term nature of these consequences was most evident within the areas of income, home-ownership and superannuation, however rather than remaining dependant on social security, most study participants used the welfare system at the time of greatest vulnerability but, over time, made deliberate moves to gain qualifications and/or obtain employment, often in areas where they could draw on their past experiences of abuse.

Child support

The receipt of child support remained a major post-separation issue for most study participants with dependant children, with the large majority receiving little or no support at all. This has an obviously detrimental effect on future financial stability (such as retirement savings or home ownership). For such women, therefore, it is actually impossible to fully ‘recover’ financially, with the costs of raising children likely to continue to impact on their financial security long after the children have become adults. In addition, many of the women perceived the Child Support Agency (CSA) as an ineffective tool that, in effect, often made their situations more problematic. Of major concern also is the strong likelihood that a significant number of DV survivors have made a conscious decision not to enforce child support assessments due primarily to either fear of ongoing contact or associated repercussions. However, as the study participants reported that it is common for women to claim successful receipt in order to avert

additional or further conflict with their former partner, survivors who choose this option disappear amongst the CSA statistics as positive outcomes rather than appear as they really are – victims of ongoing abuse.

Parenting

As with child support, issues of parenting were a major post-relationship issue for the majority of study participants, and for good reason. Many were in a situation where continuing contact, via child access, was acting as a conduit for the continuation of the abusive relationship itself, with ongoing manipulation and hostility hampering their efforts to rebuild. Participants considered that elements of the negative parenting exhibited by some perpetrators were, in fact, deliberate tactics used to undermine the survivor's own parenting and general wellbeing. The past and ongoing damage severely complicated the survivors' post-relationship re-building, with most finding that subsequent issues necessitated a continuous investment of time, money and emotion. Coping with their children's problems thus created a range of difficulties, which in turn impacted on many participants' ability to parent effectively, creating a catch-22 with serious consequences. As a result, the women in this study were strongly in favour of safeguards, such as supervision and compulsory parenting courses, being implemented to ensure emotional and physical safety for all concerned.

Social support services

Most study participants had sought some form of post-separation counselling, with a significant minority accessing support groups to assist in the rebuilding process. The women had found the majority of such contact to be positive and several continued to access support even though it had been a considerable time since the relationship ended. Participants felt strongly that post-separation assistance should continue to be available to provide support as issues arose in a long-term sense. Findings also indicate that most survivors would benefit from negotiating the rebuilding experience in company with other survivors and from having the example of more experienced survivors before them as an example of what can be achieved over time. This 'mutually rehabilitative' model would give survivors the opportunity to use their experiences in a positive manner that, in turn, goes some way towards validating those experiences. Few study participants had access to support based on such a model.

In a similar fashion, despite an academic and agency trend (for example, Drauker, 1992; Herman, 1992; Matsakis, 1996; Phillips & Daniluk, 2004; Simpson, 2003; Young & Maguire, 2003) away from such usage, most study participants drew empowerment from identifying as a

'survivor'. The women spoke of seeing this as part of a forward moving trajectory, complementing the eventual integration of their survivor identity within their overall identity as they progressed. They considered identification as a 'survivor' affirmed their progress away from the abuse without being defined by it, and without fragmentation, and felt strongly that the 'survivor' identification recognised the long-term psychosocial and economic impacts on them and on their children.

Conclusion

Overall, this report demonstrates that the damaging effects of DV have a continuing long-term impact on survivors. The evolving and expanding nature of such long-term effects led to many participants either criticising, or consciously rejecting, associated 'recovery' terminology. This was articulated by the following two women:

I do not use the term 'recovery' as, for me, it implies that being abused or its consequences constitute an illness from which I can be cured. (Anna, 55/11/17)²

I'll never be completely healed, it's something you live with but doesn't dominate your life anymore. (Gypsy, 36/7/8)

Findings from this study indicate strongly that these responses are much closer to the mark than any assumptions that the past abuse is something to 'just get over' and then 'move on.' DV is relatively unique amongst crimes in that the victim must come to terms not only with the crime itself, but also often with ongoing contact with the person who perpetrated the crime against them. Many of the participants in this study had to deal with ongoing threats to their safety. Yet the vast majority of these women had reconnected with their communities, with most establishing careers, raising children, and some returning to further education and/or forming new partnerships.

The major implication of this study is that the consequences for women of DV should be recognised as both long-term as well as in terms of the severity of their immediate impact. An abusive relationship will reverberate, in a variety of ways and degrees, for the remainder of the lives of most survivors. The challenge for public policy and services now is to formulate responses that take this into account to redress and reduce, as much as is possible, the damaging nature of these long-term effects on families, women and children, whilst supporting the rebuilding efforts of those women and children who have experienced DV.

² These three numbers represent the following formula: (age of participant /number of years that the abusive relationship lasted /number of years since separation from the abusive relationship).

Implications and recommendations

Consider the costs of prevention

The costs of DV to the Australian economy, health and community services and to families and individuals have been identified in the study commissioned by the Australian Government, *The Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy* (Access Economics, 2004). In that study, Access Economics suggests a similar study of the costs of *preventing* DV (2004: 74). This report identifies that the long-term consequences, and therefore costs, of DV are likely to be significantly underestimated by current services and in current data, and therefore to have been underestimated in the Australian Government report. This report therefore reinforces the value of considering the potential savings to the economy and the community of strategies to prevent and to provide early interventions for DV.

Investment in prevention and early intervention

The findings presented in this report add weight to relevant Canadian research (Sorensen, 2003), which has shown that, whilst the broader community is willing to invest in DV programs, approval rates for this investment dropped as the dollar amount increased and, furthermore, that men were substantially less likely to support the funding concept than were women, regardless of the method or amount. Sorensen recommends several innovative funding concepts, such as the diversion of a percentage of marriage licenses and/or divorce fees, and the collection of fines from perpetrators, to funding for support groups, preventative measures and perpetrator programs.

Investment in community understanding

The recently released *Review of Family Violence Laws Report* (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2006) recommends that the Victorian Government should “research, fund and implement a community campaign about family violence with the aim of bringing about changes in community attitudes about family violence and respect in family relationships” (2006: xivi). The findings presented in this report support the need for such a campaign as a matter of some urgency.

First point of contact capacity

The importance of the point of first contact for women seeking help is clear in this report. The first point of contact, outside the informal system of family and friends, is commonly police, medical services, Centrelink or the justice system, or a combination of these. The critical significance of the skills of these points of contact in enabling battered women to access appropriate support services cannot be underestimated. The continuing development of the resources and skills of these services and their front-line staff, to ensure practice that is informed by evidence and is relevant to clients who are seeking help in respect of DV, is essential.

Health services

The role of general practice and community health services is crucial to the immediate and long-term health of survivors. This study found that few study participants reported positive interaction with health professionals despite their high attendance rates. As victims and survivors will interact with the health care system multiple times during their lives, health services are the most appropriate source of support, information and referral for victims and perpetrators, as well as survivors. The potential for early identification to not only prevent or reduce further suffering, but to reduce the significant health care and productivity costs of DV is well established (Hadley, 2002). The rationale for both identification and intervention by health providers is compelling and requires that education in the recognition of and response to DV, both at undergraduate and in continuing professional development, be promoted.

Specific education and training, and professional development support, in an understanding of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a tool with which to assess and treat DV survivors (Herman, 1992; Humpreys & Joseph, 2004), should be promoted. Using this approach would provide obvious treatment benefits and would also promote greater professional and community understanding of the long-term consequences of DV and reduce the social stigma and self-blame of victims, by linking experiences of DV with other trauma, such as natural disasters or war (M. J. Hughes & Jones, 2000; Kemp, Rawlings, & Green, 1991), emphasising that the victim’s difficulties arise from external, and not internal, sources (Saunders, 1994).

Justice system

The Australian Government report *The Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy* (Access Economics, 2004) has estimated the response of the legal system to DV to cost approximately \$298 million in 2002-03 (Access Economics, 2004:53). Participants in this study have identified that access to legal avenues can extend unwanted contact and often locates the issue within an adversarial framework which continues the adversarial relationship from which DV survivors are attempting to escape. This has the potential for extended victimisation that can severely compromise the survivor’s attempts to rebuild, both economically and psychologically, from a position of strength. Given the significant role of the judicial system in the management and mediation of DV matters, this report strongly recommends that magistrates be trained in the recognition and appropriate management of the similarities of the adversarial nature of the justice system and the adversarial nature and consequences of the relationship between perpetrators and victims.

With regard to property division, this report recommends that the reforms advocated within the Family Law Council

letter of advice³ (2001) should be adopted by the judicial system as the guiding rule rather than the occasional exception. This would build on the potential of the court to restore equity and uphold justice in property divisions where a background of DV is established.

The recently released *Review of Family Violence Laws Report* (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2006⁴) represents the potential for considerable reform regarding the *Crimes (Family Violence) Act 1987*. The review makes recommendations on all aspects of the justice system and family violence, including comprehensive changes to the intervention order process.

It is strongly urged that *all* these recommendations, both legislative and non-legislative, be adopted as many are interdependent and interrelated and it is imperative that a holistic approach be taken to reform current law and improve the lot of victims and survivors of DV.

In particular, it is urged that exclusion orders should be given a greater profile within the community and abused women routinely informed of their availability at the point of contact with police. As recommended within the *Review of Family Violence Laws Report* (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2006: 329), there should be a judicial presumption in favour of exclusion orders rather than the reverse. The removal of the victim and children from the home in which the abusive relationship has occurred is an inadequate and frequently inappropriate response to the safety needs of the victim and children. The accommodation rights of the perpetrator should be subordinate to the best interests of the victim and the children. Whilst this is increasingly recognised in research and policy debate, and is available in practice, developing a comprehensive policy approach to ensure consistency of practice should be given high priority as a matter of urgency. This would locate service responses to the safety needs of DV victims within “a broader context of social justice, prevention of women’s homelessness, protection of children and making the violent party accountable” (Edwards, cited in *Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse*, 2003: 7).

Child Support Agency (CSA) and child support payments

It is strongly recommended that a number of modifications be adopted regarding the way in which the Child Support Agency (CSA) currently addresses cases that involve DV. This study clearly identifies that the current practice by the CSA of the release of personal financial details of one party of a relationship to the other party, particularly exposes women who have left abusive relationships to increased vulnerability and risk. Given that the CSA may not be informed of, nor be able to confirm, the existence of abuse in a relationship, this practice should be reviewed in recognition of the increased risk of providing perpetrators of DV with their ex-partners’ personal financial details as this empowers the abuser at the expense of the abused.

Participants in this study have strongly urged that the CSA commission a study of the potential to provide exceptional provisions for the permanent waiver of child support and

parental support obligations where ongoing risk of abuse can be demonstrated.

Finally, the CSA should immediately address the present situation, identified by women in this study, whereby battered women feel compelled to falsely claim receipt of child support in response to intimidation from, or to avoid contact with, abusive ex-partners. Curtailing government expenditure should not be accomplished at the expense of an at-risk woman who has been threatened by criminal behaviour.

Parenting

The Australian Government report *The Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy* (Access Economics, 2004) found that there was little data on long-term impacts of DV on children (2004: 74). This lack of available data was also identified within this report and it is evident that further research should be conducted into the long-term effects of DV on children, and also into the extent to which these effects are exacerbated by continued contact with abusive parents.

The findings presented in this report add weight to research (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Levendosky, Lynch, & Graham-Bermann, 2000) suggesting that abusive behaviour in the home should, in fact, be seen as indicative of a perpetrator’s negative parenting attitudes and the limitations of his basic parenting skills. A system of mandatory parenting education should be considered with sanctions in place for those that do not comply. With regard to perpetrators, it is also recommended that psychiatric assessments and some form of ongoing review of behaviour during contact needs to be implemented to ensure the safety of all concerned.

Further education

This report demonstrates that the majority of study participants actively sought further education post-relationship as a means of bolstering self-esteem and extending employment options. It is recommended, therefore, that research be conducted into ways in which this self-help behaviour can be more fully supported and encouraged as a means of combating the long-term effects of DV.

Religious organisations

Members and leaders of religious communities have a particular capacity to contribute to and engage in government and community agency programs and approaches to address DV, and should be included in all government and community programs and approaches to this issue. Assertions by clerics of all faiths that violence in a relationship is unacceptable, and a criminal act, would contribute to changed community attitudes. Individual clerics should recognise and understand the significant role they can play when confronted by a perpetrator, victim or survivor. A national strategy to engage clergy should be considered, and this could include use of an Australian teaching curriculum regarding DV, which resulted in a significant increase in clergy awareness, sensitivity, resourcefulness and supportiveness (Dixon, 1995).

³ As discussed in Section 4, this letter was sent as a result of the case: ‘In the Marriage of Kennon’ (1997).

⁴ This review was commissioned by the Attorney-General, the Honourable Rob Hulls MP, in 2002.

Social support agencies

The availability of social support agencies, and their appreciation of the complexities of DV, can be central to the immediate and long-term well-being of DV survivors. This report demonstrates that most study participants actively sought some form of support post-relationship, but that many were critical of expectations regarding short-term 'recovery.'

The significance of this for the current approaches to women leaving violent relationships should be assessed. Psychological, sociological and therapeutic interventions should be refocussed to 'incorporation' rather than 'recovery' and provide an open-ended model of assistance capable of recognising the long-term nature of the impact of DV and anticipating the evolving nature of the repercussions. Additionally, the benefit to women survivors of the experience and support of other survivors is evident in this study, and the concept of mutually rehabilitative support, with an emphasis on the survivor-perspective, should be included in support services for women who have left violent relationships. The concept of mutual support for health care consumers from other consumers who have survived or are living with the same health condition is now well recognised. This model of care and support should be developed for women leaving violent relationships with education and mentoring training for survivor supporters. Involvement of women survivors with other women seeking and needing support would validate survivor knowledge by listening to the voices of the women themselves as a "source of innovative theory and policy development" (Hague, Mullender, Aris, & Dear, n.d.: 2). To assist the development and implementation of this approach to care and support of women leaving violent relationships, funding should be provided to establish a pilot self-help support program for DV survivors. The women's experiences in this study indicate that a self-help and support program would be effective as a community program based on the Alcoholics Anonymous guidelines⁵, where an open-ended, mutual rehabilitative, non-obligatory, democratic framework bases itself upon the belief that (with regards to alcohol): "the personal, subjective experience of alcoholism [is] something which one alcoholic is able to share with another. We have found that trying to help another alcoholic is good for us, whether or not the alcoholic uses what we offer" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1972).

One of the strongest findings of this study is the affinity most study participants felt with identifying themselves as 'survivors', even after the abuse itself has become a less dominant issue within their lives. This report therefore recommends that support agencies contemplating the 'shedding' of the survivor label should review this in light of the wishes of survivors themselves.

5 This is not to suggest that DV survivors have an addiction, or even a predetermination towards victim-hood. Nor is it to suggest that DV perpetrators have a disease. The AA guidelines are only recommended here because much of their framework draws on the open-ended, mutually rehabilitative credo, and has had considerable success.

1 Methodology

1.1 Aim

The aim of the *Battle-scars: Long-term effects of prior domestic violence* study was to investigate whether and what repercussions of past DV affected the lives of survivors. The study has found that:

- an abusive relationship will impact, in a variety of ways and degrees, for the remainder of the lives of most survivors.
- current national and state government policies and programs should be reviewed and revised to remove provisions and practices that have adverse impacts of women post-DV relationships and to actively recognise and respond to long-term effects of DV whilst supporting the rebuilding efforts of survivors.
- there is the need for professional and community information and training to promote recognition and understanding of the long-term effects of DV on women's lives and support survivors to factor these long-term effects into their ongoing lives.

1.2 About the study

This report is based on findings from an Australian study (Evans, 2005), which was undertaken in 2003-2004 on the long-term effects of prior DV. The target group for this study were adult females who had experienced DV in an abusive relationship that had ended *at least* twelve months prior to participating in the research. No particular socio-economic or cultural group was targeted and a deliberate attempt was made to include both rural and regional participants in the study sample.

As the study was dependent on a public recruitment strategy (see Appendix A for a summary of publicity methods), the study participants are not considered to wholly representative of the population of DV survivors. Participation was based on a volunteer interest in the study with women who were unwilling to share their individual experiences, or to revisit those experiences, unlikely to respond to a public and impersonal invitation to volunteer.

1.3 Research tools

The main research tool was a comprehensive questionnaire that was designed to harvest broad data on the long-term effects of DV overall. A questionnaire was considered ideal for an issue such as DV, as it offers privacy and anonymity to those who might be reluctant to openly share their experiences of abuse.

The questionnaire also outlined the optional second stage of the study, an individual semi-structured interview designed to further investigate aspects of the women's experiences raised in the questionnaire. This interview phase within the study was included to access qualitative data that could both challenge and share knowledge; to illustrate the quantitative findings and enable any dissonance within the primary data to be identified and explored.

1.4 Research participants

Of the considerable number of volunteers, 134 met the research criteria and participated in the study. A summary of the participants' socio-demographic characteristics are provided at Appendix B. Of all participants:

- ages ranged from 18 to 88, with a mean age of 43.8 years
- most were Australian-born (106) and, of the 28 born overseas, the average length of residence in Australia was 29 years.
- the length of time spent within the abusive relationship ranged from one year to 42 years, with an average time of 9 years.
- the majority had been out of the abusive relationship for a considerable period of time, with an average of 10.6 years and a range from 1 – 34 years.
- at the time of the research, most (91%) had children and half of these had dependent children living with them. Only 21 participants had no children.

For the purposes of this report, each of the research participants was asked to select a pseudonym. These pseudonyms are used at the end of each individual quote throughout the report and are accompanied by a set of three bracketed numbers. These three numbers represent the following formula: **(age of participant /number of years that the abusive relationship lasted /number of years since separation from the abusive relationship)**. This information is aimed at providing context for the narrative throughout the report.

1.5 Terminology

Throughout this report, the term 'abusive relationship' is used to refer to the relationship that included the violence under discussion, and 'domestic violence' (DV) is used to refer to the actual abuse that the study participants suffered at the hands of their ex-partners. The choice of 'domestic violence' came about not only because this term is currently the most widely used and recognisable one in Australia (Laing, 2000b), but also because it was felt that to use a narrower definition such as 'partner abuse' or 'wife-battering' would be to ignore other variables including the fact that even where children are not the specific targets of violence in the home, they can still become secondary victims.

Similar care was taken with the choice of terms for those who have been involved in a relationship characterised by violence at some point in the past. The word 'perpetrator' was used to refer to the abuser as this term makes clear the power relationship within which DV occurs (Laing, 2000b). Similarly, 'victim' was used to refer to the battered woman whilst still within the relationship, and 'survivor' is used after separation. This distinction was chosen principally because it appeared to reflect most closely the viewpoints of the study participants. In particular, the women demonstrated a strong affinity with notions of 'survival', and most appeared to find identifying themselves as 'survivors' both empowering and descriptive.

2 Battle-scars: The case studies

Terri's story

Terri (29/4/7) left her abusive relationship with little more than the clothing she and her two children were wearing: "I asked my ex if we could have sex for the washing machine and stereo. He agreed, and that's all I got... no photos, clothes, old school reports, personal effects... this had a huge impact on my life and still does. I had to establish an entire household on one wage, with a baby and a three-year old... he now owns a business, has two new cars and owns his own home, he cleared out the savings the day I left."

Terri has relocated five times since separation and currently rents privately in outer-metropolitan Melbourne. She receives a Centrelink parenting payment, works part-time and states that she has "no confidence in paying bills and often things get out of control financially." The CSA has been unable to assist her with child support despite her ex-husband working full-time as a self-employed builder.

Terri now suffers from mild vision/hearing loss, severe headaches, arthritis and ulcers, chronic pain, Obsessive Compulsive disorder, severe joint damage, and ongoing anxiety/stress: "storms would set him off, and wind. Sometimes the wind before a thunderstorm freezes my blood as I remember things that he's done to me." Terri says that she now tends to "abuse alcohol when things get tough."

Terri's daughter, who was diagnosed with benign PTSD, is "forced to go" to her father every third weekend: "I drive 8 hours on a Friday, and then again on a Sunday to drop off, and pick up. He drives a total of 6 hours all weekend... by the time I get home at 11pm, I'm ready to fall asleep at the wheel... I have to fill the car with fuel, twice @ \$60 per tank. I don't receive maintenance, so have to fund the expeditions myself. Some weeks I have to hock jewelry so I have the petrol money." Terri says that her ex-husband, who has since re-married, refuses to relinquish control and is still verbally and physically violent: "my ex [has] assaulted me at an access changeover. He left me unconscious and with concussion... as recently as this year he has threatened to kill me... the fear has never lessened and is as fresh today as it ever was... I wish I had moved away before any court stuff was initiated, and changed my name and vanished." Terri had an intervention order during separation but was unable to get it extended.

Terri found her initial dealings with support agencies to be "fantastic, supportive and empowering", and she later volunteered to facilitate a support group before deciding to seek employment within the field herself: "I had grown from a victim to a survivor through this process, and turned the negative experience into a positive one. I did not tell my clients of my experience, but used it as an additional tool when engaging with other women and children." Terri has since completed a Bachelor of Social Welfare to enhance her employment qualifications and validate her knowledge of DV: "I wanted to understand how this behaviour occurs...

how it can be addressed and even prevented. I wanted... to validate my knowledge of the theoretical constructs in which D.V. occurs."

Terri feels both much stronger and far more content out of the relationship, and hides her vulnerability by "presenting an outwardly 'don't f%\$k [sic] with me' persona." She deals with her feelings by writing secret poems but is "too ashamed and scared to tell the real truth." Terry states that: "My interpretation of living through family violence is that once you've been to the brink, anything else in life is comparatively easy. It may be true that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger [but] I live in constant fear. I am [a] fully functioning, mother, youth worker, firefighter, uni graduate but am always under the shadow of his anger."

Kathleen's story

Kathleen (72/42/9) lived on a large farming property in rural Victoria and, when her husband died, believed that "the nightmare was over." It was then discovered that he had bequeathed their farm to their youngest son. Kathleen accepted this as she believed that she would stay on in her "beautiful" home but within six years, she was forced to leave with just a few items of clothing. She now rents a small cottage.

Kathleen currently suffers from a heart condition, damaged spine, severe depression, chronic pain, vision/hearing loss, severe arthritis, severe headaches, osteoporosis, and joint damage. The smell of alcohol continues to "petrify" her, and she is also recovering from fractured vertebrae caused during recent abuse from her sons. Kathleen is on long-term medication, feels that she has reached her 'use-by date', and has thoughts of suicide: "how I wish I was in a wooden box."

Kathleen believes that her husband is still "exerting control from his grave", and that her children will "always have long-term effects from the violence." One son has "severe anger problems", another is a "complete bully", and she worries about her daughter-in-law who may also be a DV victim. Kathleen says that her daughter states that she will never marry because "she doesn't want to finish up like me." Kathleen now lives with a large burden of self-inflicted guilt and believes that her children all view her with contempt.

Although Kathleen is far worse off financially, she is able to state that "the peace and freedom to manage without criticism or accountability is magic." Kathleen also says that at least "at my age I know I will not starve as I can get a pension!" She believes that there is a "very great need" for survivors to assist other survivors after separation from an abusive relationship and says that: "this year has been the worst year... haunted by wondering if and what was a better way – what did I do wrong? [but] they say life begins at 40, mine will have to begin at 73!"

Nikki's story

Nikki (28/3/3) is employed full-time within the medical industry and has no children. She has had no contact with the perpetrator since he assaulted her shortly after separation but has an ongoing *fear* of contact that gives her a "nervous, ominous feeling" whenever she is in large crowds. Safety concerns led Nikki to relocate three times in the first year after separation. She now rents privately and, for the next 7-8 years, will be paying off substantial loans for goods that her ex-partner took during separation. However, Nikki says that: "even though I am far worse off financially, it is a small price to pay for my personal safety and regaining my passion for life."

Nikki continues to have low self-esteem, feelings of insecurity and suffers from ongoing mild depression and an eating disorder. Nikki also has flashbacks, which lead to "momentary feelings of intense fear." Nikki has had two hospital admissions for ruptured stomach ulcers that have required blood transfusions. She is still on medication. Although she has had no contact with any DV agencies (and was never told of such options during her numerous contacts with police), Nikki has met with other survivors: "it has been a totally positive experience with feelings of total relief that I wasn't alone."

Nikki's responses were indicative of the fact she did not have children linking her life with that of the perpetrator. She had a more heightened concentration on her own sense of self and a relative absence of guilt. Nikki has re-partnered, and has an optimism regarding the future that was strongly evident throughout the interview process. Nikki feels empowered by her past. She says: "I don't see it as a road [to recovery], nor do I think it is like achieving anything. I see it as part of my life that, if I hadn't experienced it, I wouldn't be the person who I am now. Everyone has their lessons to learn and I expect to have many more."

3 Health: The impact of health-related repercussions of domestic violence and the medical response

Physically I have been left with a broken nose, fragile ribs, back pain and bad headaches. Psychologically, I sometimes need reassurance of my intelligence and abilities... Although [the perpetrator] has been dead for 14 years, I still have the occasional nightmare where I am back... (Rose, 69/26/25)

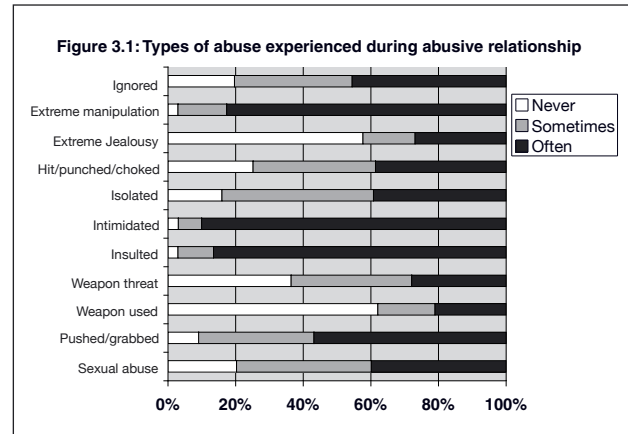
3.1 Key findings

- Recent Australian Government research (Access Economics, 2004: 24) identified that in 2002-03, there were 37,437 years of health life lost by female DV victims in this country overall. This study identifies the range of psychological, physical and sexual abuse endured by participants during the abusive relationship, and explores how the repercussions of this abuse continue to inform their post-relationship lives.
- The study participants appeared susceptible to a range of long-term negative health outcomes, in addition to existent problems stemming from the prior abuse. The long-term consequences of DV on health, therefore, require services and interventions that anticipate the ongoing needs of survivors.
- Despite the study participants recording a substantially higher than average rate of GP attendance, few reported positive interaction by medical professionals. Positive medical interaction may lead to early identification that not only prevents or reduces further suffering, but can also reduce health care and productivity costs of DV itself (Hadley, 2002). This reinforces the need for health providers to be skilled at both recognising and intervening in circumstances where DV is implicated or evident.

3.2 Overview of abuse suffered during the abusive relationship

All study participants reported a complexity of abuse suffered during the abusive relationship, with 100% reporting emotional abuse, 95% reporting physical abuse, 90% of those with children reporting that these children had been emotionally harmed, and 58% reporting that their children had been physically harmed. Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the nature and severity of the abuse endured by the participants at the hands of the perpetrator during the abusive relationship.

In addition, 94% percent of interviewees spoke of enduring a particular form of psychological abuse where the perpetrator had deliberately manipulated the truth and/or situations to make their partner question their own stability and/or normality. Several women called this 'crazy-making abuse':



(n= 132/132/130/127/125/131/133/130/124/132/128)

He'd sabotage things to create this volcanic eruption. Set you up... move things. Ask you to do something and when you go to do it, it's either already been done, or it's not supposed to be done, or – you know. In the end, you become more confused – very much like a child, where you lean on [him] more. Because you think: 'I'm not coping.' To do that to someone – actually takes thinking... just so cruel. I mean, you can get angry, lash out and hit, take control over the finances... but to actually set someone up so that they think they're going mad – that, to me, is the cruellest thing you can do. (Samantha, 39/14/2)

He used to say 'Can't you see that there's something really wrong with you? Everyone else can see it...you're really strange.' Then if I got really angry or whatever he'd smile and say 'See? That's what I mean.' And I went to the doctor because I thought there was something really wrong with me. (Dee, 49/13/14)

Several of the interviewees, like Dee, spoke of the 'crazy-making' as a circle of psychological abuse, where the ongoing manipulation caused unstable behaviour, which in turn was used as a basis for further abuse. For many of the women, this 'crazy-making' continued after the relationship ended. Riana described how, for a few years post-separation, her ex-partner would ring and advise her to call the police because he was on his way. He would rarely arrive but the threat alone was enough to cause Riana considerable distress. For Riana, as well as the rest of the women who endured this form of abuse, it was difficult in the long-term to rebuild self-esteem. This is illustrated by the fact that 76% of participants were still suffering esteem issues at the time of the study, and 81% had a continued lowered trust in others.

3.3 Ongoing psychological damage

A common theme in all of the women's stories was the ongoing consequences of past psychological abuse. Whilst trauma, no matter how short-term, can have psychological effects that negatively affect the sufferer to some degree, with DV this trauma is exacerbated by the fact that the

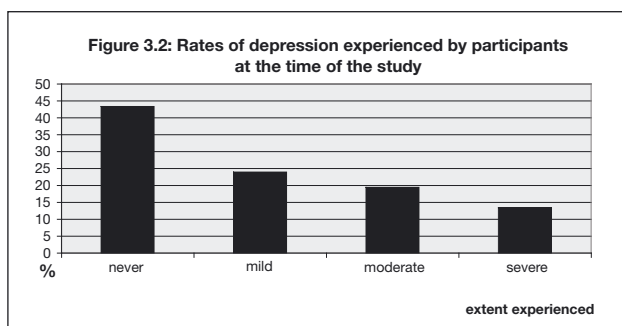
victim has an emotional involvement with the perpetrator. The study participants spoke of the psychological effects of DV as being far more damaging than the physical effects:

I still find myself dissolving into tears or thinking that killing myself would be a better alternative at times. I have come such a long way and am extremely proud of myself and my children but I wish I could forget the comments which I try so hard not to believe, the 'you're not good enough, you're a reject, no-one will ever want you' remarks. It's so much easier to dodge a fist than to erase your memory bank. (Questionnaire respondent, 46/10/6)

Many of the participants displayed a considerable awareness of the longevity of psychological repercussions, and the impact that these continued to have on their self-esteem and overall wellbeing. In addition, by readily discussing the ability of the psychological repercussions to interact negatively with their physical health, many of the women showed that they had given their circumstances a significant amount of reflection. This was illustrated by Mehetabel (29/8/3), who called her constant tonsillitis 'martinitis' (the perpetrator's name is Martin), as she had little doubt that it was a direct result of the stress and tension she was experiencing.

3.4 Long-term implications – depression

By the year 2020, depression is predicted to become the second most important cause of disease globally (Taft, 2003). On a more personal level, depression is associated with suicidal tendencies and places sufferers at increased risk for a variety of physical conditions, such as heart disease, osteoporosis and diabetes (Mazure, Keita, & Blehar, 2002). Other social factors such as poverty, inequality and discrimination also play a role in the incidence of depression in women, who are three times more likely than men to experience depression in response to stressful events in the first place (Scrandis, Fauchald & Radsma, 2004). For a significant number of participants in this study, the psychological abuse and its consequences have led to long-term depression.



(n= 134)

Over half (57%) of the participants were still suffering a degree of depression at the time of the study, with 13% of these described as severe (Figure 3.2). Of equal concern is the lack of current treatment being received with only 26% of the women taking anti-depressant medication despite the high prevalence rate. However, when these prevalence rates are compared with those who felt a level of persistent sadness during the abusive relationship, a vast

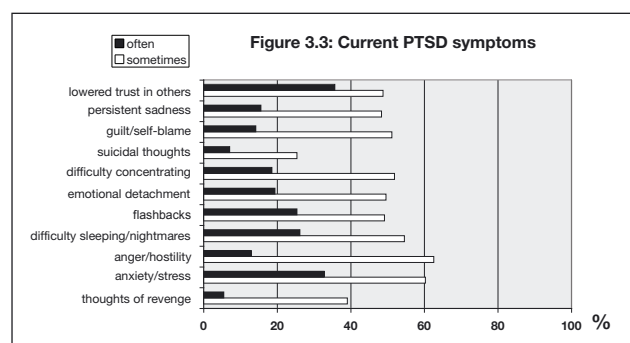
improvement is evident. Almost all (99%) had experienced persistent sadness, with the majority (75%) suffering from this condition often. This represents a considerable shift by the participants towards a better quality of life post-separation, but still indicates that depression remains an ongoing problem in the lives of many survivors well after the abusive relationship is severed:

During times like these I feel I lose my self-worth. I tend to weep a lot, I lock myself in my room sometimes. I can't handle normal day-to-day activities. Everything just feels too hard... I can feel sad and depressed and find I cannot shake these feelings. It may last several days or even a week. (Cyanne, 35/11/4)

3.5 Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Long-term stress can result from experiencing severe trauma where the response involved intense fear, helplessness or horror. This can lead to a range of related effects, including flashbacks, difficulty sleeping and/or nightmares, avoidance, detachment, and irritability, all of which can cause significant, and ongoing, distress in all areas of functioning (Mental Health, n.d.). Experiencing these effects after such a traumatic experience can result in PTSD, which has been described as a "normal reaction to abnormal events" (Hughes & Jones, 2000: 16). Contemporary research indicates that DV survivors are especially vulnerable to PTSD⁶ (Fagan & Freme, 2004), because women themselves are nearly twice as likely as men to suffer from this disorder overall (Dobie et al., 2004), and also because of variables that exacerbate related symptoms. These variables include severity of violence, perceived degree of threat, and duration of exposure to violence, all of which are particularly applicable to most experiences of DV (Hughes & Jones, 2000).

The findings of this study support this argument. Elements of PTSD symptoms were incorporated into the questionnaire in the form of eleven separate questions with the purpose being to ascertain a broad sense of the number of participants who were experiencing ongoing PTSD symptoms.



(n=133)

Elements of PTSD remain part of the lives of many participants (Figure 3.3). This suggests that, rather than 'recovering' from the various factors typifying post-traumatic

⁶ Studies have shown consistently high rates of PTSD amongst 40% to 80% of women in an abusive relationship (Golding, 1999; Roberts, Lawrence, Williams, & Raphael, 1998).

stress, many participants have been compelled to integrate them into their ongoing lives. To further test this hypothesis, an analysis was performed to ascertain the percentage of the participants suffering from multiple symptoms of PTSD both during the abusive relationship and currently. This revealed that 100% of the participants had suffered multiple PTSD symptoms during the abusive relationship, with 90% still indicating a multiple prevalence rate⁷. This confirms the assumption that although the situation improves after the abusive relationship ends, almost all the participants remain hampered by factors that relate to PTSD. It must also be acknowledged that, given many of the participants were subjected to continuing stress from the perpetrator, the assumption that the trauma itself was 'post' is in fact both erroneous and misleading. This was exemplified by one participant, talking of how she felt whilst ongoing contact with the perpetrator was occurring due to child access:

It made "recovery" impossible because I wasn't suffering "post-traumatic-stress disorder" – I was suffering 'continuing-traumatic-stress-disorder. (Helen, 49/5/3)

The most common PTSD symptom mentioned throughout the interview process was that of intrusive thinking, or flashbacks. These flashbacks were predominantly specific events, sounds and/or smells that served as reminders of the abuse with the ability to negatively affect the woman's coping mechanisms and to bring on periods of depressions and/or generalised anxiety. Several of the women referred to these flashbacks as 'triggers' and accepted them as part of their lives or simply 'baggage'. However, there appears little doubt that the intrusiveness of this 'baggage' would have a negative impact on their overall quality of life:

I don't like to be touched, I like my own space – I find it hard working in the shearing shed. The guys there think it's fun to laugh and have jokes, which is fine, but when they think it's okay to, because I'm small, to pick me up and move me out of the way and things like that, I really don't like that. And it brings images. (Leanne, 32/9/4)

The sound of a beer can being opened. The smell of someone who had been drinking – and loud music – all very strong reminders. (Yeppoon, 46/18/5)

Difficulties with sleep and/or nightmares were also being still experienced to some degree by the majority (75%) of the participants. Several women spoke of these sleep difficulties as indicative of the "residue" of the abusive relationship and did not appear to anticipate the situation changing in the future. They described the involuntary resurfacing of memories causing not just nightmares, but also insomnia and general nervousness. Given that the average amount of time since the abusive relationship ended was nine years, this represents a relatively high persistence of sleep difficulties amongst participants and further illustrates the longevity of psychological effects of DV:

Nightmares – he's killing me or I'm killing him. Graphic violence. (Riana, 39/5/12)

It has been suggested that most cases of PTSD recover within a short period of time, but if a person is still experiencing PTSD after six years, recovery without treatment is unlikely (Davidson, Stein, Shalev, & Yehuda,

2004). Although 90% of participants in this study reported symptoms, only 6% had received a medical diagnosis of PTSD and were, or had been, receiving treatment. This is indicative of the marginalisation of PTSD with respect to DV, despite its proven usefulness as a tool with which to treat victims of trauma (Herman, 1992; Humpreys & Joseph, 2004).

3.6 Other psychological disorders

Other psychological disorders also emerged during the course of the study. It was discovered that 17% of the participants were suffering from agoraphobia and 15% from Obsessive Compulsive disorder. In addition, 10% were suffering from eating disorders, such as anorexia, severe appetite loss and/or food addictions, and 5% were experiencing early hair loss. One woman held the abusive relationship directly responsible for her subsequent diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, while another told how her psychiatrist linked her ongoing chronic fatigue syndrome with the prior abuse. Another participant, now 83 years old, was constantly remaking herself physically. She has had numerous face-lifts to the point that her face resembles a flawless mask.

3.7 Long-term physical damage

Many of the interviewees (45%) were relatively quick to link current health problems with past abuse. This suggested that these women devoted a considerable amount of thought to the ongoing repercussions and their overall impact:

I believe that my suppression of my anger over a four year period...led to my subsequent diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (Anna, 55/11/17)

Two years out of the abusive relationship, I went through a premature menopause. I'm sure it was brought on by that. Because my mother went through it late – late. Um, and yeah – that convinced me that even out of the relationship – my periods never returned. I think my body just shut down, my body was aged years before... its time and I think that was because of what I'd been through. My cervical cancer scare. I think emotional turmoil can bring this sort of thing on. (Tracey, 42/8/6)

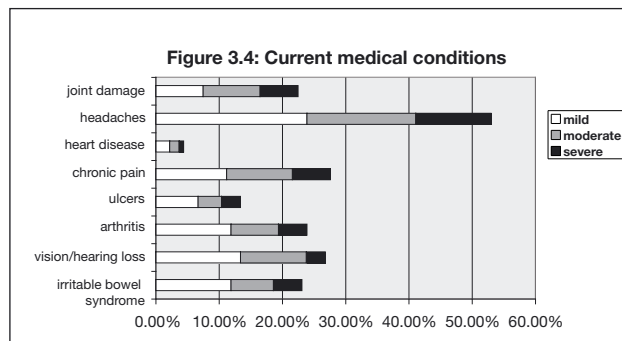
Nevertheless, the women did not exhibit the same confidence in connecting their physical long-term effects as they had with psychological effects. This was illustrated by the common prefacing of statements regarding physical health impacts with a subjective article such as 'I believe', or 'I think.' This was even more evident amongst the 55% of interviewees who were relatively cautious about linking any physical ill-health with the past abuse. Instead, these women chose to emphasise psychological effects and either downplay current physical complaints or not connect them to the abusive relationship at all. For example, a 71-year old participant, whose severely abusive relationship had lasted 19 years, simply wrote: "just the usual old people's complaints", while another, after listing the injuries still causing health problems, finished with "most of the time I am fine and have put it all behind me."

This situation may well have developed in response to the more overt nature of ongoing psychological effects. For example, many women indicated that if confronted with male aggression nowadays, they reacted with extreme

⁷ The major difference in the comparison was that the mean for multiple symptoms during the abusive relationship was ten-eleven symptoms (75%), while the mean for currently was between four-nine symptoms (63%).

responses (usually severe nervousness). Obviously it is far easier for these women to link these responses with experiences undergone during the abusive relationship, than to correlate, for instance, ongoing headaches with events that happened well in the past. Yet the long-term aftermath of severe abuse can impact on predispositions for even relatively common viral infections, such as colds and flu (Campbell, Jones, Dienemann, & Kub, 2002), but it is unlikely that survivors would make connections such as these without informed knowledge.

In addition, it is highly likely that the tendency to minimise current physical effects may well be driven by expectations of 'recovery', and be more representative of desire than fact. Indeed, the need to identify as having 'moved on' appeared common amongst the participants, and it seems reasonable to suggest that this may influence personal assessments of health. Chelsea (46/18/11), who presented as extremely (and justifiably) proud of the distance she had travelled since the abusive relationship, typifies this situation. She initially spoke of having no medical repercussions, but then described how she has been attending a naturopath for the past three years to deal with sciatic pain caused from: "the whole time I was married I was tense – it became glued that way because I was always ready to defend all the time." Similarly, Elizabeth (61/22/18) wrote on her questionnaire that she had no medical repercussions at all: "not now, too many years have gone by", which contrasted directly with her interview response of: "slight loss of hearing due to perforated eardrums. Early development of cataracts possibly linked to eye damage."



(n=134)

Figure 3.4 gives an overall snapshot of the possible health ramifications of prior abuse. The most common complaint experienced by participants was headaches at 53%, of which 17% were of moderate severity and 12% severe. A significant percentage of participants appear to be suffering other conditions as well, with 28% experiencing chronic pain, 27% vision and/or hearing loss, and 23% arthritis. With regard to arthritis, where Australian research suggests that this ailment is suffered by 14.6% nationwide (*Arthritis*, 2004), the 23% rate reported by this group appears substantially higher.

While the study was limited to requesting information regarding only eight particular disorders (Figure 3.4), a notable number of participants included extra information covering additional medical diagnoses that they believed were linked to the abusive relationship. Many participants also elaborated on their medical conditions during the course of the interview process. This extra information was

sufficient to make several general assessments regarding the long-term health of the women. These are that *at least* 12% of the study participants have ailments such as polymyositis, chronic fatigue syndrome, MS, lupus, early stroke, Sjogren's, early onset osteoporosis, and diverticulitis, and that *at least* 1.5% have undergone early menopause, 4% have cholesterol problems, 5.3% have early hair loss, 7.5% still suffer the after-effects from bones broken during the abuse, 7.5% have spinal and back problems, 10% have dental problems as a result of the abuse, and 10% have cancer currently or have suffered from a form of it since the cessation of the abusive relationship.

The proportion suffering cancer rises to 14% of interviewees only⁸. Other research has suggested a link between DV and some forms of cancer. Coker, Smith, McKeown & King have pointed towards a relationship between intimate partner violence and higher-grade cervical lesions (2000), while the recent Australian study (Access Economics, 2004: 25) included cervical cancer as a possible outcome of prior DV. Furthermore, a study on victims of breast cancer found that they almost invariably had a history of unresolved emotional pain throughout their lives (Gawler, 1994).

Few (12%) of the study participants reported being in good health overall. Instead, the majority reported they were currently suffering from multiple medical conditions, with 26% indicating four or more co-existing conditions. DV survivors suffer from heightened psychological and physical health problems that have long-term negative health outcomes and that makes locating their post-relationship experiences within a framework of recovery both impractical and misleading.

3.8 Long-term sexual damage

Sexual abuse is defined as "any sexual behaviour that makes a person feel uncomfortable, frightened or threatened. It is sexual activity to which a person does not consent. The use of emotional or physical violence to force another person to engage in sexual activity also constitutes sexual assault." (CASA, 2003: para. 1). Therefore sexual abuse does not just refer to forced intercourse, but also to sexually abusive and controlling acts such as verbal sexual degradation (Campbell, 2002). Overall, past sexual abuse can have long-term consequences for victims, including sexually-transmitted diseases, vaginal, anal and urethral trauma, fibroids, decreased sexual desire, genital irritation, painful intercourse, chronic pelvic pain and urinary tract infections (Campbell, 2002).

Eighty percent of respondents to the questionnaire reported forced sexual activity during the abusive relationship. During the interview phase, however, few women referred to *any* of the differing forms of sexual abuse with the subject raised in only two interviews. These were two of the three group interviews⁹. From this it seems likely that the group

⁸ It must be emphasized that these figures are conservative as, with regard to the actual interview question (where most of the data was gained), participants were asked to describe medical conditions that they believe *stemmed* from the abusive relationship. Therefore participants who were unwilling to link current conditions, believing them immaterial to the current study, were not encouraged to divest.

⁹ The third group interview, where the subject of sexual abuse did not arise, was conducted with a mother and her two adult daughters and was therefore an unlikely arena for a discussion of this nature.

environment facilitated disclosure and discussion of an issue women are reluctant to explore and for which the group provided considerable support before any details were divulged. The group dynamic is illustrated in the following transcript excerpt¹⁰:

Liz (43/15/3): *Mine was all of it – sexual, everything. And I was just so sad inside, but I didn't know any different. Because my mum and dad, I don't know about the sexual side of things, but my mum and dad were abusive to each other. So I just saw that and I went into mine and I just thought it was normal. And when it come to the sexual side of it, I thought 'Oh, this is wrong' but I still put up with it. And now I've got a new partner and I'm thinking 'why aren't you hurting me? Why aren't you doing this?' and he's gorgeous. Yes, I'm very lucky I survived it. I shouldn't be prejudiced – but he's [the perpetrator] Greek. And you know the Greek men like it – up the backside. So he tied me up and said 'I want it' and I said 'no' – and that was it. And I couldn't move and – oh, to this day I still have problems with my bottom.*

Solva (56/12/12): *Doesn't need to be Greek.*

Liz: *That was the only way. And if I wanted it the other way it was just 'shut-up.'*

Solva: *Some take every orifice you have. So it doesn't have to be Greek – and I still suffer. Coz that wasn't the way I knew things.*

This conversation also illustrates a reluctance to use the word 'rape'. Even after Liz describes being forced, neither discussant uses the word 'rape' to define the events.

Similarly the choice of language throughout the conversation is relatively non-judgmental. Liz excuses her ex-partner on ethnic grounds, while Solva partially blames her own knowledge of 'things' for her suffering. Throughout their dialogue the women chose sterile, low-key terms to describe the sexual activity and its abusive nature is downplayed as a result.

The long-term repercussions of sexual abuse can continue to impact on the post-relationship lives of survivors in a number of ways. In the group interview in which the above discussion occurred, Liz subsequently asked the others if they also felt that "their body was just awful", and Solva replied that she felt "like a sack of potatoes." Jeanie described how she was currently having counselling "to sort out some of this sexual stuff." Obviously, the women were all dealing with self-esteem issues that they had been unable to overcome. While this relates to psychological repercussions of sexual abuse, 6% of participants also indicated that they were currently suffering vaginal and/or anal difficulties that they believed stemmed from the past abuse¹¹.

It is highly likely that the stigma associated with sexual abuse inhibits disclosure. Sexual abuse is one of the most likely events to be consciously or unconsciously suppressed, and can lead to prolonged feelings of embarrassment, shame and guilt (Greenspan & Samuel,

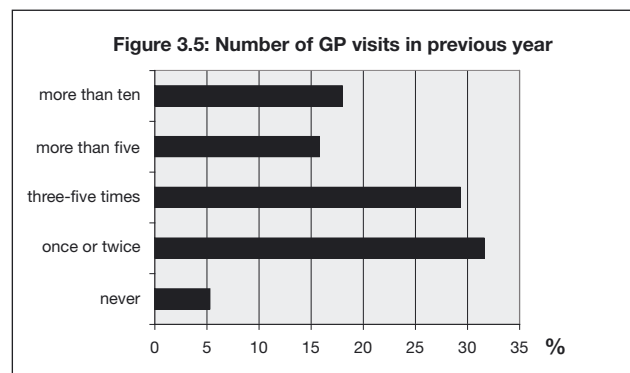
1989). In this study, the word 'rape' was used only once in all of the 134 questionnaires and 48 interviews:

Huge highs, and huge lows – there's nothing in between. You know, because of all the loving afterwards – 'I love you, I adore you' – they [the beatings] were almost worth it to get his love and affection. But when they got severe – nothing was worth it. And when I started refusing him, he raped me anyway.
(Tracey, 42/8/6)

It is difficult to conclude that participants did not consciously equate the sexual abuse with rape, as so few of them mentioned the sexual aspects of the relationship at all. Wood and Rennie (1994) postulate that this is a method by which rape victims can minimise the actual event. With regard to wife-rape, this can be aggravated by widespread societal myths regarding consent to sexual contact being perpetual in marriage (Eskow, 1996), which results in denying or downplaying the existence of wife-rape altogether (Basile, 2002a). Yet not only does research suggest that 34% of all women are victims of sexual coercion during their lifetimes with 10% of these experiencing rape (Basile, 2002b), but that there is a strong relationship between male physical and male sexual aggression (Marshall & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002). Thus a high level of sexual abuse being experienced by a voluntary sample of DV survivors is not as surprising as their reluctance to identify the issue even after the relationship itself has been severed.

3.9 Responses by the medical community

The premise that participants were suffering from a variety of long-term health repercussions of the abusive relationship is supported by an examination of average GP visits. Participants were asked to estimate the number of these visits undertaken during the twelve-month period immediately preceding this study (Figure 3.5).



(n=133)

Of the participants in this study, 18% had attended a medical clinic more than ten times in the past year, with only 5% having not attended at all (Figure 3.5). The most common definition for frequent medical attention is ten or more consultations within a 12-month period with an average of 3% of the population falling into this category (Scaife, Gill, Heywood, & Neal, 2000). By contrast almost one in five women in this study were frequent attenders.

The high GP attendance rate by study participants demonstrates their reliance on ongoing medical support.

¹⁰ This conversation took place during the first group interview, which was held at a local community centre and involved four participants and the researcher.

¹¹ However it is important to note that this may not have been as a result of sexual abuse per se. For instance, a 41-year old questionnaire respondent wrote: "He would not let me go to the toilet, which was especially hard when I was pregnant, and I would have to wet myself."

Whilst this does not necessarily indicate a similar reliance during the abusive relationship itself, it is indicative of the significantly higher healthcare utilization rate of abused women (Coker et al., 2000; Thompson, 2003). This situation places those in the medical professions, particularly doctors, in the unique position of being able to positively intervene in the lives of women who are currently, or have been, in abusive relationships.

Yet studies (for example, Campbell, 2002; Hadley, 2002; Ramsay, Richardson, Carter, Davidson, & Feder, 2002; Sugg, Thompson, Thompson, Maiuro, & Rivara, 1999) indicate that this intervention seldom occurs. Instead it appears that the medical profession lacks a standard set of signs, symptoms and illnesses or any sort of routine screening that would flag current or prior DV (Campbell, 2002). In a 1998 USA survey, it was found that only 29% of abused women had discussed their abuse with a physician and only 1 in 5 of these women reported that it had been the doctor who had raised the subject. Furthermore only 44% of the women who had discussed the abuse were referred to a support service, and only 23% were referred to police (*Women's Health*, 1999). Certainly few of the participants for this study mentioned positive interaction by medical professionals. While medication seemed readily available, dialogue regarding the background to the injuries was not:

The doctor prescribed prozac, temazepam, valium and serepax. If I had taken these things, I believe I would be crazy by now. Doctors just seem to want to 'pill you up' so the real issue becomes numbed over with medication (Terri, 29/4/7).

Attitudes amongst healthcare professionals would appear to be part of the problem. An American survey (Sugg et al., 1999) found that 50% of clinicians and 70% of nurses/assistants believed that prevalence rates of DV in their practice were 1% or less, a misconception that negatively influenced investigation, and only 10% believed that they had management information to deal with it if it did arise. In addition, studies have found that two thirds of physicians and almost half of emergency room nurses are not in favour of screening for DV at all (Ramsay et al., 2002).

Detection of the underlying abuse is the first step in successful management of both the immediate and the long-term effects of DV. Medical professionals can then make more accurate diagnoses, assess levels of risk, refer to appropriate community or advocacy services (Weir, 2000), or simply acknowledge the abuse while providing confirmation of the patient's own worth (Gerbert et al., 1999):

I went to see a psychiatrist at one stage because I, well, I was planning my own suicide. It didn't occur to me to leave him! Well, I went to see this doctor and he sent me to this psychiatrist and, ah, I only needed one visit and he said to me: 'why don't you leave him?' And it was like someone switched on a light. (Gwynne, 74/26/27)

3.10 Summary and recommendations

Domestic violence (DV) is a major public health problem, affecting women of all ages, cultures, and socio-economic levels. Even apart from physical injuries sustained as a result of the abuse, battered women are more likely to suffer from conditions such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, psychosomatic symptoms (*WHO*, 2000) and posttraumatic stress disorder (Dobie et al, 2004; Fagan & Freme, 2004). A woman who has experienced DV has been abused on a number of levels. Her rights, her physical safety, her integrity, and her sense of self have all been violated and, as such, she is often left with the persistent belief that she herself is worthless, guilty, hopeless and a failure (Oke, 1999).

The findings of this study strongly indicate that it is illogical to assume that all the health-related impacts of the abuse will cease when the relationship does. While some specific conditions may be framed by expectations of recovery, such as a broken arm or a bruised neck, it presents as a limited context in which to locate the overall damage to health caused by an abusive relationship. Such expectations, furthermore, have the potential to impact on the help-seeking behaviour of survivors and their willingness to acknowledge an abusive background as a legitimate predictor of future health-related outcomes. As a result of these conclusions, this report strongly recommends the following:

- General practice is commonly one of the most significant professional contacts on which women survivors are reliant. However, few study participants reported positive interaction with health professionals despite their high attendance rates. General practices need to be provided with information and resources that enable primary health care to provide responsive and effective early identification and early intervention to better manage and potentially reduce the significant health care and productivity costs of DV itself (Hadley, 2002).
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) provides a relevant tool with which to treat DV survivors (Herman, 1992; Humpreys & Joseph, 2004), and general practice should be encouraged and supported in using this approach. Even apart from the obvious treatment benefits, such a diagnosis can also negate social stigma and self-blame by linking experiences of DV with other trauma, such as natural disasters or war (Hughes & Jones, 2000; Kemp et al., 1991), thus emphasising that the victim's difficulties arise from external, and not internal, sources (Saunders, 1994).

4 Justice: The long-term impact of legal issues on the post-separation experience

My experience with the legal system has left me jaded, disgusted and with the feeling that nothing has changed in the 140 years since Margaret Robinson was jailed for defending herself against her drunken and violent husband. (Dawn, 48/21/3)

4.1 Key findings

- The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that access to legal avenues can extend unwanted contact and locate it within a similar adversarial framework as that from which DV survivors are attempting to escape. This can lead to an extended victimisation for the survivor that makes a mockery of expectations of 'recovery', and can severely compromise the survivor's attempts to rebuild, both economically and psychologically, from a position of strength.
- As a direct result of this adversarial framework, DV perpetrators often perceive the legal system as a 'challenge', and gain a sense of achievement from legal manoeuvrings that are used to exact revenge and/or punishment on the survivors.
- Abused women are at a distinct disadvantage when negotiating property settlement, whether or not they access legal assistance. However, pursuing settlement through the legal system does result in a more equitable result.
- There is a strong perception amongst DV survivors that the judicial system favours the rights of the abusive parent over the rights of the child to security/safety and that the legal fraternity is largely naïve and/or ignorant regarding issues of DV.
- Many DV survivors negotiate separation without recourse to an intervention order (IO) even if the violence actually increases during this time. This is largely due to a widely held perception that an IO is 'not worth the paper it's written on.'

4.2 Property settlement.

In Australia, under the provisions of the Family Law Act 1975, the Family Court has the discretionary power to divide property on marriage breakdown where such cases are brought before them. The legislative intention of the act is to present a finding that takes account of the past financial and non-financial contributions to property and to the welfare of the family, and the respective future financial needs of both the parties.

Relationships characterised by DV are often in dire need of this legal intervention to ensure equity within the property settlement. Yet only 26% of participants for this study had used this option to achieve property settlement, with the remainder undergoing settlement without recourse to legal

assistance. This made a substantial difference to the amount of property received. On average, according to their estimates, the women received 39% of the marital assets while their ex-partners received 61%¹². Where participants acknowledged use of legal aid or otherwise, however, it was ascertained that legal intervention resulted in an estimated average 55/45% split in favour of the survivor, whilst attempting settlement without legal intervention meant an average 70/30% split in favour of the perpetrator. In one-third of these latter cases, the survivor received no property whatsoever.

These findings are striking given that these women, at separation, were often in desperate circumstances: 44% without any paid employment, 47% dealing with an escalation of the violence (with only 28% holding an intervention order), and almost all with the primary care of dependent children. In addition, DV survivors as a group are statistically the most likely to have left the family home during separation, which in itself is a predictor for a lower share of property (McDonald, 1986). Certainly, at the time of this study, only 20% of participants were still living in the home that they had lived in during the abusive relationship.

Overall, it appears that the property share received by these women reflects the practical difficulties they face in trying to negotiate a fair settlement with a violent former spouse – a situation where safety may take precedence over the right to a fair share of the matrimonial property (Sheehan & Smyth, 2000). Whether legal assistance was sought or not, the relative willingness of study participants to settle for less than their legal entitlement at the time of separation was a strong theme:

The solicitor said you may get more if you tried... [but] I had no choice, I had to protect my children. (Jeanie, 55/14/12)

I could have 'fought' for more but I did not want to enter into nasty legal battles... peace of mind and body for myself and the children was my priority. (Rose, 69/26/25)

This reluctance to 'fight' affected even the minority of cases that did go to court, with at least five interviewees ignoring legal advice on what they were entitled to, and instead choosing to settle for the property amount least likely to escalate violence. Whilst this choice may have assisted short-term safety, it often resulted in a later sense of bitterness. Overall, the responses of the participants demonstrated the potential longevity of the impact of property settlement, not just in economic terms, but also psychologically:

He had planned the separation for years it seemed, skimming money from the business... between separation and divorce he bought 3 vehicles, 2 motorbikes and a liveaboard cruiser. [He now] lives in a property valued at over \$1million and takes holidays on

¹² This average was established using estimates that 24 interview participants volunteered with regard to property settlement.

the Whitsundays amongst other interstate resorts. It is difficult when [my] only working hours are cut to three days a week and my 25 year old car breaks down or is stolen. It is difficult when I measure the cost of a pizza and I remember his interstate jaunts, B&B weekends and restaurant dinners. (Dawn, 48/21/3)

As with Dawn, a common thread throughout many of the survivors' narratives was the perception that their ex-partners had successfully milked the relationship of funds either in preparation for separation, or between separation and settlement. This practice, often coupled with a tendency to use threats and/or aggression to achieve advantageous results, placed the survivors in an unfavourable position:

He threatened to burn the house down, broke into the house, but um – it was difficult because he was still an owner of the house... so basically up until settlement, which was nearly a year later, he dragged it out, I knew there was nothing I could do about it. (Samantha, 39/14/2)

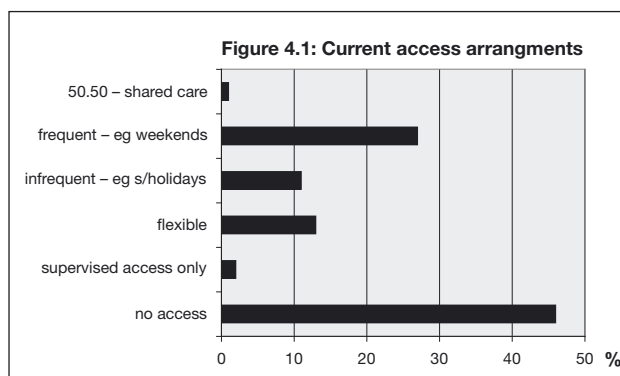
Very negative... frustrating. [I] was interrogated in court by solicitor (his) who said I was paranoid because I stated that I believed my husband would burn my house down and try to kill me with his guns. He actually tried both. (Susan, 51/21/13)

Yet division of marital property at the point of separation for relationships characterised by DV represents an important avenue for redress of the wrongs suffered by the victim. It is an opportunity to emphasise society's refusal to sanction such criminality as DV, while simultaneously acknowledging the right to compensation by the survivor. Property division may likewise address the economic costs associated with spousal violence, as well as assist in alleviating the long-term health-related repercussions. Ironically, however, it appears that the reverse is more often the case with the general approach adopted by the courts in determining property settlement of ruling the marital violence irrelevant, except in cases of dire physical injury (Sheehan & Smyth, 2000). As a consequence, the tactics of manipulation and intimidation employed by many perpetrators reap unmerited economic rewards.

In the case of Kennon (1997), the court's potential to restore equity and uphold justice was ably demonstrated. The court found the past DV to be relevant because the abuse had negatively affected the survivor's ability to contribute to the marriage ("In the Marriage of Kennon," 1997). The Kennon case even gave rise to a letter of advice sent by the Family Law Council (2001) proposing reforms that would oblige courts involved in property proceedings to consider the effects of family violence on the contributions of both parties. However, the case of Kennon currently stands as the exception rather than the rule and it appears that if DV has any bearing on legal outcomes, it is more likely to be to the advantage of the perpetrator. As the responses given by the study participants demonstrate, a history of DV can impact upon the process of settlement in many ways, not least being the creation of a substantial power imbalance and a climate of fear and hostility between the parties that disadvantages the victims in terms of their ability to negotiate a fair settlement, leading directly to a reduction of the property amount that they receive (Astor, 1995; Neave, 1995).

4.3 Issues of child residence/contact

Within this study, 84% of participants had children, with the large majority of these children having been under the age of eighteen at the time of the abusive relationship. Of the children who were still under the age of eighteen during the study, 91% were residing with the survivors and 4% with the perpetrators. 53% of those women with dependent children residing with them also had continued contact with the perpetrator due to the requirements of child contact¹³ (Figure 4.1).



(n=66)

Figure 4.1 shows that a significant proportion of the dependent children (46%) have no ongoing contact with the perpetrator¹⁴. In some cases this situation has arisen through the actions of the survivor (either having moved long distances or currently refusing contact), but many had also arisen through the perpetrator's choice ("He hasn't bothered to contact children for three years"). Of the 13% of children with flexible arrangements above, extra information supplied indicates that a large number of these signify a flexibility governed by the needs of the perpetrator ("when he can be bothered"), and not the woman or children. It is important to acknowledge therefore that, for the participants, the role of resident parent does not necessarily equate to control of that role.

Of particular concern is the low proportion (2%) of dependent children who have supervised contact arrangements in place. Research strongly suggests that the past behaviour of perpetrators is indicative of their likelihood to continue behaving in a hostile manner (Saunders, 1998), resulting in continuing victimisation for women and children. This risk is heightened during unsupervised access (Fleury, Sullivan & Bybee, 2000; Ratus, Rendell & Lynch, 2001; Saunders, 1998) and for this reason, studies have continually stressed the importance of supervised contact in the case of abusive fathers (for example, Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Kaye, Stubbs, & Tolmie, 2003; Wyndham, 1998). Yet several participants in this study spoke of trying to pursue supervised access via the legal system to no avail:

The system failed me. It [supervised access] should have continued but he fought for it not to. It was like they were just sick of the sight of us. We were in and out of Family Court that many times that, yeah, I'm not

¹³ This number could well be higher as 11% of participants with dependent children declined to answer the question regarding contact.

¹⁴ It is important to note that Figure 4.1 does not reflect court-ordered contact, as several interview responses indicated that what was actually occurring now was contrary to what had been set up initially.

happy with the system at all. I went back to court to push for the supervision – because of all the places [the son] was being exposed to, [his] father was taking him in the car while he was doing robberies...he'd had two car accidents while [the son] was in the car... all these things I brought up, that he was sleeping outside in the shed, [no] appropriate bedding... and the courts were saying: 'well, we can't put an order down that he not be given rubbish, that he be given a proper diet.' (Sunshine, 32/1/8)

With very few exceptions, study participants clearly perceived issues involving child contact, or lack of, as one of the most influential implications of the abusive relationship. The potential for long-term judicial conflict was also most evident within cases involving child residence and contact, which can cause issues throughout the childhood of the offspring. Overall, the participants with dependent children felt that the system focused too strongly on the rights of the father and that these rights were seldom aligned with the needs of the children:

He was having access every weekend but, because of his abusive behaviour and hostility towards me, I had ceased making any arrangements since [2 months before]. He is currently seeking Parenting Orders in the Family Court and I am opposing them because of his abusive behaviour towards the children (but I'm not holding my breath). (Questionnaire respondent, 44/17/1)

It's the kid's rights! That's what they told me. The kids have the right to get to know both parents, doesn't matter how bad his dad is, he still had a right – [their son] has to go. (Leanne, 32/9/4)

This is a situation addressed by recent Australian research, which highlighted how women are often caught between concern for their children's overall safety and a system that is currently failing to address such concerns adequately (Kaye et al., 2003). This is mainly due to inherent structures in the current system that enable long-term manipulation by perpetrators should they so choose, resulting in extended victimisation of the survivor through frivolous proceedings that are extremely costly not just in terms of finances, but also in time and emotional strength:

Because of all the courts and everything, I'm stuck here. I hate it. I'm almost – decided I'm going to leave him [her eight-year old son] and go. I've been going through this hell... for four years – and it's taken its toll. Because he's taken me back to court – he's taken me back and – I had to get a solicitor... to represent me and everything – and he stands up and says 'well, it's not for any, ah, orders she's actually breached, it's for any future possible breaches!' And like this is thousands of dollars later! (Leanne, 32/9/4)

Years and years and years of going to the Family Court because he didn't take no [for an answer]. (Jeanie, 55/14/12)

He actually had me charged with contempt! It was a thing that I had to let him know if I changed phone numbers or whatever and he was hassling me, making abusive phone calls – so I didn't. Put it off as long as possible. And was charged with contempt – had to go to court. (Tracey, 42/8/6)

Many of the women found that the perpetrator's manipulative tactics actually suited the Family Court system

and that he “put on a show” which, regardless of the fact that it was unsupported by his abusive background, nevertheless often resulted in relatively generous contact. These tactics were aided by the perpetrator's intimate knowledge of the survivor's life, allowing for a structured vindictiveness to take place. The success of such a tactical approach worked to support the perpetrator's perception of the legal system as a challenge, rather than a process. This situation stands in direct contrast to Yeppoon, who bypassed the Family Court altogether and took her children overseas where she was eventually charged under the Hague Convention for abduction:

This is why I left Australia. I could not stay in the country and be safe and mentally healthy enough to care for my children. We had been separated many times and had access arranged – however I knew that the children would be in danger if and when he drank, got in the car, etc. And I knew that the courts, police etc would require “convincing” before I got their help – and they are not handy at 3 in the morning. So, if it was up to me – I would have done the same thing. Left the country and worry about the legalities after. (Yeppoon, 46/18/5)

Several other participants were in hiding at the time of this study, having travelled interstate to avoid issues of contact. One questionnaire respondent, who disappeared when her children's lives were threatened, described what she felt was the inappropriateness of the court system with two separate judicial laws: “Things he does is criminal law but family law says he is their biological father and has rights to see them even if he hurts us. One is state law and the other federal law.” Several others expressed considerable bitterness, in hindsight, that they had not followed a similar avenue:

If, um, anything happened and I had to rely on the law again, there's no way I would. I left that relationship saying: “well, okay – we can stay here, the law will protect us.” But if I could do it again, I'd be out of here. Because no way has the law protected us... I'd recommend women to shoot through and never be around again! (Leanne, 32/9/4)

Like Leanne, few participants described feeling supported by the Family Court, with several voicing concerns that if they tried to advocate for their children, their actions were seen as either paranoid or “self-motivated rather than child-motivated.” This latter relates to the use of ‘Parent Alienation Syndrome’ (PAS) as a tool to discredit the non-offending parent. PAS has been described as a term with no scientific basis that is used to pejoratively describe and pathologise what is essentially very healthy and productive behaviour: the desire to hold the perpetrator responsible for the outcomes of his own abuse (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Research has established that the pro-contact stance of the Family Court system is a significant contributing factor to the large number (60-76%) of children from violent backgrounds who undergo court-ordered contact with their abusive parent after separation has been accomplished (Radford, 1999; D. Shepard, 1994; M. Shepard, 1992). In fact, it is more common for an abusive parent to seek custody/residence than for a non-abusive parent, leaving the courts in a position of having to evaluate allegations of DV with few resources to investigate the evidence. This, coupled with widespread judicial ignorance regarding DV and the personality types of perpetrators, often works to

the perpetrator's advantage and underscores his sense of his own entitlement as a parent (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Women are placed in a particularly invidious long-term position. The pressures of ongoing contact and its ramifications can affect the quality of their own interactions with their children (English, Marshall, & Stewart, 2003).

4.4 The legal system: perceptions and reality

Strongly evident within the study responses, whether participants had accessed legal assistance or not, was a lack of faith in the legal system, both in terms of ability and willingness to assist those in need. The women also spoke of a lack of effective penalty within the system to reprove those who continue to display inappropriate behaviour. This lack of faith was reflected by the low amount of study participants who accessed intervention orders with 47% having never held one at all.

Marge, whose ex-partner was stalking her, managed to obtain an intervention order (IO) after several years but soon found that it did not prevent the perpetrator from continuing contact. When he was eventually charged with six counts of breaking the IO and two counts of stalking, he received a six-month good behaviour bond and forty hours community service. At the time of the study, the perpetrator continued to phone Marge's friends to discover what she is doing and often drove around to Marge's house to watch her. Other women spoke of obtaining an intervention order during separation but, if it was successful in curtailing the violence, being unable to have it extended when it finished. In some of these cases, the violence was still continuing at the time of the study. Overall, few participants who had contact with the legal system found this to be either supportive or beneficial to their efforts to rebuild after the abusive relationship:

The courts don't really deal effectively with victims and the lack of understanding hurt me deeply. (Gypsy, 36/7/8)

The legal system was abusive in withholding vital legal information, playing with jargon and not allowing me a say. (Sweet, 43/12/6)

And the judges stand up and say "not to minimise domestic violence but..." and with that 'but', they just have! (Leanne, 32/9/4)

Many of the women also indicated a belief that, whilst they found legal issues stressful and daunting, the perpetrators actually gained a sense of achievement from legal manoeuvrings and, in fact, often used these to exact revenge and/or punishment on the survivors. This situation is epitomised by one participant, who had lent her abusive ex-husband \$20,000 and, after a considerable period of time, was forced to take him to court to retrieve the money. After twelve months of legal manoeuvring, she was awarded part of the outstanding sum (\$3,000 of which was used to pay legal fees) and, as her ex-husband's father handed over the cheque, he commented: "we were always going to pay, we just wanted her to suffer."

Overall, the legal fraternity was perceived by many participants as intimidating, discriminatory and non-accountable. In addition, there was a strong perception that the legal system was a matter of luck rather than justice,

with the outcome received highly dependent on which magistrate heard their case:

The system is more about making money than justice and it depends on which judges you get what outcome you get. Delayed my recovery a great deal. (Jeanie, 55/14/12)

When you've even got solicitors going in there and saying: 'oh, we've got her, you've got no hope' – that's scary, when they can predict that this judge is going to award against you and everything. And the barrister, when I went for the property settlement, said: "this lady, she hates me – she never does anything towards my clients." I know now which magistrates and judges we can walk in and okay – we can just turn around and walk out. (Leanne, 32/9/4)

The abuse of the family court where the judiciary, with nicknames like "Mad Dog", can distribute "Justice" on the toss of a coin. My original solicitor was so abusive that I asked my father to accompany me whenever I spoke to him. In the words of my subsequent (female) solicitor – I had been abused [by] my husband and now the courts were vindicating his behaviour and perpetrating the same abuse. (Dawn, 48/21/3)

In the case of DV I feel the perpetrator should lose his rights/or be handled more cautiously. The courts should look at the damages done to children and there should be someone held accountable for their naïve and poor decisions. (Questionnaire respondent, 34/3/3)

For the participants, another barrier to utilising legal assistance was the perception of legal costs as being unduly prohibitive. Indeed, of those who were involved in the legal system, only two study participants spoke of a positive return on their outlay. Instead, the large majority expressed considerable bitterness, finding the experience a costly exercise that did not return on the financial and emotional investment required:

It cost me my home, \$60,000 and 3 years of my life to be awarded 58% of the 60% I could legitimately claim. (Dawn, 48/21/3)

All mine went to pay legal costs. My ex told my children I had wasted their part of the money by going to court. (Jeanie, 55/14/12)

I've got another seven years of court fees, solicitor's fees and everything to pay off yet. And that's basically doing everything I can to pay them off. I've lost everything. I don't have a car any more, I don't have house or land. He's got two cars, in the stage of building a house. (Leanne, 32/9/4)

Leanne represented the extreme scenario of negative financial implications. Although she had originally been able to access legal aid, the cost ceiling was soon reached and her aid was terminated¹⁵. Leanne commented that "apparently his solicitor's renowned for using up the legal aid on stupid things – it goes pretty quick." Four years after separation, Leanne was still funding regular court

¹⁵ Only three other participants mentioned access to legal aid, with none of these women finding the experience advantageous: "Legal Aid in the Family Crt/waiting for a barrister was like waiting in casualty of a hospital for medical attention. Very frustrating and not very validating." (Anne Charles, 34/3/3). At the time of writing this paper, the Legal Aid cost ceiling was set at \$10,000 (VLA, 2003).

appearances¹⁶ and, at the time of the interview, had just had her legal representation terminated due to non-payment of fees:

They've got my files [her former solicitors], and I said that's really wrong – I've paid for that file three times. And it was only probably the last three months that I hadn't paid for... they knew my financial situation before they took me on. I was paying what I could, I had money coming out, directly out from my account into their account. And the last hearing, they dropped me a week before unless I could pay the whole amount upfront... I've probably paid them fifty thousand dollars... over the course of time, and I only had something like twelve thousand left... so, okay – I've got to go to this hearing and I've got no solicitor... disgusting. (Leanne, 32/9/4)

4.5 Summary and recommendations

Rather than forming a minority of cases, the Family Court's own analysis reveals that DV was a factor in the majority of judicially determined cases (68 out of 91 cases in 2002) (Nicholson, 2002, in Eltringham, 2004: 21). In theory, as the legal system is a neutral body capable of handing out consequences for criminal behaviour, it should be an ideal venue in which DV survivors can seek equitable post-relationship outcomes, whether in property settlement or in long-term parenting arrangements. The law has the potential to overcome the unequal power differential of an abusive relationship, whilst also providing an instrument through which necessary ongoing contact can be formally regulated.

It is a paradox of our legal system that the adversarial conflict characterising abusive relationships is actually replicated within the pursuit of a judicial decision in contested cases. The adversarial nature of this dominant legal discourse clearly favours perpetrators rather than victims, by providing a context more suited to those skilled in tactics and the exercise of power. This is typified by DV survivors using descriptive language such as "fight" and "battle" to refer to their judicial experiences. Rather than neutralise the oppositional nature of the relationship, therefore, the system often provides the perpetrator with a legally sanctioned avenue through which to vent his aggression. The situation has a direct bearing on the difficulties women face trying to negotiate fair settlements, and their need to prioritise personal safety over an equitable outcome (Sheehan & Smyth, 2000). This prioritising can

¹⁶ These ongoing court appearances were due to residence and contact issues, as the property settlement had been completed several years before.

lead to attempts to negotiate without recourse to legal support, a position that can severely weaken a survivor's ability to achieve a reasonably equitable outcome. This report, therefore, makes the following recommendations:

- Given that the response of the legal system to DV was estimated to cost approximately \$298 million in 2002-03 (Access Economics, 2004: 53), it would seem likely that a review into the effectiveness and efficiency of the system in terms of the process and outcomes for all parties is appropriate and necessary. At present, it appears that access to legal avenues can extend unwanted contact and locate it within a similar adversarial framework as that from which DV survivors are attempting to escape. This has the potential for extended victimisation for the survivor that can severely compromise the survivor's attempts to rebuild, both economically and psychologically, from a position of strength.
- Magistrates should be provided with information and training in the similarities between the adversarial nature of the system and the manipulative tactics employed by the majority of perpetrators.
- The reforms advocated within the Family Law Council letter of advice (2001), sent as a result of 'In the Marriage of Kennon' (1997) should be adopted by the legal system as the guiding rule rather than the occasional exception. This would build on the potential of the court to restore equity and uphold justice in property divisions where a background of DV is established.
- It is strongly urged that *all* the recommendations, both legislative and non-legislative, contained within the recently released *Review of Family Violence Laws Report* (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2006) be adopted. This review found that the often inadequate and inconsistent response of the justice system to DV was partly attributed to the absence of a clear philosophy and overall approach within Victoria's family violence legislation (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2006: xxii). It is imperative that a holistic approach be taken to reform current law and improve the lot of victims and survivors of DV.
- Exclusion orders should be given a greater profile within the community and women reporting abuse should be routinely informed of their availability at the point of contact with police. As recommended within the *Review of Family Violence Laws Report* (Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2006), there should be a judicial presumption in favour of exclusion orders rather than the reverse (2006: 329)

5 Financial wellbeing: The repercussions of prior domestic violence on long-term income, employment and education

I was left on the street with nothing – he got everything. When I met him I had everything and thought my future was assured. [Now] I don't have life insurance, nothing like that. Not even a nest egg for the future... lucky that I've got a roof over my head! (Tracey, 42/8/6)

5.1 Key findings

- Embedding the post-relationship economic journey within a framework of recovery suggests a point of time where the survivor has regained her former state and is able to 'put aside' financial repercussions of the abuse. However, whilst this positioning is appealing in its simplicity, it belies the complexities of DV and negates the seriousness of its consequences.
- This study indicate that many DV survivors utilise the financial support available through Centrelink at the time of optimum vulnerability but, given sufficient time to re-establish themselves, are able to re-enter the workforce, thus reducing welfare dependency.
- DV survivors often use the cessation of the abusive relationship to make significant life-changes. This frequently involves re-training and/or further education post-relationship to increase employment prospects. Many of those who take this step are drawn towards community-related employment (such as social work, counselling, or refuge work). This appears to reflect a deliberate attempt by these women to validate what they had been through and subsequently extract something positive out of what was essentially a negative experience.

5.2 Economic repercussions of an abusive relationship

Generally speaking, the inherent and lifelong economic vulnerability of women is exposed by divorce (Weston & Smyth, 2000), causing many to carry a significant long-term financial disadvantage in comparison with their partners, whose post-divorce economic circumstances seem little changed, and sometimes improved (Holden & Smock, 1991). Research has indicated that this scenario is particularly relevant for single older women and solo mothers, causing them to remain the most financially disadvantaged groups post-divorce (Sheehan & Fehlberg, 2000). Forty-one percent of single mothers report feeling financially stressed compared with 14% of couple families (ABS, 2002), and the labour force participation rate for single mothers is significantly lower than for married mothers. Yet one-parent families are on the increase, now comprising 21% of all Australian families, with 86% of these families headed by a woman (ABS, 2000).

The economic impact of divorce for women is not just apparent in the short-term, but has impacts which can

stretch all the way into old age (Maloney, Marshall, MacConnell, Elliot, Banks & Hausknecht, 2000). Women are at a considerable disadvantage in the area of superannuation (Hyams, 1995), which has been estimated at 15% of the family assets, second in importance only to the family home (Fehlberg, Funder, Sheehan & Smyth, 1997). Research indicates that splitting a partner's superannuation equally on divorce substantially improves long-term financial outcomes, even for women who had marginal workforce attachment (Maloney et al., 2000). The fact that women often exit a marriage with no regard to this valuable financial asset (Lawrence, 2001) has a direct bearing not just on the future of divorced women, but also on the long-term costs to the community. A loss of superannuation entitlements increases eventual reliance on age pensions, which themselves do not guarantee economic security. Ironically, the key method by which women can negate post-divorce financial hardship and raise living standards is either to stay married in the first place (Maloney et al., 2000), or to re-partner (Weston & Smyth, 2000). Both of these options promote a financial dependency that removes choice for women.

The situation is even more problematic for those whose relationship was abusive. Recent studies (Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Sheehan & Smyth, 2000) have supported the definitive interconnection of spousal violence and economic disadvantage post-divorce for women. It also appears that these levels of economic disadvantage rise, and fall, according to the severity of the abuse experienced, and that this vulnerability is restricted to female survivors, rather than male. In addition, as discussed in the previous section, female survivors are less likely to receive an equitable share of the property. They are also statistically unlikely to opt for a judicially ordered property settlement, further reducing any chance of positive legal intervention in the division of superannuation even though legislation¹⁷ has now included superannuation entitlements within property settlements. Certainly, none of the women interviewed for this study indicated that superannuation was even treated as part of their settlement. However, it must be noted that, as the questionnaire and/or interview phases of this study took place in 2003 and participants were required to be separated for at least the prior twelve months, it is highly unlikely that even those who undertook court-ordered property settlements had recourse to the new act. Nevertheless, the economic situation that study participants were in was not the result of ignorance, instead many appeared keenly aware that full economic 'recovery' was an unrealistic goal, and that the abusive relationship had cost them dearly in terms of long-term financial security:

There needs to be a focus on other aspects of DV that discriminate against the victim long after the abuse.

¹⁷ Changes introduced in the Family Law Legislation Amendment (Superannuation) Act 2001 (which commenced on 28 December 2002) provide for the division of superannuation benefits either as agreement or on court order as part of property settlement after marital (but not de facto) breakdown.

Insurance companies can refuse to cover the victim. Job loss as a direct result of DV. (Questionnaire respondent, 43/7/4)

Despite my ongoing education... I will never actually achieve the same as I may have otherwise, in terms of security, superannuation, etc. (Uni, 34/6/6)

I missed out all round. I missed out on his super, his DFRB [he was a Warrant Officer in the army at the time] – all of that was not brought in – I got very little. (Gwynne, 74/26/27)

Furthermore, 80% of the participants had endured financial abuse¹⁸ during the abusive relationship, often resulting in an ignorance of basic money management, such as budgeting, that severely impacted on their financial stability for a considerable period of time post-relationship. For many of the women, this meant they had little experience of such basic economic issues as paying bills or balancing an account:

How do I even go to the bank and apply for a loan? Very scary. I mean, I never paid a bill, I didn't have my name on any account... didn't have anything to do – with any of that. So you virtually have to do – you're like a child and you're stumbling over everything trying to work out how to do it. (Samantha, 39/14/2)

He had complete control over the finances. It took me a long time... to learn how to handle my income because I didn't know, I had no experience. (Cyanne, 35/11/4)

It is impossible, however, to make a comprehensive presentation of the economic implications of an abusive relationship without making mention of the financial resiliency demonstrated by many DV survivors. Despite ongoing resentment regarding long-term fiscal damage and an awareness that their ex-partners have often arrived at a more advantageous outcome, the majority of study participants were able to balance this resentfulness with subsequent personal achievements. They were then able to translate this into both a sense of pride and financial optimism, unrelated to actual income, which provided the women with a feeling of empowerment:

It is difficult. After years of financial worries, this should have been the time that I began to reap the rewards [but] I do not feel [my] current financial position will be forever... and [now] simple pleasures invade my home and enrich my soul. My daughter asks her father (with his new wife in his \$1M mansion) if he has regrets (he has!) – she never asks me! (Dawn, 48/21/3)

I have been on a pension since the break-up and have learnt to budget, and to save, and have bought a sewing machine and an old car. I am so proud of myself. (Gypsy, 36/7/8)

Overall, few of the participants appeared to use their economic standing as a key measure of quality of life. Instead, a major shift for many was the move in perception from 'his' money to 'my' money. This shift had an overwhelmingly positive influence on the participants' long-term economic outlook, and was illustrated by a common preference to interpret financial status not in real, or

monetary terms, but rather in terms of freedom to use available funds:

There was a hundred thousand dollar income coming in from him...but if I wanted milk and bread, he'd give me \$3.50 to go down the milk bar. There were many times when I'd go and buy something and, um, he'd make me go and take them back. Whereas now, I do what I want to do – financially I'm, you know, better off in the sense that I can do things – like going out. (Samantha, 39/14/2)

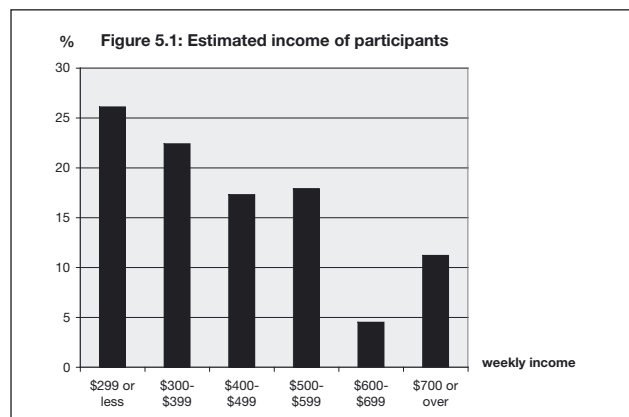
Although only having a pension... I express the feeling that I [am] better off to my friends. During my marriage... I had to resort to 'stealing' money from his pockets when he was asleep to avoid having to ask for more. He would make me account for the smallest item, & if I'd forgotten... I was in for a bad time. 'Stealing' made me feel so grubby. (Rose, 69/26/25)

5.3 (Un)employment and/or welfare dependency

In terms of individual economic effects, research offers evidence to support the fact that having or not having a job exerts a considerable influence, on self-worth as well as income, on the entire family of poor female single parents (Lloyd, 1997). Yet a number of studies have documented not only the negative influence of abusers on their partner's employment attempts (Allard, 1997; Coker et al., 2000; Raphael, 1995), but also the indirect barrier to job searching that exists due to subsequent health problems and psychiatric disorders caused by DV (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997). Furthermore, existing solely on Centrelink payments ensures that single parents in Australia are below the poverty line (ACOSS, 2001), with 57% of all poor households in Australia relying on government benefits as their main income source (Lloyd, Harding, & Greenwell, 2001).

Abused women are more likely than non-abused women to have a serious physical, mental or emotional disability and significantly more likely to have care of a child with an ongoing disability that limits their activities, all of which have an adverse affect on their ongoing employability (Raphael and Tolman, 1997) and overall economic stability. The situation is illustrated by Dawn, (48/21/3), who told how she had already spent \$20,000 on medical and psychological expenses since separation, and that she believed she would be spending "many more thousands on various repercussions that continue to affect me from time to time."

(n = 133)



¹⁸ Financial abuse describes a situation where one partner in a relationship maintains control over the finances and prevents the other from having ready access to available funds. This enables perpetrators to establish and sustain an unequal power balance that is exacerbated by the victim's gradual lack of faith in her own survival abilities.

Figure 5.1 provides an overall snapshot of the financial position of the 134 study participants post-separation¹⁹, with their average income calculating at the low side of \$400-\$499.00 per week for a female-headed, sole parent household with 2.2 children. With the Henderson Poverty Line assessing poverty at \$445.82 pw for an employed single parent with two children, and \$391.55 pw for a non-employed single parent with two children (*Poverty Lines*, 2001), this places many of the participants in a difficult economic position.

As it stands, their life-circumstances lead to many abused women being unable to sustain employment, although studies have found that they do indeed seek work on a regular basis (Raphael & Tolman, 1997). But the violence creates a very real barrier to sustained labour force participation, leading to reduced economic circumstances and a long-term cycle of reliance on welfare payments. In the words of two survivors some years after separation:

And the thing is that even if you're educated, or have a career to go back to, you're so emotionally abused that the kids – together... well, returning to full-time work [she grimaces and shakes her head]... (Tracey, 42/8/6)

I had no speech... lost all my reading and writing skills, the whole lot. It happened emotionally and physically as a result of the – abuse. I had to go to maths and redo that, um, still have problems twelve years later. (Dee, 49/13/14)

Another issue that has implications for financial independence is the fact that a considerable number of survivors have few, or outdated, qualifications and/or limited work experience. This is often because they are considerably more likely than never-abused women to have had a partner who discouraged attempts at employment and/or further education during their relationship (Raphael & Tolman, 1997). Within this study, 36% of the participants had been occupied with full-time home duties at the time of separation, thus making entry into the workforce even more problematic.

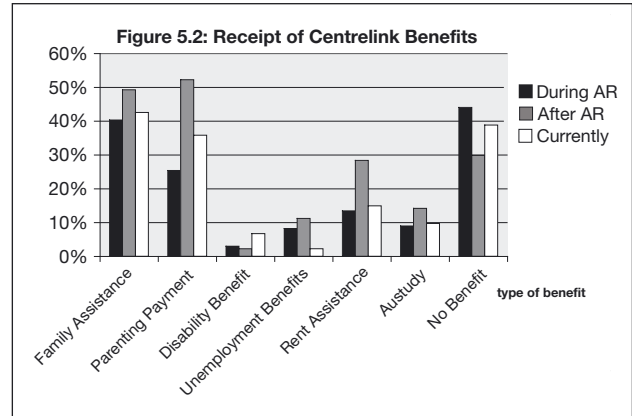
Thus, DV survivors are in a difficult economic position overall. A reliance on welfare equates to straitened economic circumstances and their abusive histories often inhibit their ability to enter the labour market. Moreover, several women who had approached Centrelink during the ending of the abusive relationship intimated that they found this to be a significantly shaming experience. The reason for this appeared to be not so much a result of treatment they may have received, but an internalised sense of the stigma associated with what they were going through:

I'd actually been to Centrelink to talk to them, you know, what do I do, where do I stand – but [what] scared me the most, was that I was going to be a single mum, a statistic, a woman standing at Centrelink in moccasins waiting for my payment. And, you know, being on a pension – I'd never been on a pension, unemployed, or anything else in my life, but it's a stigma attached with

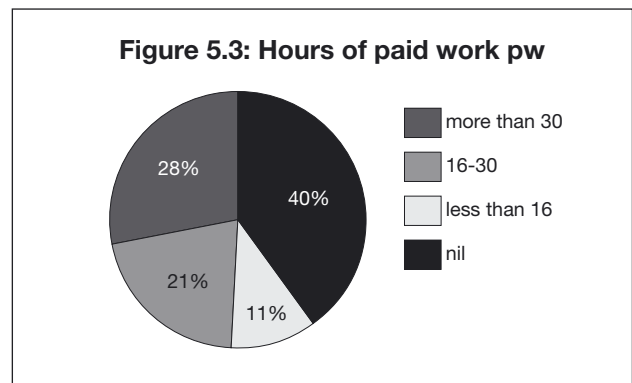
¹⁹ This estimate was performed by the participants as they were asked to place themselves within one of the stated income brackets. It must be noted, however, that this chart cannot be held to be truly representative of the full post-relationship economic journey of women, as it covers women who have been out of the abusive relationship for anything up to 35 years, together with women who may have separated only twelve months before. In addition, the participants were not asked to estimate their level of income during the abusive relationship, so it is impossible to chart actual economic growth or otherwise.

being a single mother. To me personally, it was very hard. (Samantha, 39/14/2)

Recent Australian research has indicated that the experience of physical violence in the past three years will increase a woman's chance of receiving some type of government benefit by 35% (Access Economics, 2004: 58). The following chart (Figure 5.2) demonstrates receipt of Centrelink benefits during and immediately after the abusive relationship as well as at the time of the study.



(n = 134)



(n=134)

The receipt of payments such as Family Assistance²⁰, parenting payment and rent assistance increase significantly post-separation, but decrease over time to a point that more closely resembles the pre-separation position (Figure 5.2). This suggests that survivors utilise the available financial support at the time of optimum vulnerability but, given sufficient time to re-establish themselves, are able to re-enter the workforce, thus reducing welfare dependency. The only benefit to increase rather than decrease over time was disability benefits, perhaps indicating that some repercussions of the abusive relationship are persistent or can take time to manifest themselves, and that these can adversely affect the survivor's long-term employment prospects.

Interestingly, a significant proportion (30%) of participants negotiated the move out of the abusive relationship without recourse to any social security benefits at all (Figure 5.2).

²⁰ Receipt of Family Assistance does not equate to a reliance on social security benefits per se. A level of Family Assistance may be received by a nuclear family with both parents working, meaning that the 'assistance' can be exactly that, rather than a benefit restricted to low-income and/or sole parent families.

In addition, the number of participants currently receiving no benefit at all is similar to the period of the relationship itself, suggesting that although DV presents as a drain on the national economy, it is a drain regardless of whether the relationship remains intact or not. The finding that a reliance on Centrelink was often a temporary situation was further supported by the fact that, at the time of the study, the majority of women were in paid employment of some kind (Figure 5.3).

It must be noted that the 40% who were undertaking no paid work also includes a significant proportion (33% of the participants overall) that were engaged in further education at the time of the study. It appears likely therefore that the vast majority of the women made considerable efforts over time to re-enter the workforce and that relatively few were content to remain reliant on Centrelink benefits:

Oh, wonderful, crucial thing – a job! The money!
(Elizabeth, 61/22/18)

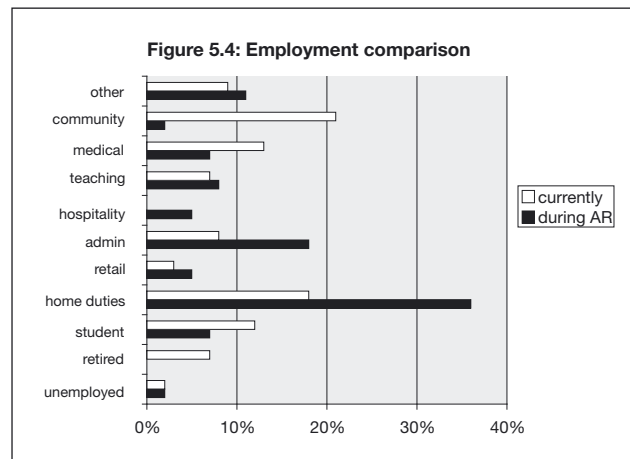
I have always wanted an antique writing desk, and now that I work as a nursing assistant (never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd have such a responsible job) I have been able to afford to buy one. [I found one] in a second hand shop, paid \$340- cash and loaded it into the back of my car. Oh, what a feeling.
(Susan, 51/21/13)

Both Elizabeth and Susan also illustrate the pride felt by many of the women who had rejoined the workforce after the abusive relationship had ended. This pride was amplified for those, like Susan, who had suffered past financial abuse. As well as pride and financial security, steady employment can also provide an extra avenue of support if abuse re-occurs.

Although few employed participants in this study divulged details of their abuse to employers during the abusive relationship, the majority (53%) were more forthcoming after the relationship had ended and found this quite worthwhile. This was evidenced by 79% of those who informed their employers of their circumstances finding through this revelation another avenue for support as they move away from the abusive relationship. Chelsea (46/18/11) illustrates this: "My employers at the school I worked, come holiday time, they'd give me a basket of food coz they knew how tough I was doing it." Apart from practical support such as this, employers can emerge as critical players within the lives of DV survivors, often identifying potential in the women and encouraging them to take on new challenges that ultimately increase their confidence (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999)

5.4 Shifts in education and employment

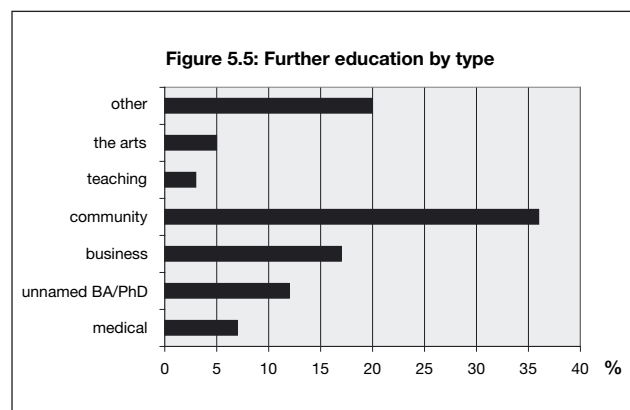
Many of the participants made conscious steps, once the abusive relationship was over, to increase their educational level and/or their employment options. As such, it is interesting to compare the employment undertaken during the abusive relationship and currently (Figure 5.4). Given time, it appears that most study participants were able to re-enter the labour force successfully. This concurs with findings indicating that women who have been recently abused have lower self-esteem, less sense of mastery and more emotional distress contributing to a lack of employability than women whose abuse occurred more than 12 months ago (Raphael & Tolman, 1997).



(n=132)

During the abusive relationship itself, a significant minority (36%) were employed on home duties (Figure 5.4). Of these women, 35% had moved from full-time home duties to employment within community services or support agencies after the abusive relationship. The rise in community-related employment was, in fact, the largest shift of employment that had occurred since the abusive relationship. With only 2% of participants employed in this field during the abusive relationship, and 21% currently, this represents a substantial increase. For most, this move was primarily the result of a desire to incorporate their experiences of abuse into their chosen field of employment.

The majority of the participants (74%) had either undertaken re-training of some type since the abusive relationship ended, or were currently engaged in an educational course at the time of this study. This re-training usually took the form of further education, leading to a marked change in employment options. A return to education for mature women often reflects more than simply promotional and/or enhanced employment prospects, but a desire for self-improvement and self-empowerment. As such, mature students often make informed choices about their studies from the vantage point of their own life situation, rather than from aspirations to join an elite or any particular consideration of the national economy (Peters, 2000). For many a return to education represents an attempt to redress both public and private power inequalities and regain control over their lives (Tett & Merrill, 2001).



(n=134)

A significant minority (36%) of participants who either had, or were currently, engaged in further education had chosen to concentrate their studies within community-related fields (Figure 5.5). These community-related fields ranged from social work to refuge work, and almost all were associated in some way with the area of DV. As with changes in employment, this appears to reflect a deliberate attempt by these women to validate what they had been through and subsequently extract something positive out of what was essentially a negative experience. This attitude is particularly interesting given the findings with regard to concentration camp survivors, that those who coped most successfully appear to make conscious efforts “to interpret their survival as a special obligation to give meaning to their lives” (Levine, 2001: 354). Similarly, many of the women described how they had used further education in an emancipatory sense, to bolster self-worth and garner a sense of achievement in the wake of the abusive relationship. Whilst in many cases the women envisaged increased employment opportunities as a result of their added qualifications, the main thrust behind their return to education appeared to be personal empowerment:

Motivation for resuming my education came from many directions ranging from survival to fancy. I needed to broaden my employment opportunities which had narrowed alarmingly during my marriage. I was unemployed at time of separation. Next, I wanted to do something to address the issues I had encountered during the early years of separation [and] I sought a diversion from the chaos and confusion enveloping me. (Dawn, 48/21/3)

I had deferred from a BA that I began the year I met my ex-partner. I went back in 2001, and have deferred again to do an advanced diploma of justice – justice as empowerment... (Anne Charles, 34/3/3)

It is clear that most of those women who had returned to further education had used the cessation of the abusive relationship to make significant life-changes. This may be a result of the hypothesis that women, while being as awed by authority as men, do not themselves identify with it as they see this authority as residing in men or bodies controlled by them. Therefore it is when the male authority in their daily lives suffers some crisis that they may turn to subjective knowledge for themselves and often, at this point, turn to education (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

With DV survivors, this crisis point is the cessation of the abusive relationship. It appears that the majority use this as an opportunity to make major alterations within their lives, and reinvent themselves through their qualifications. Regardless of the driving force behind this reinvention, it has the immensely positive benefit of not only equipping the survivor more ably for re-entry into the labour force, but of providing her with increased sense of self-worth and self-achievement. For many of the participants in this study this involved re-packaging their experiences and incorporating them into their lives in some ongoing way. By doing this, they were able to take charge of their own past and purposefully direct the repercussions into their future.

5.5 Housing insecurity

Historically, women have always been susceptible to homelessness, mainly due to their often dependent economic position within the household and their primary role of child-care (Nunan & Johns, 1996). This susceptibility is heightened after the dissolution of a violent marriage because spousal violence appears to play an important role in the division of property during settlement²¹. This situation has led to accommodation issues being a major factor in women’s decisions to leave a violent situation or even return to one (King, 2003). An estimated 94,400 people were homeless in 2002-03 in Australia as a result of DV (Access Economics, 2004: 55).

This situation is largely a result of a common scenario where the perpetrator of the violence remains in the marital home²², while the victim and the couple’s offspring are forced to seek alternative accommodation²³. The women in this study reflect this trend. Eighty percent have re-located at least once and 68% more than twice since the abusive relationship ended.²⁴ These multiple relocations are themselves detrimental economically to the survivors as they attempt to rebuild their lives.

When separating from an abusive relationship, the traditional accommodation option available is the refuge or shelter. However these services continue to be in high demand (WESNET, n.d.), and have only limited space available. Perhaps this is one reason why only 19% of the study participants used refuge accommodation upon leaving the abusive relationship. Others used a variety of accommodation options ranging from reliance on family and friends, to securing rental accommodation prior to separation. However, no matter what option taken, the women all faced a long road back:

It’s taken me... seven years to get to this point. At the beginning of this year, I was homeless. I was living at my daughter’s, at a friend’s, and then I put my name down with... housing and they said that I had to go under homelessness. Therefore I had to go out and live in a crummy, rotten flat in Fitzroy [a considerable distance away], that they supplied for me, to qualify. (Margaret, 60/6/7)

Margaret’s story typifies the current increase in demand for public housing. This demand has seen desperate women, like Margaret, faced with the necessity of moving out of familiar areas to secure public housing. This further isolates survivors at a time when family and friendship support networks are of vital importance (Nunan & Johns, 1996).

²¹ Discussed at more length in Section 4.

²² The first study of exclusion orders (a condition of an Apprehended Violence Order that prohibits the defendant from living in the premises, thereby ensuring that the abused woman and her children are able to remain in the family home), conducted in 2002, revealed that the courts’ response to a request for such an order often focuses on the property rights and accommodation needs of the male defendants, rather than the female victims (*Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse*, 2003: 6).

²³ Centrelink has recently established a scheme whereby violent males, if removed from the family home by police, can be eligible for a one-off \$200 crisis payment. The concept behind the scheme is to enable the victim to remain in the family home, rather than the perpetrator. This rather controversial scheme has been welcomed by some women’s groups as a pragmatic response to a problematic issue, although many fear that it could be seen as a reward for violence (Horin, 2005; Howden, 2005).

²⁴ Full breakdown was 20% having never relocated, 12% once only, 46% two-four times, and 22% more than five times.

CURRENT LIVING ARRANGEMENTS	LIVING ARRANGEMENTS DURING RELATIONSHIP				
	Own or purchasing	Private rental	Govt. rental	Other	Total currently
Own or purchasing	44	8	1	8	61
Private rental	20	15	5	6	46
Govt. rental	3	10	5	2	20
Other	3	2	1	1	7
TOTAL DURING AR	70	35	12	17	134

(n = 134)

*This table shows the distribution as well as the total. For example, there were 61 participants who, at the times of the study, either owned or were purchasing their home. By reading across the chart, it can also be seen that, of these 61, 44 either owned or were purchasing their home during the AR, 8 were renting privately, 1 was in government rental, and 8 classified themselves as 'other.'

Alternatives to public housing include private rental, however research indicates that there is widespread discrimination by real estate agents and landlords against female-headed households. Women escaping DV readily describe experiences of being judged, belittled, and actively discriminated against, particularly in areas where there is a high demand for private rental (King, 2003). Home ownership may be an option for some survivors but here too there appears to be particular gender-specific barriers for female-headed households. Affordability is naturally the major barrier, but this is often exacerbated by discrimination by financial and lending institutions (WESNET, n.d.).

Despite these barriers, the majority of participants in the current study were non-transient at the time of the study. A substantial minority had even secured finance for home purchase on their own merits.

Of the participants who held home ownership during the abusive relationship (70), 44 were currently in a similar situation, with another 17 having purchased a house since separation (Table 5.1). That is, 46% of the participants, at the time of the study, either owned or were purchasing their home in comparison to 52% during the abusive relationship. In terms of public housing, 12 participants had been in this form of accommodation during the abusive relationship compared with 20 currently, a small increase given the difficult circumstances at separation.

Nunan and Johns (1996) cite the eventual gaining of a home, rather than living accommodation, as perhaps one of the most important steps a woman can take after an abusive relationship. This is because the 'housed homelessness' of abused women often persists for years, with repeated physical, sexual and verbal abuse in the home rendering women homeless, regardless of whether or not they actually have a roof over their head. The continuing abuse results in negating feelings of control and security yet, when it comes to separation, sole occupancy orders are rarely awarded to women. Instead, it appears that while paramount consideration is given to the accommodation needs of all parties concerned, the greatest emphasis is placed on the needs, and perceived rights, of the perpetrator in this regard. This is despite the fact that female-headed households are among the most disadvantaged when it comes to securing appropriate alternative housing (Nunan & Johns, 1996).

5.6 Summary and recommendations

Research has indicated that increased levels of spousal violence are associated with economic disadvantage post-divorce for women, but not for men. This is not only due to the fact that divorced men are less likely to experience severe spousal violence and less likely to be resident parents, but also because they enjoy a stronger position in the market place overall with both greater overall income and earning capacity (Sheehan & Smyth, 2000). For women, however, the situation appears bleaker. They bear 50% of overall costs (Access Economics, 2004: vii), both direct and indirect, with a conservative annual cost of \$4,570 for anyone who has ever suffered DV in the past (2004: 71). Overall, as female DV survivors begin their post-relationship journey, they carry an emotional, physical and financial deficit that often places them and their children in a position of enduring disability (*The Financial and Economic Costs of Domestic Violence in the Northern Territory*, 1996: 51).

Furthermore, associated long-term costs of DV reverberate beyond the individual and throughout the community in terms of social welfare, the criminal justice system, social security, the refuge system, health care, employment, childcare, and housing (Godenzi & Yodanis, 1999), to name just a few. The most recent Australian study on the economic costs of DV made a conservative estimate of both tangible and intangible total lifetime costs of \$224,470 per victim (Access Economics, 2004: 71).

The findings of this study demonstrate how the financial impact of past DV can continue to affect survivors for a considerable period of time. This places such women in a position of long-term economic vulnerability that casts a shadow over the remainder of their lives. As a result of these findings, the following recommendations are postulated:

- That exclusion orders be given a greater profile within the community and that abused women be routinely informed of their existence when having contact with the police. The accommodation rights of the perpetrator should be subordinate to the best interests of the victim and the children. Whilst this is increasingly recognised in research and policy debate, and is available in practice, developing a comprehensive policy approach to ensure

consistency of practice should be given high priority as a matter of urgency. This would locate service responses to the safety needs of DV victims of within “a broader context of social justice, prevention of women’s homelessness, protection of children and making the violent party accountable” (Edwards, cited in *Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse*, 2003: 7).

- That Centrelink and other relevant funding programs and support services note the evidence of women survivors actively seeking further education and re-entry to employment, often at a greater skill level of employment than that prior to the relationship, and give consideration to targeted support for women to gain access to further education and training.

6 Child support: receipt of child support and experiences with the Child Support Agency (CSA)

I didn't get any maintenance. I told them I was getting maintenance but I didn't. My husband jumped the fence where I was living and held something to my back, I don't know what it was and I had no witnesses to say anything, but he told me if I continued to fight, at that stage for maintenance or property, he'd kill me. I lost \$132 a fortnight off my pension, but I just went and got another part-time job.
(Chelsea, 46/18/11)

6.1 – Key findings

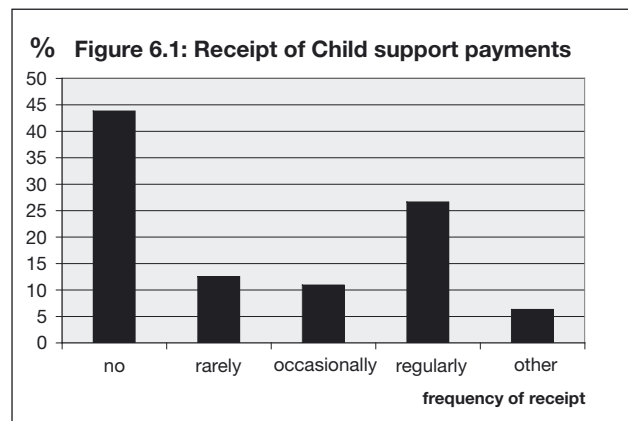
- The receipt of child support remains a major post-separation issue for DV survivors. The vast majority of study participants did not receive regular child support, with many perpetrators going to extreme lengths to avoid payment.
- Overall, it appears likely that the Child Support Scheme is falling far short of its intention to alleviate the poverty of sole parent families, particularly where those families have an abusive background. Instead, many DV survivors perceive the CSA as an ineffective tool that actually made their situations more problematic.
- Of major concern is the strong likelihood that a significant number of women have made a conscious decision not to enforce assessments due predominantly to either fear of ongoing contact or associated repercussions. Nevertheless, as they claim successful receipt, they exist amongst the CSA statistics as positive outcomes rather than what they really are – victims of ongoing abuse.

6.2 – The Child Support Agency (CSA)

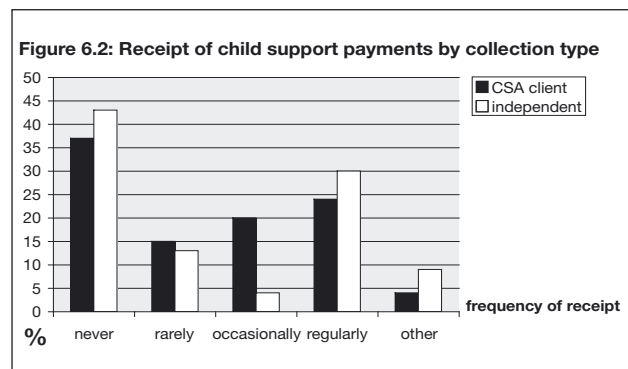
The Australian Federal Government established the CSA in 1988 to “administer the Child Support Scheme and to help separated parents take responsibility for the financial support of their children” (CSA Australia, n.d.). One of the main purposes of the CSA is to remove the requirement for custodial parents to negotiate child maintenance themselves while the Child Support Scheme aims to strike: “a fairer balance between public and private forms of support [for children] to alleviate the poverty of sole parent families and to achieve some constraint on Government outlays on sole parent payments” (Child Support, 1986: 14). It is difficult to know how the Government prioritised these aims, but certainly that of alleviating the poverty of sole parent families appears to have been the most difficult to achieve. The recently released Federal Government child support study (*Every picture tells a story*, 2003) based its findings on statistics showing that, of the 597,000 families who had a child with a natural parent living elsewhere, 41% received no child support, 42.3% received cash child

support of some amount, and a further 16.3% received only in-kind child support. Non-government research paints an even more disturbing picture. An Australian Institute of Family Studies report quoted ABS figures of a total of 978,400 children with a non-resident natural parent (ABS, 1999) and, of these, 56% received no child support at all (Weston & Smyth, 2000).

Whatever the actual figure, results from this study indicate that statistics taken from CSA sources should be treated with some caution. Over 50% of the participants were in a position where an amount of child support should form part of their income, and Figure 6.1 below²⁵ demonstrates whether this was in fact the case.



(n = 77)



(n: 69)

As can be seen above, only 50% of eligible participants were receiving child support, including those receiving it irregularly, and 44% were not receiving any at all. The situation is even bleaker when taking into account only those who receive child support on a regular basis, thus allowing them to use it as part of their fixed budget. Only 22% of the women in this study with dependent children fell

²⁵ There is a distinct possibility that several participants, whose children are now adults, also form part of these calculations as several questionnaire respondents completed this section with notations such as ‘he never did’.

into this category, so almost 80% were *not* receiving fixed and frequent child support capable of offsetting their weekly expenditure. It must also be noted that several participants who had used the CSA to achieve regular child support were actually receiving sums that were relatively negligible with, for instance, seven women commenting that they were receiving CSA-assessed support of less than \$10.00 per week²⁶.

Sixty-four percent of participants with dependent children were under the CSA umbrella and Figure 6.2 shows this made little difference to collection rates. While regular support was marginally more likely without CSA involvement, the chances of receiving no support at all were increased when the women were operating independently (Figure 6.2). The most remarkable difference appears in the receipt of irregular support, with substantially more women receiving occasional maintenance when utilising CSA services. Overall, however, there appears to be little significant variations between the CSA and independent operation, with 63% of relevant participants successful at receiving support of any kind via the CSA and 57% successful by independent means.

6.3 Ongoing contact via the CSA and child support

Research has indicated that, with regard to DV situations, the collection of forced child support has the potential to re-involve a perpetrator with the family, which may hamper the process of rebuilding their lives. This involvement can lead to a reactivation of abuse, renewed access, or even custody awards, which can put the women and children at further risk of violence. In turn, such re-victimisation can interfere with the survivor's ability to remain employed or seek further education, thus causing renewed periods of welfare dependence. (Raphael & Tolman, 1997).

Similarly, several participants in this study spoke about their dissatisfaction with a system that encouraged ongoing contact by attempting to ensure that perpetrators fulfil their financial obligations to their children. Whilst the women agreed that a successful result would be advantageous to their overall financial situation, in practice the involvement of the CSA did little except guarantee that the perpetrator remained part of their lives whether they wished this or not:

I wouldn't want his money if he didn't see him! If he walked away, I wouldn't want his money! They should go in and say: "Okay, if you don't see your kid – you don't have to pay child support," and see how many genuine ones there actually are. (Leanne, 32/9/4, whose eight-year old son reportedly does not wish to see his violent father)

Several participants spoke of experiencing this situation to such a degree that they eventually supplied the CSA with misinformation about money received in order to minimise ongoing contact with the perpetrator. Other women used this as the reason that they did not want to become involved with the CSA in the first place. The general consensus of all of these women was that, although any amount of child support would relieve ongoing financial pressures, it simply was not worth it:

I did not want any support, as it would give him an excuse to continue the manipulation and intimidation. (Reagan, 52/27/2)

I know women who absolutely refuse – they'd rather live without any amount of support they'd get, than have that (ongoing manipulation) hanging over their heads. They're much happier without it. There's a price to pay! (Esmeralda, 38/9/7)

I recently signed consent orders to waive the [perpetrator's] \$20,000 child support debt both to stop him claiming from me and the court would've waived the debt anyway. Now I need have nothing to do with him unless there is a crisis with one of the boys. (Sweet, 43/12/6)

In Sweet's case, fear of contact with the perpetrator had led directly to a reduction in support payments that, as they were seldom paid anyway, had accrued into a considerable debt. However, rather than eventually claim the money as a means of offsetting the cost of child-rearing, Sweet eventually waived the debt to avoid ongoing contact in any form.

Another issue raised by several women was their resentment concerning the necessity for them to provide personal financial details, which were then provided to their ex-partners as a practice of the CSA. This situation was occurring whether the ex-partner was complying with maintenance orders or not, or even if contact had not occurred for some time. These women saw this as enforced contact, and resented providing the perpetrator with his victim's financial circumstances, and their fluctuations, throughout the childhood of the offspring:

I have a CSA assessment, which never gets collected, or acted on, or checked. I resent having to provide HIM with my assets and liabilities, my credit card debt and how much I spend on food to get an effective assessment. That's none of his business, we've been divorced for 7 years! (Terri, 29/4/7)

6.4 Strategies used by perpetrators to minimise payments

Whilst the CSA does not replicate the adversarial nature of the abusive relationship in as overt a manner as the legal system, it nevertheless contains the potential to locate the ongoing maintenance of children within an oppositional framework. This was evidenced by the commonly held perception within this study that perpetrators perceived child support payments as a competition between them and the survivors, or between them and the CSA, and were particularly proud whenever they had a 'win'. Many women found that their ex-partner took a sense of pride from manipulating the CSA and used any successes as an avenue of further control:

[I] have found his avenues for avoidance have been unimaginable. This has resulted in severe financial difficulties for both the children and myself, and a sense of power for the father. (Uni, 34/6/6)

Mine put the business in his wife's name. Still worked. And do you think Child Support would listen? (Dee, 49/13/14)

He simply has never paid, but claims the dole and does cash jobs. I'm angry about this, and think much more

²⁶ It is impossible to know exactly how many women were in this situation as the information came from extra notations that the women included on their questionnaires, and not an actual question itself.

should be done to deal with these deadbeat Dads to face up to their responsibilities. (Gypsy, 36/7/8)

As with Gypsy, one strategy used by men avoiding child support was voluntary unemployment. Although this was not a specific question asked, seven participants mentioned that their ex-partners had resorted to this avenue to avoid CSA assessment and/or enforcement:

You find a lot of the men from domestic violence don't pay maintenance, they'd rather be unemployed. Mine is still unemployed. And they tell the children 'I don't pay maintenance because your Mum would spend it all.' That's the reason they give. (Tracey, 42/8/6)

His unemployment is currently paying off his \$6000 CSA debt, since his voluntary unemployment after employer garnished his wages two years ago. His current assessment by CSA is \$0 a month. (Uni, 34/6/6)

He left his job to be spiteful as soon as child support linked up. [Now] when he does work, he manages to do it undetected. (Questionnaire respondent, 36/11/8)

The overall situation is aggravated for women who receive little or no child support payments, yet still must present their children for access when they live a considerable distance from the perpetrator²⁷. One interview participant in this position estimated her yearly access costs at approximately \$500.00, none of which was offset by maintenance payments as her ex-husband had taken voluntary unemployment and now worked only for 'cash under the table'. These costs included obvious items such as petrol, as well as less apparent ones such as mobile phone charges to ensure that the children could communicate if distressed.

Another method of avoiding child support payments that was used by perpetrators in this study involved the threat to seek either full or shared custody if survivors insisted on receipt of child support. This often resulted in a reduction in child support as the resident mother, through fear of consequences, ceased CSA or individual negotiations. For at least three study participants, however, this also resulted in their ex-partners following through with threats to contest for shared custody of the children:

He's actually trying now... because child maintenance – he was giving me \$6.00 a week for three kids. Self-employed builder. And it's been, as I said, three years so I took him back to child maintenance. So now he's meant to pay \$740.00 a month. So now his little thing is that he's going for half-custody of the kids. Yeah! So he thinks he can get out of it! (Liz, 43/15/3)

[He] knew exactly what he was doing and he was so cocky that sometimes he would tell me about it! His goal was to get custody of my youngest so he could stay on the pension. Drugs ended up bringing him undone in the end and he never bothered with the child after he lost that battle. (Sweet, 43/12/6)

As mentioned earlier, several women had supplied misinformation to the CSA to avoid ongoing contact with the perpetrator. This was also a course of action taken by women when they were under overt physical threat from the perpetrator to do so:

For years [I allowed] him to pay less than the CSA assessment said he should, and because I collected privately then, the CSA didn't know I was letting him get away with substandard payments. I dared not insist the CSA collect as that would have riled him and increased my danger during child handover. (Helen, 49/5/3)

He did [pay child support] until I got onto the pension but then it just petered out... and he said that if I took him to court and, um, tried to make anything official, that he'd have me shot. (Mary, 65/24/21)

Chelsea, who freely admitted having given the CSA false information under duress from her ex-husband, explained how he made up a list of items that he gave the children, such as haircuts, school-fees etc, when in fact he had never contributed any money at all. Chelsea supported this fiction through fear, even though at several stages she was forced to approach the Salvation Army for food:

It took me a lot to go to Salvation Army and say "can I have some food?" Because it's really demeaning. I felt terrible, I felt like I'd really let my boys down – and that I'm taking food off someone who really needs it. Yet we were destitute. (Chelsea, 46/18/11)

Whether women such as Chelsea mislead the CSA through a desire to avoid ongoing contact or simply through fear of the consequences, this situation leads to the CSA treating such survivors as 'success stories' when, in fact, the opposite is the case. It is highly likely that this situation is also the reason why CSA figures are routinely higher, with regard to successful receipt of child support, than those drawn from non-government sources. To have this situation exist, hidden amongst the statistics, is a serious indictment on the present system in general.

6.5 Perceptions of the 'bureaucracy'

For those study participants who were relying on social security benefits, the reality was that receipt of child support made little practical difference to their economic vulnerability, as a significant portion of money received served to reduce their pension/benefit.²⁸ It appears, then, that while successful collection of child support goes some way towards containing Government expenditure, it provides little real support for the women and their children (Weston & Smyth, 2000). This situation was reflected in many of the study participants maintaining a strong belief that the 'system' overall is more about issues such as lowering parenting payments, than about any real assistance for custodial parents. This belief, coupled with the success of the perpetrator's manipulative tactics, led to many participants experiencing extreme frustration:

I think everyone's missing the plot when it comes to child support. It's not about US – it's for the kids! THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT! (Liz, 43/15/3)

The majority of interviewees expressed a considerable lack of faith and cynicism in the present system overall, perceiving both the CSA and Centrelink as adversarial bureaucracies, rather than supportive organisations:

I'm in debt. I've had the children and, um, when I went to work and paid tax and I should have got a big return, they took it. They take it straight out of your tax

²⁷ Several of the women interviewed had deliberately moved a considerable distance from the perpetrator after separation to minimise unplanned or random contact.

²⁸ When a single parent relies on parenting payments from Centrelink, a percentage of monies received from child support via the Child Support Agency is used to offset government outlay.

return. Coz they're all connected. And I got a phone-call just very recently and they said 'I was just going through your stuff and do you realise that you've got this debt to the Commonwealth and it's accrued interest? And I said: 'Look – I've gone in and tried to sort it out. But it's so complicated.' (Jeanie, 55/14/12)

I'd like to see them [the CSA] talk more to family and friends who knew [the perpetrator] – because I told them lies, so that they wouldn't aggravate [him]. They've got to go a little wider to see, because there's a lot of women out there doing it really tough on very little money. (Chelsea, 46/18/11)

Ridiculous! The system is screwed up. (Solva, 56/12/12)

6.6 Positive aspects of the CSA

As already discussed, a significant proportion (36%) of the participants had chosen not to use the CSA, preferring instead to handle matters themselves, with several stating a minimisation of ongoing contact and/or fear of the perpetrator as their reason. However several women also cited their CSA experience as positive for the same reasons, as once they handed the responsibility for collecting child support over to the agency, they were able to actually reduce contact and increase safety:

My ex was one of those who was inflamed at the thought of giving me money. He even compared the children with the family dog, still living with him. When he demanded that I should give him money to support the dog, I offered to take her off his hands – he declined!! After I was assaulted on my front lawn over a maintenance issue, I requested Child Support Agency to direct debit his invalid pension – problem solved. (Cyanne, 35/11/4)

In the same way, Solva discussed how the perpetrator's abuse and threats had increased when she decided to shift the support collection to the CSA, but then decreased as his wages became automatically garnered and she no longer had any direct financial contact with him. Three other participants described another positive aspect of the CSA: if the payments were handled by the agency, they were more likely to receive at least some financial assistance, however small:

I applied for child support for my 4 kids, who were 15, 13, 10 & 8 years of age at the time. I received nothing until the legislation changed six months before my youngest turned 18. My husband was on a disability pension most of his life. So, I was supposed to receive \$2.50 per week, but it had to be shared with another child he had since our relationship... \$1.25 per week for 6 months. (Susan, 51/21/13)

6.7 Summary and recommendations

The previous section of this report, 'Financial wellbeing', discussed how the average participant in this study had an income that skated along the poverty line and a range of negative financial repercussions stemming from the abusive relationship. For over 50% of the participants in this study, financial issues were made even more problematic by ongoing care of children, some of whom had special needs.

The long-term economic impacts of this situation are highlighted when the costs of raising two Australian children is taken into consideration. These costs represent 23% of the average gross family income over time, and average out at \$448,000 from birth to age 20 (Percival & Harding, 2003). The economic pressure during the childhood of offspring has an obvious detrimental effect on future financial stability (such as retirement savings or home ownership). For the majority of the participants in this study these costs were not offset by regular child support, thus increasing, even further, long-term economic vulnerability. Therefore, for such women, it is actually impossible to fully 'recover' financially, with the costs of raising children likely to continue to impact long after the children have become adults. On the basis of this, the following recommendations are put forward:

- That the Child Support Agency (CSA) should commission independent studies of
 - the incidence of manipulation and ongoing abuse related to or resulting from the practice of routinely providing former partners with details of the personal financial income and expenditure of women with resident and dependent children.
 - the potential benefit of developing tools or methods to enable collation of evidence of ongoing financial, emotional or threatened abuse between separated partners, to provide a case based approach to counselling and mediation for partners, and to provide the option of waiver of parental responsibilities contingent upon waiver of child support, for either a defined period or permanently.
 - the extent to which battered women feel compelled to falsely claim receipt of child support in response to intimidation from, or to avoid contact with, abusive ex-partners. Curtailing government expenditure should not be accomplished at the expense of an at-risk woman who has been threatened by criminal behaviour.

7 Parenting: The repercussions of domestic violence on the parenting of both survivors and perpetrators

After separation I thought that things would settle. But the children... took it in turns being Daddy and re-enacting his role. [They] tend to reiterate the Put Downs that their Dad had used on me during the relationship – This can be quite hurtful when it comes from them... sometimes I get so overwhelmed I can lock myself in my bedroom [and] I feel so low that I wonder how I am ever going to go on. (Cyanne, 35/11/4)

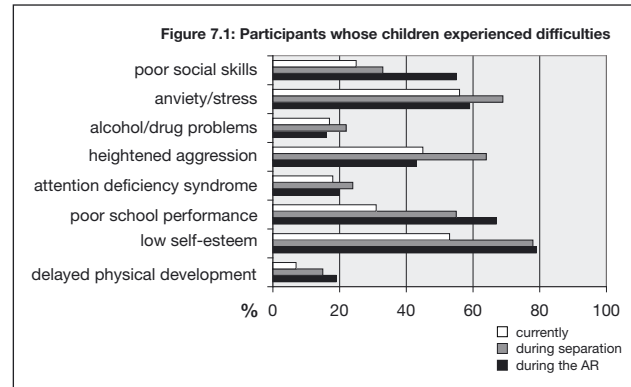
7.1 Key findings

- Effective parenting is a major post-relationship issue for the majority of DV survivors, and for good reason. Ongoing contact, via child access, often acts as a conduit for the continuation of the abusive relationship itself, with ongoing manipulation and hostility hampering survivor's efforts to move away and rebuild.
- The parenting relationship post-separation can enable an abusive former partner to continue to undermine the survivor's own parenting. This situation can lead to an ongoing investment of time, money and emotion. Coping with their children's problems also creates a range of difficulties, which in turn impact on the survivors' ability to parent effectively, creating a catch-22 with potentially serious, and ongoing, consequences.
- As a result, the majority of participants in this study felt that ongoing contact was inappropriate, and often dangerous. Nevertheless, the women indicated that ideally they would prefer contact to continue, but only if safeguards, such as supervision and compulsory parenting courses, were put in place to ensure emotional and physical safety for all concerned. Without such safeguards, there was widespread concern regarding the wellbeing of children, and that the perpetrator's ongoing influence could lead to long-term, and permanent, damage.

7.2 Long-term damage to children

Increasing evidence has emerged, particularly in the past two decades, of the range of child-related repercussions of exposure to DV, such as lowered self-esteem and social competence, depression and a variety of behavioural problems (Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987; Mertin, 1995). Through services such as remedial education, childcare, juvenile delinquency and child protection services, second generation costs of DV are estimated to cost the Australian economy \$220.3 million dollars annually (Access Economics, 2004: 47).

Within this study, the highly charged nature of interview discussions regarding children demonstrated the profound impact of the abuse. This in turn had severe consequences



(n=101)

for the mothers, the majority of whom had retained primary care of the children after the abusive relationship ended.

Figure 7.1²⁹ shows that, for most of the conditions experienced, the extent of difficulties experienced by children, as described by the mothers, declines significantly after the abusive relationship ends. Some issues, such as anxiety/stress and heightened aggression, worsened immediately after separation at a time of greater adjustment and associated stress but have now reduced. Not included in Figure 7.1 were the eight children who were deceased at the time of the study³⁰. Three women also noted on their questionnaires that their child was currently suicidal and another participant spoke of her son's prior suicide attempts. This concurs with research findings that indicate suicidal behaviour is related to childhood experiences of abuse (Hamid Maker, Kemmelmeier, & Peterson, 1998).

Other additional information provided by questionnaire respondents included one child named as manic-depressive, two with eating disorders, and a further four with unnamed mental disorders. These examples may indicate serious repercussions suffered by children who have been exposed to DV. This was further illustrated within the interviews, where participants identified a myriad of longitudinal effects:

I think she has a cellular memory of it [the abuse]. She sees a psychologist & suffers from anxiety & a little obsessive/compulsiveness. She also suffers from eczema, asthma & anaphylactic hypersensitivity & night terrors. She didn't walk until 20 months & is behind in her gross motor skills. (Anne Charles, 34/3/3)

My daughter gets headaches. Continual stomach trouble, she's gone for a scan... she vomits, she's sick all the – and we've done everything – she's diagnosed

²⁹ Note that figure 7.1 does not show the percentage of children who experienced difficulties, but the percentage of participants who had children with past or ongoing difficulties.

³⁰ Whilst this was not a question asked in either the questionnaire or the interviews, several participants included such additional information so this number may be conservative. Cause of death for these eight children were two suicides, two overdoses, and four by causes not stated (two of these as infants).

with irritable bowel but the tablets that are supposed to work on her have no effect. (Tracey, 42/8/6)

They all have low self esteem. He was always telling them they were stupid. Consequently, they never reached full potential at school. My 2nd son has a problem with alcohol. This has affected his relationships – one marriage and one de facto. He [has] a very menial job, refusing offers of promotion because of low confidence. (Rose, 69/26/25)

7.3 Inter-generational transmission

The most significant long-term concern of the participants with regard to children was the possibility of intergenerational transfer of abusive behaviour. Current research indicates that these concerns are not wholly unfounded. Whilst the majority of children who have been exposed to DV do not participate in further violence, some estimates put the extent of intergenerational transmission, as either an offender or a victim, at around 30-37% (Kovacs & Tomison, 2003). It is interesting, therefore, to note that the vast majority of the study participants appeared to have taken determined steps to attempt to 'inoculate' their children against this occurring. They did this principally by open discussion regarding the dynamics of abuse and the characteristics of abusers. In several cases, this strategy appeared to pay dividends as the children used the example set before them by the perpetrator to consciously avoid following the same path:

I feared that my son might turn out like him – in the beginning he was in his father's image. But [he] doesn't like seeing his father in himself and I am very proud of him. (Dawn, 48/21/3)

However, 33% of the interview participants described the realisation of their fears that their children would in fact model themselves on the perpetrator's behaviour rather than the reverse. These women described excessively aggressive behaviour amongst their children, and the use of manipulation and control within relationships:

My 17 yr old daughter is quite manipulative and extremely bossy in her relationships. She seems to have learnt a number of survival skills during her childhood & although they are no longer needed she still uses them. My 14 year old boy feels that he has no choice but to be like his father & although he has done some anger management, as he gets stronger he gets more uncontrollable within himself. (Cyanne, 35/11/4)

Suicide attempts, criminal activity, incarceration, conduct disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, bed-wetting, mental illness, psychosis, fear and panic attacks ... my second son threatened to stab me. (Questionnaire respondent, 36/11/7)

My eldest daughter has behavioural problems – a violent temper, & can be very cruel, so I've had to get her mental health counselling. I worry that my daughters will pick abusive men, but hope I've broken the pattern in our family. (Gypsy, 36/7/8)

Gypsy's response also illustrated a common perception amongst the participants that their sons were more at risk of becoming perpetrators than their daughters, who were viewed as more likely to become victims. Ironically, their narratives indicated that the majority of the children who were continuing a pattern of abuse appeared to be doing

so in the role of the perpetrator and not the victim, regardless of their gender. For example, Gypsy stated that she worked hard to teach her daughters to "stand up for themselves" and fails to consider the possibility that her daughter, with a 'violent temper', appears to be modelling her behaviour after her father rather than her mother.

7.4 Child contact and visitation

One of the most significant aspects of DV as a crime is the ready acceptance that most victims must be prepared to have some form of ongoing contact with the perpetrator for a varying period of time. Whilst the occasional public uproar is heard over the legal requirement for victims of other crimes to face their perpetrators even briefly, the ongoing contact between former partners of an abusive relationship is both legally and socially sanctioned and rarely supervised by authorities. Such acceptance challenges the location of DV within a framework of criminality, hampers attempts to improve community understanding, and actively works to negate the perpetrator's overall culpability. Ongoing contact exacerbates existing damage to the survivor, and creates the potential for continuing trauma that works directly against efforts to rebuild. Instead, survivors are often in a position where they must re-negotiate boundaries against stiff and aggressive opposition whilst they construct their new lives around the reality of ongoing contact and its long-term repercussions:

It was, um, the more rules that were there, the more games that would be played. He'd be late, he'd be early, swapping weekends, playing games... okay, fix times, say I'll be an hour late, then ring and say 'guess what?' It never stopped. (Donna, 49/13/14)

The most common reason for ongoing contact between former partners is the widespread and legally sanctioned recognition that children have a right to know their fathers and vice versa. Yet the past two decades have brought increasing evidence of the diverse range of repercussions that exposure to DV can have on children. In fact, a history of DV is the single most significant difference between delinquent and non-delinquent youth (Volpe, 2002) and, after separation, ongoing contact may well move children from the periphery of the violence to the centre (Laing, 2000a; Peled, 1997).

Over half of the participants (53%) with dependent children were, at the time of the study, having continued contact with the perpetrator due to the requirements of child visitation³¹. Furthermore, despite research showing that the past behaviour of perpetrators is indicative of their likelihood to continue behaving in a hostile manner (Saunders, 1998), and numerous studies having stressed the importance of supervised access in the case of abusive fathers (for example, Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Fleury et al, 2000; Kaye et al., 2003; Rathus et al, 2001; Saunders, 1998; Wyndham, 1998), only 2% of these dependent children had supervised access arrangements in place.

In addition, it was found that a number of women (eight) indicated a belief that their ex-partners had committed either paedophilia and/or incestuous behaviour. Despite this question not being specifically asked either during the questionnaire or the interview process, sufficient information

³¹ See Figure 4.1 (page 20) for a breakdown of current access arrangements.

was volunteered by study participants to suggest that at least 6% of former partners were perpetrators. In these cases, two had been charged (both with paedophilia, with one currently serving jail-time), and in three further cases child access had been officially adjusted due to alleged incestuous behaviour. In one other case the woman was refusing access despite Family Court orders to the contrary and did not fear prosecution as she considered the perpetrator knew “he was guilty.”

7.5 Child contact used as control

Responses from the interviewees made it clear that the vast majority who were involved with ongoing contact arrangements also had ongoing issues as a result. Many spoke of their bitterness that they were always left to “pick up the pieces” with no end in sight or commented that the necessity of coping with the children’s psychological difficulties meant that they were obliged to neglect their own healing efforts:

The damage he’s done in the last three years to the children has been quite profound. Everything he can’t have control over, he’ll undermine – “your Mum’s done this wrong, your Mum’s doing that wrong.” Two different categories though – my recovery and the children’s recovery. Very different. So just when I think everything’s going fine, something’ll happen with the children because of an access visit or whatever – and that’ll bring me straight back into dealing with the power struggle – and all that sort of stuff. (Samantha, 39/14/2)

My kids were 18 and 16 when I told their father to leave. They were used as pawns, seduced with gifts and holidays. They would return home shouting lies and accusations that hurt deeply. I was deemed responsible for all the grief that had ever befallen the family. Eventually they followed their father and I was left alone with my dog. (Dawn, 48/21/3)

Both Samantha and Dawn also illustrate a common awareness regarding the perpetrator’s use of contact as a further control tactic. The participants recognised the manipulative and/or hostile behaviour of their ex-partners and many were especially bitter regarding the subsequent use of the children as tactical tools. They saw this as the perpetrator casually ‘flexing his muscle’ in an overt sense, such as insults and violence, and in covert manoeuvres, such as influencing a variety of small issues that impacted on the survivor’s lifestyle. This situation was epitomised by, for at least six women, their children’s hair becoming a symbolic battleground for ongoing control. Two of these women had their children returned after contact visits with their hair substantially trimmed by the perpetrator’s new partner (at his request), while another had his head completely shaved by his father. A young girl whose long red, curly hair was cut short during visitation sat in the back seat of the car after being collected, with her mother staring straight ahead so that the child would not see how her “tears just streamed.”

For the survivor, the continual and stressful nature of issues such as these can severely undermine the rebuilding process. This ongoing manipulation cannot be framed by concepts of ‘recovery’, which are insufficiently flexible to accommodate the ongoing recurrence of the associated long-term effects. The following excerpt from a group interview illustrates the situation:

Liz (43/15/3): *So Wednesday night he drops the kids off, and my partner now, he was there. And it was on! For young and old! Shit – my kids are out the front – thank god they didn’t hit each other. But what it was over was the holidays. He’s meant to be having half-custody of the kids on the holidays, you know as they do. The stupid things they have. And I put in my two weeks holiday and he said due to the circumstances of me not agreeing to the kids going to him [the perpetrator is currently pursuing full-time shared residence], I’m not having them!*

Ilisa (researcher): *You’re not having them or he’s not having them?*

Liz: *He’s not having them! So my partner now, he says ‘oh, you’re a bloody wanker.’ And, oh, poor kids – they saw it all. They had friends – and now their friends at school know it all. That this happened. And I called the police. That’s how scared I was.*

Ilisa: *So are you still scared of him?*

Liz: *Absolutely. No-one understands that. The power!*

Marge (40/4/3): *What they do to you...*

Solva (56/12/12): *Yes, that one I did work out. It was funny, the slightest thing – driving the kids over for access and waiting in the car for ages but he wasn’t there. Or not feeding them when he has them for an evening.*

Ilisa to Liz, who is nodding emphatically: *Are you finding that now as well?*

Liz: *I’m just finding that the set-up – he’s manipulating the kids.*

Solva: *Mine was two or three days for the kids – just that initial coldness until five minutes down the road – and it’d take two or three days at least before they’d start to bounce back again.*

Several participants spoke of having to live with a continuing, and very real fear regarding the perpetrator’s access to the children. As described in Section 6, a few had taken the extreme step of uprooting themselves and their children and disappearing. Other women took deliberate steps designed to both minimise risks to their children’s safety and alleviate their sense of fear during access:

I tell him under no circumstances [to show any aggression at his father’s house] – you’ve seen what he’s capable of. I don’t want you to get hurt. (Leanne, 32/9/4)

The boys had to be “briefed” on their safety every visit they have with their father... emergency numbers in their shoes, change for telephone booths, “procedures” to follow if their Dad tried to take them away. (Yeppoon, 46/18/5)

One woman described this issue as a balancing act between concerns for her children during access and the “possible consequences on their safety” should she attempt to reduce contact without the perpetrator’s consent. Nevertheless, several women felt that maintaining the

relationship between the perpetrator and the children was of more importance than the risk that access provided:

Do you know, I think you can't win? The rejection would be the biggest thing. If you take a child away from their father – he's still their father – no matter what condition. (Dee, 49/13/14)

7.6 Without access/contact

Several of the participants, through changes in circumstances, were in a position to compare the behaviour of children who had access to an abusive parent, and those who didn't. All of these women claimed that there was a substantial difference between the children, with those who had had more exposure to the perpetrator displaying more negative characteristics than those who hadn't:

My youngest rarely saw his father and has a totally different disposition to the other two. The difference is phenomenal! (Sweet, 43/12/6)

This is a finding backed by research (Church, 1984) demonstrating that children who recover most rapidly after separation were those who had no further contact with their violent fathers. Other responses from this study indicate that the situation may not be so clear-cut. Several women whose children no longer had contact spoke of how this situation impacted on their ongoing self-esteem as many felt 'rejected' by their fathers. This appeared to be especially relevant when the child was a boy, and placed the women in an un-winnable position:

I know that the boys are far better off away from their father – but this is not something they appreciate. The violence is what drove us away and it makes it hard for me to support my children having a positive yet realistic image with their ONLY father. It took five years for the boys to go to Australia. So for five years they could imagine their father as being wonderful and me being the 'bad' cop for taking them away. Now my eldest son in particular is clear about his father's shortcomings – but nothing and no-one can step in and fill a huge gap. I am not sure what I would have done differently – as I could not let the boys go over to their father on their own with huge safety concerns. This part sucks too. Like being called irrational for trying to do the right and best things for your children. Sometimes we just do our best. (Yeppoon, 46/18/5)

Yeppoon also demonstrated the friction many of the participants felt between doing what they felt was theoretically right by the children, compared with the practical results of lack of access with their fathers. This friction was also evident when the interview participants were asked whether, if it had been up to them, access would have continued. Whilst the clear majority (83%) stated that they would have stopped access if they had had the choice, they also appeared well aware of the possible repercussions of this regarding their children's sense of self-worth. However they felt that this was outweighed by the harm the perpetrator was causing via ongoing access:

My daughter has zero contact now, and is very glad about it. When access was occurring he turned her against me and made her a conduit for his abuse. She'd come home spouting all the derogatory things he used to say to me. All they did each weekend was discuss how terrible I was. Handling this vituperation required

extraordinary amounts of parenting skill [and] energy. While it lasted, access exacerbated the negative effects on my child (she had 5 years of access). Zero contact is BLISS. (Helen, 49/5/3)³²

It's positive to my kids because he can do no more damage, but it's negative that they don't have 2 parents [but] I'm glad he gets no access, he's a dangerous man, I wouldn't have it any other way. (Gypsy, 36/7/8)

7.7 Conflicts within parenting

For the majority of the study participants, the bottom line was a lack of faith in the perpetrator's parenting style and concerns regarding the long-term impact on the children. These concerns are validated by studies (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Levendosky et al., 2000) indicating that attitudes that lead men to employ abusive behaviour in the home do not lend themselves to positive parenting and should, in fact, be an indicator of the limitations of his parenting skills. Bancroft and Silverman (2002) describe these limitations being demonstrated by the following:

- a lack of empathy and interest in the child's life
- an expectation that the child should meet the perpetrator's needs,
- a tendency to swing between authoritarian and permissive parenting, and
- a tendency to neglect the child's needs.

All four of these limitations were readily evident within the responses given by the participants during this study regarding the parenting methods of perpetrators. Apart from the effect this situation has on the child overall, it makes the transition from one parent to another especially difficult as the parenting styles are not complementary (Levendosky et al., 2000). The overall situation is illustrated by the following:

Absolutely filthy. I mean, massively filthy – dirty face, dirty clothing. And it was like... power – look what I've done. If I've got her, that's what I'll do. And it was just devastating – she'd look feral – and he was really proud of that. An ego thing. (Riana, 39/5/12)

I think he [the perpetrator] has to learn that's not what you do – [their son] does something wrong, he has to sit on the floor for three hours in the middle of the room and not move. (Samantha, 39/14/2)

He [their son] was sleeping outside in the shed... there wasn't appropriate bedding [and] he was coming home vomiting because he was being given inappropriate food, too much shit... just common sense things. (Sunshine, 32/1/8)

Saunders (1998) argues that the past and potential behaviour of perpetrators of DV mean that, even apart from their propensity for violence, they will be more likely to communicate in a hostile, manipulative manner. This is exemplified by the work of Shepard (1992), who found that 60% of battered women who had left the relationship reported ongoing psychological abuse (threats and intimidation) that often involved the children, even after legal intervention and counselling had taken place. Other studies

³² Helen first separated in 1994, but reconciled from June 1998 until May 99. Therefore her 'time since abusive relationship' is calculated from the second and final separation date.

agree, showing that repeat victimisation after separation is common for both the survivor (Fleury et al, 2000; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999) and the children (Rathus et al., 2001; Sheehan, 2001), with 60-76% of children undergoing court-ordered contact being further victimised as a result (Radford, 1999; Shepard, 1994). This suggests that, mainly due to the requirement for child contact, the abuse that characterised the relationship is often ongoing despite separation.

It is clear, therefore, that ongoing contact has the potential to expose children, who already have a troubled history, to the damaging parenting styles of perpetrators. The difficulties of the overall parenting relationship with the perpetrator is also illustrated by the fact that less than 2% of the participants with children felt any sense of solidarity and/or friendship with the perpetrator, despite them being bonded by having children in common³³. Nevertheless several participants spoke of consciously working towards a positive parenting relationship between the perpetrators and their children:

Right now he is not paying child support because I said he could use the money to save for a trip to Canada this winter. Stupid me – I am in debt and he is not. I try to look at the big picture – 20 years from now the boys will remember another Christmas with Dad, not sure that they will remember finances. (Yeppoon, 46/18/5)

I can't say 'oh, here's your Dad – he's a really positive image' – it's just not true. That's my biggest concern – their belief in themselves. [So] I've tried to tell positive stories. About his brother and him when they were young. How smart they were, how clever... I don't want them to think half of them is missing. (Esmeralda, 38/9/7)

Available research suggests that the repercussions on children of exposure to DV, whether they be physical, psychological, behavioural or academic, impact on the resident family as a whole (Children's Defense Organisation, n.d.). Wyndham (1998) argues that this flow-on effect is exemplified by the DV itself causing a lowered parenting capacity, which in turn affects the children involved. Similarly, Mertin (1995) argues that a woman's 'recovery' rate from an abusive relationship should in turn affect her child(ren)'s ability to recover. For instance, circumstances that may delay her recovery, such as ongoing threats by her ex-partner, may also be expected to flow through to the recovery rate of offspring. Subsequent aggressive and/or destructive behaviour, anxiety, depression, disobedience on the part of the child all affect, not only on the child's quality of life, but also the overall wellbeing of the mother (Levendosky et al, 2000), thus creating an emotional catch-22:

It's been hard to find the time & energy to do the work on me, with 4 kids, with 2 having additional needs. (Gypsy, 36/7/8)

And also your children are damaged. By the time it was completely over, my youngest was just starting school, and three weeks after she started, I was called up there and they said: 'look, I'm sorry but we simply cannot cope with her...' And that was just one child! And I had two others! There's simply no way I could have worked. (Tracey, 42/8/6)

Whilst many of the women felt ongoing anger and bitterness regarding the continuing influence of the perpetrator, the majority also experienced significant degrees of guilt. The guilt was largely a result of accepting responsibility for a variety of factors, such as allowing the children to perceive men as dominant and women as submissive. In some cases they felt guilt for contradictory elements of the relationship, such as staying within the relationship for as long as they had, but also for leaving the relationship. Regardless of the validity of their guilt, the ongoing wellbeing of the women was compromised:

Every day I think of my children and the damage that I have caused them by leaving. Sometimes I have really dark thoughts because I have scarred them for life. I don't get any birthday, Christmas or Mothers Day cards from them. (Ann, 46/20/5)

My children now blame me for the abuse. If I was a better wife/mother then my husband would have loved them. (Reagan, 52/27/2)

Yet interestingly, in a recent survey (Levendosky et al., 2000) dealing with the effects of DV on women's parenting, the participants reported not only negative effects of the abuse but also some positive ones, such as increased empathy for what their children are experiencing. Similarly, within this study, 34% of participants felt that their own parenting abilities had actually improved as a result of the abusive relationship, and a further 6% believed that the negative effects had been balanced out by the positive. The women spoke of learning lessons, mainly with regard to issues of increased empathy and resilience, which they were able to integrate into their parenting styles. This does not suggest that abused women feel that the violence itself was either positive or worthwhile, but that the mobilisation of their resources in response to it resulted in affirmative changes in their parenting styles (Levendosky et al., 2000). It appears likely that this result is yet another reflection of ongoing attempts by survivors to extract positive results from an otherwise negative experience.

7.8 Seeking assistance

Most participants asserted a strong concern about, and observation of, the repercussions of the abuse on their children and a majority had sought formal assistance for their children. Sixty percent had obtained counselling for their children, with 22% in ongoing counselling the time of this study. However, several women spoke of a situation where they attempted to access professional assistance for their children only to have those endeavours sabotaged or blocked by the perpetrator:

My children and I started family counselling... but that came to an end when my second son threatened to stab me... I then took my two eldest to be assessed through mental health. The boys went to a few sessions and then they were lured away by bribes from dad and grandma to live with grandma. Their dad did not believe in counselling... they successfully brainwashed my boys and destroyed them. (Questionnaire respondent, 36/11/7)

I had really good therapy for my son and he [the perpetrator] found out about that and sabotaged it. My son's turned... I haven't seen my son since he was

³³ Interestingly, most of the participants who indicated still feeling 'love' towards the perpetrator (4 out of 7) did not have children with him.

sixteen. My son said 'Dad said he understands me, he said he wanted to hit you too.' (Dee, 49/13/14)

Recent American research has found that this situation is not unique, and that perpetrators of DV regularly incapacitate efforts by their ex-partners to obtain therapeutic intervention or mediation for the children involved (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). For these women, the situation was extremely frustrating and led to considerable long-term bitterness.

The majority of the participants, whether they supported ongoing access or not, felt that a large part of the answer lay in compulsory parenting classes, psychiatric assessments, and some form of ongoing review of behaviour during access to ensure the safety of all concerned. Many of the women felt frustrated that such a system was not in place, as ideally they would prefer their children to have ongoing contact as it would benefit the children and provide respite for themselves. Failing that, most women felt that access should be limited to a supervised format and the perpetrator 'taught' non-abusive strategies of parenting:

I think that supervised child access with a child advocate or someone. There's a lot of barriers because of his behaviour, his anger. I think he [the perpetrator] has to learn that's not what you do – I would have gone [to parenting classes] – I didn't know how to parent as a single parent, and like my first six months of coping were very difficult. (Samantha, 39/14/2)

Samantha was not the only participant who felt that she also would have benefited from parenting classes. Indeed, quite a few of the interview participants had sought out and attended such classes after separation as they attempted to garner support in addressing the new family dynamics. No perpetrators were reported to have followed suit.

7.9 Summary and recommendations

For the majority of women involved in this study, issues of parenting were a major post-relationship concern. Research has indicated that the past behaviour alone of perpetrators means that they are unlikely to establish a mutually supportive, or even neutral, relationship with their ex-

partners (Saunders, 1998), even after legal intervention occurs (Shepard, 1992). This, coupled with the necessity for ongoing contact, results in a high likelihood of ongoing abuse (Fleury et al., 2000; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999).

As most of the study participants had retained residence of their children after the abusive relationship had ended, they were therefore compelled to renegotiate parental boundaries in circumstances that were often less than conducive to effective parenting. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for children to reflect their own ongoing damage onto their mother, leaving her to cope with their ongoing issues, as well as her own, as they arise (Bagshaw & Chung, 2001; McBride, 2003). This has the potential to create a circle of cause and effect that can severely undermine attempts at positive parenting. On this basis, the following recommendations are put forward:

- Given the concurrence of this study with the recent Access Economics report, on the lack of data on long-term impacts of DV on children (2004: 74), and on the reported incidence in this study of unsupervised contact with children by DV perpetrators, research should be commissioned into the nature and extent of the long-term effects of abusive parental relationships on children, and on the nature and extent of the effects of continued contact with the abusive parents.
- The concurrence of the findings of this study with research (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Levendosky et al., 2000) that has indicated that abusive behaviour in the home should, in fact, be seen as indicative of a perpetrator's negative parenting attitudes and the limitations of his basic parenting skills, indicates that compulsory parenting education strategies should be developed for relationships in which abuse is reported, with sanctions in place for those that do not comply.
- The Child Support Agency (CSA) and the Family Court should research, test and evaluate principles, protocols and practices based on ensuring the safety and quality of contact for children in relationships where abuse is identified and indicated by medical, psychological or other professional confirmation, criminal or civil evidence and/or family history.

8 Community Services: the response of family and community services to the post-relationship journey

It is paramount to know that you not alone, that you able to talk to someone with the same experience, that you normal, not stupid and not pathetic and you definitely not a punching bag, that you deserve Respect Love and Kindness. People – women with similar experience give you the information – support to pick up the pieces for a new beginning. (Karin, 59/42/1)

8.1 Key findings

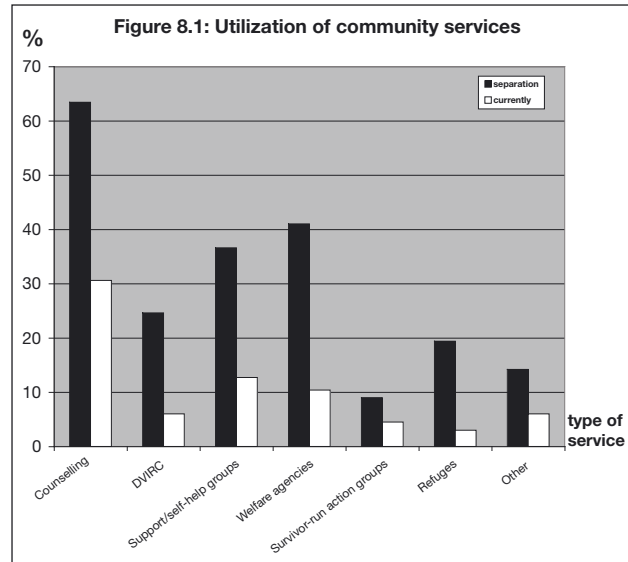
- Social and community networks and organisations are of vital importance in the immediate post-relationship period and facilitate the location of the survivor's experiences in the larger context of DV as a societal issue, rather than solely a personal crisis. However, whilst the importance of counselling and/or support groups may wane as the survivors rebuilds, support should be accessible long-term in recognition that, with or without ongoing contact with the perpetrator via child access, the post-relationship journey taken by DV survivors has life-time implications.
- This study indicates that most survivors would benefit from negotiating the rebuilding experience in company with other survivors and from having access to the experience of survivors before them. This 'mutually rehabilitative' model gives survivors the opportunity to use their experiences in a positive manner that, in turn, goes some way towards validating those experiences. Few study participants had access to such a model.

8.2 Actively seeking community/social support

During and after separation, the majority of the participants in this study actively sought some form of community assistance to help them cope with the post-separation transition, with some 'shopping' around for the most appropriate and relevant form of support. Counselling was the preferred option with 31% of participants still using this method of support at the time of the study (Figure 8.1), indicating the longevity of ongoing effects and a pro-active stance by survivors in dealing with them.

However, 21% of the survivors did not actively seek assistance at all. Many of these women indicated that they have little faith in available services to understand their plight, while others commented that they were simply unaware of the availability of possible assistance³⁴.

Ignorance and/or lack of faith in community services often results in further isolation as such women remain removed



(n=134)

from potential aid, and continue to believe that their particular situation is unique.

The majority of the participants who had contact with counselling, DV agencies and support groups found their experiences overwhelmingly positive. One described the difference attending her support group made as "sink or swim." Most of the woman cited knowledge that they gained through these contacts as precipitating a breakthrough in their transition out of the abusive relationship and ensuring that they did not contemplate reconciliation. In particular these breakthroughs centred around having their stories believed and not being held accountable for the abuse:

That was one thing Al Anon taught you. That it wasn't your fault. And I grabbed that like a lifesaver – I was drowning, see. Shocking state. (Dalma, 83/35/9)

In the early days I was so thankful to those who listened and offered their stories. Without them, I would not have been able to see a way through the mire that enveloped me, and I would not have felt there was another life. They also helped to convince me that I was not to blame because here were these wonderful women who had experienced the same, and who certainly deserved no blame. (Dawn, 48/21/3)

As with Dawn, the participants also spoke of the importance of discovering that they were not alone. This helped the women to identify the abuse as DV, something that many had been unable to do beforehand. The importance of some type of formal support service in the lives of survivors was emphasised in interviews, where those who had attended support groups displayed a better overall understanding of both the dynamics of their past abuse and its consequences on their ongoing quality of life.

³⁴ Nikki, one of the case studies, spoke of how she had been assisted by the police on numerous occasions during the abusive relationship as well as after, yet had never been given any information about agencies or possible support at any time.

For the participants, the knowledge gained from such support services contributed to an empowering sense of growth and strength that they incorporated into their post-relationship journey, often resulting in a easing of dependence on outside support. This is also reflected in Figure 8.1, which indicates a gradually diminishing demand for community support services over a period of time post-separation. Several of these women spoke of a desire to distance themselves from a role they perceived as no longer necessary:

The support I gave and received from other survivors was priceless. But I did notice a time when I chose to give up those friendships as I'd grown and they were no longer relevant for me. But I will always treasure them in my heart. (Gypsy, 38/7/8)

A significant minority of the interviewees, however, also spoke of an ongoing need for support that most achieved by keeping in touch with other survivors, whether formally or informally. Several of these women told of how their support group actually eased the strain on their families by providing the survivors with an alternative venue for discussion and encouragement. There was also a strong feeling that that no one else would appreciate their situations unless they themselves had experienced similar trauma. This created a sense of camaraderie illustrated in the following extract from a group interview:

Liz (43/15/3): *Honest to God, I thought I was the only one!*

Solva (56/12/12): *Yes, you do think you're the only one.*

Ilsa (researcher): *Well, this goes back to what you were saying – about isolating women.*

Liz: *Oh, yes. And no-one understands that [the fear]. No-one understands...unless you've been through it. Like you guys would – you're like me!*

Marge (40/4/3): *What they do to you – the mental abuse...*

Liz: *It's worse than the physical.*

Marge: *Oh, yeah.*

Liz: *A broken arm you can fix- the other you can't.*

Liz then tells how she became pregnant at forty and her husband told her that she could either have a new car or the baby, but not both.

Solva: *Wonderful how they put it down to such a low level, isn't it?*

Liz: *Yes, so simple.*

Jeanie (55/14/12), Solva and Marge all laugh sympathetically.

Liz: *So I'm determined to get this car one day!*

Solva: *Yes!*

Liz: *Yeah! Shove it up your arse, I've got both!*

Everyone laughs and one of the women reaches over and pats Liz on the back.

This camaraderie and sense of mutual support was the primary reason given by participants for continuing to attend support or self-help groups even after they perceived that they were no longer experiencing the level of trauma that had prompted them to make contact. Instead, they

described how the support complemented their ongoing journey:

I still go, I don't think I need it anymore but we're all sticking together, we've all come through this together so... (Gwynne, 74/26/27)

I was in a secular facilitated support group and when it was finished most of the participants continued meeting without a facilitator. No-one "asked" us to help each other – we just wanted to still share together. (Helen, 49/5/3)

I attended a support group at one of the community centres and most of the ones that were there decided that we wanted to keep on going so we were meeting all by ourselves and we don't have the meetings now because some are working, some have got kids at school and have canteen and all that. But we've all stayed friends – so it depends on what type of support I need, whether I want to, okay, get back to earth or sympathy or wisdom, depends who I ring. (Leanne, 32/9/4)

8.3 Allowable time for support

Several of the participants indicated a perception that, after a certain period of time, it was expected that they should have 'come to terms' with the abuse and 'move on'. The women felt that this actually increased the pressure on them, as well as creating the impression that they were either particularly damaged or 'slow' if they were unable to attain the anticipated level of 'recovery' within the given timeframe.

When you've been abused for years and years, well, six weeks is just not going to cover it. And turning them out six weeks later and saying: 'well, you're fine now – go on, you've done your course, everything's fine!' Six weeks of me going – I went along for a while and I didn't even know if it was for me. I used to sit there and shake! I went for a long time, twelve months before I opened up! I'd just shake and cry – didn't say anything, didn't feel I had anything to say! You know, I'd been a complete idiot, I had no self-esteem – and, um, well, six weeks would have sent me out with nothing. I was listening, but it wasn't getting through. (Tracey, 42/8/6)

Most times I separated I found that after about six months the assistance just stopped. I was put in situations that caused great stress and each time I returned to my abusive partner for support. (Cyanne, 35/11/4)

Several participants were guided to other programs after their initial course ended. This gave them the sense that their transition from the abusive relationship was an ongoing process that was fully supported. On the other hand, Cyanne felt that she was cast adrift after a certain period of time post-separation, and that her subsequent feelings of isolation and stress led to reconciliations (seven) with her abusive partner. Many of the women commented on the need for ongoing support and, although they acknowledged that harm minimisation was a priority, nevertheless felt that open-ended assistance should be available as required:

The women should be offered on-going support. The immediate escape from harm is important, the re-establishment of the home etc important, as are the associated emotional issues. But the possibility

of having an on-going link with a professional should be available. (Anna, 55/11/17)

The concept of an allowable period of time in which to accomplish a healing process is directly located within expectations of 'recovery'. The recovery framework anticipates a series of stages during which the survivor moves in a steady direction towards a state of being 'recovered.' This approach then underpins the structuring of support groups and/or courses that operate within a relatively inflexible timeframe and further isolates those who do not then feel 'recovered.' This model fails to take into account the longevity of the impact of DV and therefore misleads individuals by fostering expectations of recovery that are unlikely to be met. In addition, this concept removes any choice from even those survivors who might fit the model being used, and is insufficiently flexible to accommodate those who suffer setbacks down the road. Gwynne endured an abusive marriage for twenty-six years before forming a new, and successful partnership with another man for a further twenty-six years. It was not until a year after she was widowed that Gwynne, then aged 73, started having difficulty sleeping:

*I thought I'd put it all behind me actually. But, ah, you bury stuff and stack more on top of it and you think it'll never come out but it does eventually... like having a deep-seated boil and it all came bubbling up!
(Gwynne, 74/26/27)*

In Gwynne's case, although her first husband had then been dead for some time, she found that she couldn't "get him out of my head." Gwynne was able to locate, and join, a support group, which she has now been attending for some time and has found that "it has helped considerably." Overall, therefore, there was a strong sense amongst the participants that the model for post-relationship support should be more open-ended, with survivors able to establish individual timeframes as needed.

8.4 Supporting others – turning abuse into expertise

A strong theme in this study was the willingness of the participants to use their experiences to aid others in similar circumstances. For many, this was a method by which they could neutralise some of the negativity of their experiences by turning them into something useful. This was the driving force behind the focus on community-related courses among those who had returned to further study after the abusive relationship³⁵. Other women worked for a period of time in a voluntary capacity within fields related to DV such as W.I.R.E.³⁶. Many of the participants who did not use their experiences in such a direct way, still attempted to draw on them to assist others within their immediate circle of acquaintances:

If I think I'm going to make a difference in that area, legitimately, and without getting emotional, that's where I go. I'm very strong when it comes to people being abused. I had an example on the street where a bloke hit a woman in front of the supermarket and I just dropped my groceries and I went up and shoved him in the chest and said 'you're a real hero.' I kept saying

*to myself 'he's going to hit me, he's going to hit me' but I couldn't – didn't stop myself. I go with my gut.
(Chelsea, 46/18/11)*

A number of women told how, on witnessing an abusive incident, they felt compelled to intervene despite feeling considerable fear. They also derived a sense of pride from those interventions that reflected positively in their increased sense of self-worth. Many of the women also indicated an awareness of how community attitudes would need to alter before there would be any real change regarding DV. They consciously located their openness about their abuse within an educational process, and appeared to regard speaking out as a societal duty:

If it is relevant in conversations I do bring it up, as I feel it's important the subject be discussed & misconceptions cleared. (Rose, 69/26/25)

My goal is to ride around Australia one day – maybe I could highlight and raise money for the domestic violence issue. (Susan, 51/31/13)

Several participants related their openness, and their attempts to assist those they suspected of being abused, to the benefits they had experienced when someone had spoken positively to them whilst they were still in the abusive relationship. These women saw themselves as having now taken on this constructive, nurturing role and felt they were repaying the assistance they had received in the past. As one woman said: "I've taken a lot over the years and [now] I feel like I want to give back." The general consensus was that this transition from helped to helper was synonymous with the journey from victim to survivor and thus formed part of an onward journey.

This willingness to assist others led to considerable enthusiasm for survivors to be utilised long-term to assist those just beginning the post-separation journey. This concept was supported by 88% of participants, who felt that it would not only assist the newly separated, but would also aid the more-experienced survivor, as it brings with it a form of validation for the past abuse. In other words, by using the abuse to achieve something positive, they are able to rationalise, to some extent, the reality of their abusive experiences and their impact on their ongoing quality of life:

I believe that we go through certain things, where they might not be good experiences, but they can be used for good in the future. And, um, you know you can be healed by all those things and you can use that to help others. (Sunshine, 32/1/1)

*I may never come to terms with the injustice dealt to me by my former husband, the police, the courts and other authorities and institutions, but I can begin to make sense of it when I examine the lessons I have learnt and pass this knowledge on in the hope that others will be spared, my family will understand, and society in general will become aware of what dangerous creatures exist.
(Dawn, 48/21/3)*

Those who supported this model located the mutually rehabilitative philosophy within the commonly held perception that nobody would fully understand unless they had been in a similar situation. This was illustrated by several participants using the term: 'walk a mile in my shoes.' Some of the women elaborated on this approach:

³⁵ See pages 27-28 for further discussion on this issue.

³⁶ W.I.R.E (Women's Information and Referral Exchange), which is situated in central Melbourne, trains volunteers to assist with the running of its telephone information and counselling service for women.

I think one of the things that I found with social workers or whatever, over the years, is that they were looking down at me. Coz they hadn't come from – and I felt intimidated by their perfect lives. Whereas someone who's been – well, there's a connection.
(Riana, 39/5/12)

I do believe that professionals would be most effective if they had personal experience of abuse and, if not, that they could and should be assisted in their work by those with that experience. They can provide not just an external role model to emulate but can assist the women to think through their situation. The workers at the refuge were extremely supportive – non-intrusive, protective... They had no formal training – but had been in an abuse relationship. (Anna, 55/11/17)

And then she [a survivor who was a guest speaker at a DV course] said... 'don't expect to get over this grieving in under two or three years, and some people never do.' And to me that was – reality. And I felt that she was talking from the heart. And it was very much powerful – because you could hear it was coming from the heart.
(Margaret, 60/6/7)

For Margaret, a breakthrough came when a fellow survivor acknowledged some of the fallacies inherent within expectations of recovery. This corresponded with Margaret's own reality and thus validated her own experiences. However, despite the strong support for the concept of survivor involvement in support services, only 47% of the participants had ever been invited to do so. In fact, it appeared that active survivor involvement was often discouraged, rather than pursued by support services. One participant, for example, wrote to a variety of support services to offer volunteer work, but failed to even receive one reply. Chris, who has some experience within the community support industry, explained this lack of encouragement:

Oh, there's a question the Department of Human Services asks, and they say: 'aren't you putting women who are really confident with women who aren't? And would those women feel incompetent? Because they haven't achieved what the women who are experienced have – that you can't put those types of women together. And I disagree – it's the women.'
(Chris, 48/12/13)

However, the expectation that the more confident women may make others feel incompetent is not supported by the responses of the participants in this study:

I had been to lots of counsellors and different groups and it helped me going to... the group, because [the facilitator] had been through it, and that was a major advantage to me... I don't think any sort of counselling – no-one really knows how you feel unless you've been through the experience. When I first started going to group, [another member] had already been there, and I had a goal that I could be like [her] – she'd obviously gone through it and come out the other side, and I did learn – and it was hard to believe that this woman was the same woman they were talking about – and I could see the huge difference to what she was in the beginning to the woman I met and to me that was: 'well, look what she has done with her life, look what she's doing.' You know, and she came from the same – or it

didn't really matter whether she'd come from worse or what – look what she'd achieved! (Tracey, 42/8/6)

Tracey's admiration of the other woman's journey leads to her using the woman as a role model who represented the reality of life after abuse, and the possibilities that are available for those more recently separated. This suggests that, rather than being detrimental, the act of placing those at differing post-relationship stages together has great potential for all concerned. This finding is supported by the considerable popularity that client participation finds in contemporary social work practice and research (Ban, 1992; Healy & Walsh, 1997), and the fact that participatory models have been closely aligned with empowerment ideals (Dodds, 1995; McCallum, 1992).

Nevertheless, like Chris who said that "you would have to be careful", several of those who had gone on to work in the field of family violence, whilst supportive of the concept of survivors working with survivors, urged those contemplating this to receive full training:

I sincerely believe that survivors working with survivors is the most powerful relationship for healing, but have seen too many survivors bring their own baggage and anger into relationships that are delicate. I have seen damage occur as a result and some survivors abuse their clients. This really frightens me and I firmly believe and advocate for careful selection and intensive training for survivors work in this field. (Sweet, 43/12/6)

Several participants advised survivors to allow a sufficient period of time to elapse before attempting to assist other survivors. They felt that offering assistance is initially dangerous, as the women would need some time to 'lick their wounds' and put aside the understanding of themselves as worthless. Others felt that it was precisely because of this feeling of worthlessness that the idea should be encouraged. Nevertheless the majority of the participants, even those who urged caution in this regard, were overwhelmingly supportive of the concept of survivors working with survivors and felt that the lack of a widespread scheme supporting this was a failing within the network of support services.

8.5 Support of religious organisations and/or faith alone

The assistance of the clergy is requested with regard to wife abuse more than any other form of violence (Dixon, 1995). This alone positions religious organisations as a vital part of the support network for many DV survivors. Nineteen of the interviewees in this study spoke of turning to their religious faiths both during and after the abusive relationship. For several of these women, the attempt to access support via their faith was complicated by a history of spiritual abuse at the hand of the perpetrator:

And there was the spiritual thing – he would put on this stuff like 'Oh, you're a witch, oh – you're...' it was really twisted, malevolent – undercurrents of horrible, evil stuff that he would come up with. And I was so freaked out. It was so incessant. That was one of his powers, one of his tactics – and I was so vulnerable. There was this front of having the good spiritual beliefs, because we were in church, you know, but at home he would turn into this – preying – twist my mind, entangle my thinking.

Twisted the church's teachings around – submit till you bleed. (Esmeralda, 38/9/7)

He told me I was a failure spiritually etc. He twisted spiritual stuff around [and] pointed the finger at me saying I was a bad Christian. (Jeanie, 55/14/12)

This spiritual abuse was a method used by perpetrators to psychologically manipulate their victims. One participant (Dee, 49/13/14), who had experienced a supportive religious upbringing and wished to take her children to Sunday school, was forced to witness her husband teach them to 'celebrate' not believing in a God. Two other women spoke of the perpetrator drawing on their religious beliefs to abuse them in a similar fashion to the 'crazy-making' form of psychological abuse³⁷. These men manipulated their partner's spirituality to further isolate and confuse them.

Another difficulty for those women with religious backgrounds was that some of the spiritual assistance actually offered included being encouraged, whether overtly through their religious communities or covertly through background doctrine, to remain in the marriage despite the abuse. One woman explained her decision to remain in the abusive relationship as: "the right thing to do – being Christian", while another spoke of the abuse as a type of 'test', in order for God to build strength in her. An Australian project (*Against the Odds*, 1998) found that this sense of commitment to their marriages was a common factor amongst those surveyed and often resulted in a high level of acceptance or stoicism regarding the abuse. Whilst these beliefs may have compelled several women to remain in abusive relationships, for others it became an extra hurdle as the perpetrator and/or their religious community used this doctrine to condemn separation:

Initially our church embraced the father (who had not attended with the children and only occasionally with myself) to encourage his martyr-type perception of his existence wholeheartedly and shunned me because I left. They suggested that staying in an abusive marriage was the way to go, and that my faith was lacking. (Uni, 34/6/6)

On the other side, his Christian friends treated me badly [and] didn't believe me. They felt I should have remained in the marriage no matter what I suffered. I was looked upon as a "sinner". Pastors in some churches don't have an understanding of abuse – I was told to submit when I told a pastor about ex abusive behaviour. (Jeanie, 55/14/12)

A Western Australian survey (Albany, 1990) found that there was a "disturbing level of dissatisfaction" at the response given by ministers of religion towards women who had suffered, or still were suffering, from DV, with 44% of women finding their responses unsatisfactory. Much of this appears to result largely from a lack of clergy knowledge with regard to aspects of DV, such as the power and control nature of such abuse. However, participants for this study cited a large part of the problem being the doctrine of 'forgiveness' as a necessary virtue, which encourages the survivor to forgive the perpetrator in order to either move on, or to renew the abusive relationship with a clean slate. Several of the women found this doctrine both frustrating and confronting, as it transferred the responsibility to them

by requiring that they take action and 'forgive', whether they were prepared to or not:

I did start going back to church afterwards, and that's the great thing with religion – they talk so much about forgiveness and I wasn't ready for that. And that was playing on me and, um, I'd actually even wrote him a letter to say I'm sorry, you know, the things I did that may have hurt you. And I look back now and think 'what a fool!' And this is how it emphasised my feeling bad at the beginning... it emphasised my guilt, me feeling bad about myself. (Margaret, 60/6/7)

Church abuse from church leaders [and] fellow Christians who say all sorts of hurtful things [and] overemphasise the "submit, pray, forgive, reconcile" scriptures and ignore the "flee from persecution, resist evil, refuse to comply with sin" scriptures. But I eventually found other Christians who gave me more balanced (Biblical) advice [and] this greatly helped my recovery [and] made me realise I had done right to separate. These Christians are few [and] far between. (Helen, 49/5/3)

In Margaret's case, the pressure to 'forgive' added to her emotive burden by emphasising her guilt and made her feel worse rather than better. Similarly Helen found her religious community placed pressure on her to absolve the perpetrator, with the precedence of the survival of the marital unit devaluing her own personal wellbeing. As can be seen above, Helen's response was to actively seek a community whose faith, or interpretation of faith, was more suited to her experiences and thus more supportive of her decisions. Several other participants took similar action and, rather than abandon their religious commitment, simply changed parishes to obtain necessary support. Other women either redefined their religious beliefs, or sought a new faith that was more sympathetic or instructive with regard to the choices that they had made and the post-separation journey:

I sought the peace of meditation as I believed that it would help me with anger. Through this I was introduced to the philosophy of Buddhism and then, through my own studies, to that of post modernism. Both helped in their concern with mindfulness and reconstituting reality. (Anna, 55/11/17)

I found that the church put me in the 'too-hard' basket, whether that was the truth or not, that was how I perceived it. Might be completely wrong. Some churches are very cliquey and you're supposed to be accepted for who you are – some people would just avoid me. So I know the bible says you should be part of a congregation, that you need that fellowship. I don't see it that way – I'm quite happy just acknowledging God and I know he hears my prayers. He's everywhere. (Sunshine, 32/1/1)

My faith in god [and] the support of other believers have greatly helped me survive. (I found a church who understood). (Jeanie, 55/14/12)

Their actions enabled the women to reframe their beliefs in order to maintain necessary support yet still encompass their new reality. In this way they were also able to incorporate the two entities, the abuse and the religion, into their ongoing journey in a complimentary fashion.

³⁷ Discussed in more length in Section 3.

Overall, the large majority of those study participants with religious backgrounds felt spiritually supported and assisted during their most difficult times. Whether they felt supported all along or, despite the manipulation of their beliefs and/or the condemnation of their actions, they were able to eventually re-evaluate their beliefs and separate the abuse from their faith, the women were able to draw on the strengths of their spirituality after the abusive relationship had finished. As such, they cited faith as an integral part of their post-relationship journey:

I have a personal philosophy which is loosely based on the teachings of Taoism. These teachings provided the stability amongst the months of chaos and floods of people and emotions. Tied in with this is a belief system which was all but extinguished during the darkest period of the past four years. I could not believe that my guides still cared about me and I would test them, over and over...they never failed and it became impossible to ignore the answers I received. (Dawn, 48/21/3)

I turned back to God for strength to get me through the break-up, didn't go to church for ten years or so when I was with the ex. Believe it did have a positive impact on my recovery, lots of support, people who had gone through similar situations also gave me support. (Mehetabel, 29/8/3)³⁸

8.6 Summary and recommendations

A common thread throughout the abusive relationship is the attempt, by the perpetrator, to isolate the victim from contact with support (Bybee & Sullivan, 2002; Johnson, 2003). This tactic benefits the perpetrator because it both lessens the chance of the abuse being detected, and limits his victim's options for help (Browne, 1997; Bybee & Sullivan, 2002), thus becoming an effective strategy in maintaining power and control (Ptacek, 1997). In general, the prevalence of wife assault varies according to the amount of support they are able to generate within their social networks and, as the degree of support available to wives increases, the likelihood of husbands using violence against them declines (Baumgartner, 1993).

This background positions the availability of ongoing support as vital to the overall wellbeing of survivors, and this was reflected within the interview narratives of this study. Also important were methods by which the women were able to gain empowerment, such as contact with other survivors. These findings have led to the following recommendations:

- Members and leaders of religious communities have a particular capacity to contribute to and engage in

³⁸ Mehetabel chose as her pseudonym (for this study) a name that means 'God made free' in Hebrew.

government and community agency programs and approaches to address DV, and should be included in all government and community programs and approaches to this issue. Assertions by clerics of all faiths that violence in a relationship is unacceptable, and a criminal act, would contribute to changed community attitudes. Individual clerics should recognise and understand the significant role they can play when confronted by a perpetrator, victim or survivor. A national strategy to engage clergy should be considered, and this could include use of an Australian teaching curriculum regarding DV, which resulted in a significant increase in clergy awareness, sensitivity, resourcefulness and supportiveness (Dixon, 1995).

- That psychological, sociological and therapeutic interventions should be refocussed to 'incorporation' rather than 'recovery' and provide an open-ended model of assistance capable of recognising the long-term nature of the impact of DV and anticipating the evolving nature of the repercussions.
- The benefit to women survivors of the experience and support of other survivors is evident in this study, and the concept of mutually rehabilitative support, with an emphasis on survivor-perspective, should be included in support services for women who have left violent relationships. The concept of mutual support for health care consumers from other consumers who have survived or are living with the same health condition is now well recognised. This model of care and support should be developed for women leaving violent relationships with education and mentoring training for survivor supporters. Involvement of women survivors with other women seeking and needing support would validate survivor knowledge by listening to the voices of the women themselves as a "source of innovative theory and policy development" (Hague, Mullender, Aris, & Dear, n.d.: 2).
- Funding should be provided to establish a pilot self-help support program for DV survivors. The women's experiences in this study indicate that a self-help and support program would be effective as a community program based on the Alcoholics Anonymous guidelines³⁹, where an open-ended, mutual rehabilitative, non-obligatory, democratic framework bases itself upon the belief that (with regards to alcohol): "the personal, subjective experience of alcoholism [is] something which one alcoholic is able to share with another. We have found that trying to help another alcoholic is good for us, whether or not the alcoholic uses what we offer" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1972).

³⁹ See note 5.

9 Incorporation rather than recovery: an alternative way of viewing the post-relationship journey

I think this will be ongoing for the rest of my life, 'baggage' I think most people call it.
(Mehetabel, 29/8/3)

9.1 Key findings

- This study clearly illustrates that assumptions of 'recovery' provide an inadequate and problematic framework in which to locate the long-term effects of DV. Failure to acknowledge the long-term consequences of DV has the potential to actively contribute to ongoing risk for the health and wellbeing of survivors and their children. These assumptions also can be considered to have inhibited research and investigation into long-term effects of DV, given the emphasis on an *expectation* of recovery.
- A therapeutic and social policy that is appropriate and beneficial acknowledges the ongoing nature of repercussions of past DV and recognises the validity and value of the concept of incorporation in lived experience and in health of the experience of DV.
- Study participants draw empowerment from identifying as a 'survivor'. They spoke of seeing this identification as part of a forward moving trajectory, complimenting the eventual integration of their survivor identity alongside their other identities as they evolved. Thus they were able to progress away from the abuse without being defined by it, and without fragmentation, whilst the identification legitimated the continuing impact of the long-term effects overall.

9.2 Concepts of 'recovery'

The term 'recovery' is used to describe a variety of circumstances. A stolen item can be 'recovered', whilst a flagging athlete may recover stamina in time to win a race. However the most common use for concepts of recovery is within the areas of health and healing, both of which are focussed on eradication of an illness or symptom and restoration to a previous state of health and function. Thus cancer treated early may never recur, and an infection is cured by antibiotics. For both scenarios the script remains the same: diagnosis, treatment, recovery – and treated individuals return to their lives without impairment (Shay, 1994: 186). The concept of recovery, therefore, contains a fundamental goal – that of being 'recovered', of being restored to a prior state of wellbeing.

The pervasiveness of the concept of 'recovery' within literature dealing with the post-relationship journey taken by DV survivors is evidenced by the number of recent studies⁴⁰

that contain the word in their title. A consequence of this focus has been that, beyond a limited concentration on the immediate post-relationship period, little light has been shed on the longer-term effects of DV. Instead there has been an *expectation* of recovery that has rendered all but invisible any ongoing repercussions.

A significant proportion of the literature that focuses on the initial post-separation journey uses concepts of 'recovery' to frame the survivor's recuperation as a series of phases with fixed parameters (for example, Farrell, 1996; Kearney, 1999; Patton, 2003; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). By presenting 'recovery' as a fixed and achievable outcome, these studies suggest a point in time where the phases will have been negotiated and 'recovery' completed. However, the findings of this study strongly indicate that the assumption of an end-date is in fact both illusory and potentially damaging. Herman alludes to these dangers when she describes how a former patient was humiliated by her need, some years later, to return to psychotherapy and feared that this meant that she was 'incurable' (1992: 212). This situation can amplify a survivor's self-blame, as she becomes angry with herself for not 'getting over it' (Lamb, 1996).

Of additional concern are recovery models that are structured on the initial establishment of safety (for example, Herman, 1992), or that build towards such assumptions (for example, Patton, 2003). Yet total safety, even years after separation, is often an unattainable goal for women who, owing to the requirement for child access, are compelled to deal with the perpetrator on an ongoing basis⁴¹. DV is relatively unique amongst crimes in that the victim must come to terms not only with the crime itself, but also often with ongoing contact with the person who perpetrated the crime against them. Many of the participants in this study had to deal with ongoing threats to their safety. Yet the vast majority of these women had reconnected with their communities, with most establishing careers, raising children, and some returning to further education and/or forming new partnerships.

Similar problems were found within recovery models that required a progression away, or a release, from feelings of anger and/or bitterness (for example, Smith, 2003). Within the present study, however, it was found that, rather than progressing away from feelings of anger/bitterness, 45% of participants had an ongoing desire for revenge. Interview responses indicated that many of the women considered this perfectly healthy. Several equated their desire for revenge with their ongoing anger over what had happened to them, and their inability or disinclination to forgive.

⁴⁰ For example, Gilboa-Schechtman & Foa, 2001, 'Patterns and Recovery from Trauma'; Herman, 1992, *Trauma and Recovery*; Kearney, 1999, *Understanding Women's Recovery from Illness and Trauma*; Landenberger, 1989, 'A process of entrapment and recovery from an abusive relationship'; Smith, 2003, 'Recovery from Intimate Partner Violence: A Difficult Journey'; Wilson & Morphett, 2000, *Recovery From Family Violence Project*.

⁴¹ Even those women who had had no contact with the perpetrator since separation were not guaranteed ongoing feelings of safety. Carol, who has not seen her abuser in twenty-five years, suffers from depression, migraines, and chronic fatigue syndrome (that both her counsellor and her psychiatrist link to the past abuse) and her current husband works as her full-time carer. Carol readily admits to ongoing fear of the perpetrator and when asked what she would do if she saw him, Carol replied "I'd throw up."

Forgiveness itself is perceived by some authors as a therapeutic stage (for example, Hope, 1987; Smith, 2003), which will bring transformation or transfiguration to those who are able to achieve it. Yet many study participants here saw forgiveness as a personal choice, rather than a requirement, and resented the implication that this then absolved the perpetrator. Nietzsche alludes to this situation when he refers to forgiveness as “sublimated resentment”, and claims that sublimation is a dubious achievement and resentment even worse (Nietzsche, cited in Lamb, 1996: 161). Other philosophers have pointed out that to forgive too easily can actually show a basic lack of self-respect (Murphy, 1988), and that those who do not resent the violation of their rights do not, in fact, take their rights very seriously at all (Strawson, 1974). When forgiveness and lack of anger are aligned with DV it can be seen to slot neatly into the ‘cycle of abuse’ that the survivor endured during the abusive relationship itself. Within this cycle the perpetrator abuses his partner and then becomes remorseful and is granted forgiveness. This is followed by the gradual build-up once more that results in another episode of abuse, another round of remorse, and another round of forgiveness. Thus, requiring a survivor to forgive once she has left the relationship can locate her ongoing journey within an abusive context whilst simultaneously downplaying the actual harm done (Lamb, 1996).

The overall responses from the participants and their attitudes towards concepts of recovery indicated that the most constructive and relevant phases were those that described the gradual displacement of the abusive experiences from a central position within their lives (for example, Wuest and Merritt-Gray, 2001). However, problems arose within expectations that the survivor be able to “shed” her former identity (2001: 83). As Herman (1992) has noted, this move holds inherent conflicts with the necessity for survivors to include memories of the abuse within their reassembled selves. Furthermore, it promotes repression, secrecy and shame, and encourages the expectation that, once ‘recovered’, the abused woman can cleanly discard segments of her past and move forward unencumbered. Instead responses from this study strongly indicate that many survivors locate the abusive experiences within an *ongoing* journey, and that a reluctance to claim ‘recovery’ does not equate with a failed journey. Instead, this reluctance can simply signify a considered analysis of circumstances:

To rebuild a shattered self esteem and sense of self takes a long while, and the growth staggers... even going backwards at times. Today I feel like I've passed the end of the road to recovery, and am continuing down the road of life, however occasionally things happen... and I'm reminded that the road to recovery is never fully ended, issues reappear and need to be dealt with again as they arise. (Mehetabel, 29/8/3)

There are lessons to be learnt from a comparison between ‘recovery’ expectations for combat veterans and those for DV survivors. During the closing stages of the Second World War, two eminent psychologists proclaimed that the effect of combat was “not like the writing on a slate that can be erased, leaving the slate as it was before. Combat leaves a lasting impression on men’s minds, changing them as radically as any crucial experience through which they live”

(Herman, 1992: 26)⁴². Similarly, Shay states that, after severe trauma, full recovery for veterans can neither be predicted nor promised (1994: 186). In this, combat is aligned with DV, and the logic of these words alone raises questions about the suitability of the recovery framework, with its inherent assumption of restoration, for severe trauma of any kind.

9.3 Realities of the post-relationship journey for DV survivors

The term ‘recovery’ is bound up with perceptions of restoration, where the act of recovering equates to the regaining of a former condition and/or state of health. Few of the participants for this study could be said to have met this criteria. Instead, the women continued to experience a range of long-term effects, which impacted on such variables as their finances, relationships, and physical, psychological and sexual health. Recovery, in the sense of moving on without effect, is quite unlikely. For abused women, the impact of the trauma continues to reverberate throughout the post-relationship life, and it is simply not possible to erase the abusive experience as though it did not occur and return to a former state and/or former identity (Herman, 1992: 93).

There was a heavy reliance on the terminology of recovery evident within the interview narratives for this study. When queried about their expectations of recovery, 11 women stated that they had fully recovered whilst 23 stated that they had not, with many of these latter women being very clear about the fact that they never expected to recover. Several of those who stated that they had fully recovered, also spoke of issues that undermined such a claim, such as continuing fear, medical problems, and ongoing counselling. These discrepancies appeared to relate to an expectation that, after a certain period of time, they *should* be recovered:

Yes [I have recovered]. It's taken such a long time and I know that there are many issues within me that aren't resolved, and maybe they never will be. (Sweet, 43/12/6)

However, also evident was an awareness of the contradictory nature of ‘recovery’ and its limited application to the experiences of the participants. Even several of the women who self-described as being ‘recovered’, did so with provisos that suggested that they were uncomfortable with the construct. Others clearly struggled to align the terminology with their experiences:

[He] prevented recovery for me and my daughter because [he] turned her against me and gave her (and me) trauma and emotional distress almost every fortnight. You don't live, you just go from crisis to crisis. It EXHAUSTED me for YEARS. I believe [women's] recovery experiences have not been addressed and described as well as they might. We need to hear

⁴² Yet war veterans are encouraged to feel pride in their survival and given opportunities to commemorate this as well as remember those who did not survive the trauma. In Australia, Anzac Day, framed within a discourse of national honour and support, illustrates this concept by the emphasising of pride rather than recovery. Paradoxically, survivors of more ‘private’ trauma, such as sexual assault and domestic violence, are given little public voice in which to express pride in their post-trauma journey (one of the few exceptions would be the international ‘Reclaim the Night’ march, held annually on the last Friday evening in October, which upholds women’s rights to a life without fear of violence, harassment and sexual assault (Isis, 2005)).

survivor's voices more personally... I'm personally frustrated because I haven't been able to tell many people about how hard my recovery was.
(Helen, 49/5/3)

Some participants rejected the notion of 'recovery' outright, with one woman explaining that this term implied that her experience of abuse was an "illness from which I can be cured." This points to one of the major flaws within the construct of 'recovery'. It positions the survivor as the person who requires treatment and suggests that there is a finite healing process and cure available. Instead, many of the women preferred to focus on 'learning and adapting', rather than on a 'recovery' model that can, in fact, hold out a false promise⁴³. In addition, the women questioned how the 'triggers' and/or flashbacks, which 81% continued to experience, could be incorporated within the recovery framework. As a result, several women had arrived at conclusions more suitable to their circumstances, and devised schemas to fit:

Recovery continues. It is not linear – or even based on time – rather it is like a huge colourful package called LIFE. (Yeppoon, 46/18/5)

It's more of a journey, a learning – to heal... and my journey has just begun. (Dee, 49/13/14)

I would describe it like a dance... like a tango. You know, two steps forward, one step back...
(Margaret, 60/6/7)

Margaret went on to explain how she considered that this dance was all part of the 'journey' and, when asked about a 'road to recovery', explained that she did not believe there was really a destination as such. In this, Margaret displayed a similar point of view to many participants who viewed the abusive relationship, and their journey since, as just one part of their life cycle. They were therefore able to view the repercussions, while significant, as simply an addition to the store of experiences that defined them:

I view life as an ever-changing process; the experience has shaped who I am now but so have other experiences. My life does not focus on this experience – it has led me into other areas. (Anna, 55/11/17)

Anna was representative of the majority of the women in this study, who saw the journey away from the abusive relationship as exemplified by its gradual shift from the centre of their existence. The women described how the abusive relationship demanded an intense focus both during the relationship itself and immediately after separation. However, over time and as the women rebuilt their lives, the abusive relationship was moved to a less central part of their lives. This situation mirrors the process described by Wuest and Merritt-Gray as "putting it in its rightful place" (2001: 86). However, the responses from the participants in this study also show that this phrase may not fully demonstrate the complexities of the issue. For instance, subsequent events often bring the abusive experiences back into focus, even if only temporarily. In addition, the extent to which this displacement can be made appears to be very dependent on other issues, such as the children, ongoing contact and manipulation by the perpetrator. The common theme within the participants' responses is a rejection of any schema that calls for the

abusive experiences to be 'put aside' and for the survivor to 'move on' without them, but rather for her to take them aboard, incorporate them, and move away from the relationship with them adding to her store of knowledge and experience.

9.4 Concepts of 'incorporation'

The dominant recovery framework carries an inherent expectation of a point in time where the verb can be used in the past tense, and the subject has entered a state of *being* recovered. This state assumes that the subject is no longer significantly affected by what she was recovering *from* and, although her past will always contain a period marked by recovery, she is nevertheless able to move forward relatively cleanly. The majority of the participants in this study clearly struggled to fit their post-relationship experiences within this framework. For many, this led to conscious criticism, if not rejection, of the recovery schema and all it represents. The situation was exemplified by one woman who stated that: "I do not use the term 'recovery'... I view abuse as a social phenomenon which I have attempted to reframe." This reflective testimony acknowledges the cultural underpinnings of DV and the pro-active stance required to obtain control over both past experiences and present circumstances. Thus, a survivor's quest to gain control by acknowledging the ongoing repercussions of DV in her life can be seen as both empowering and continual:

No, I do not talk of there being a light at the end of the tunnel or of even reaching this light. But perhaps I do talk of the light of enlightenment. (Anna, 55/11/17)

During the course of the research study, the term 'incorporation' was adopted to better describe the process by which the survivor subsumes, or integrates, her experiences within her sense of self. Herman (1992) alludes to this concept when she describes how survivors create a new identity that includes the memory of the abuse even after the trauma no longer dominates. Rather it becomes integrated into the survivor's store of experiences, and those who do not accomplish this integration, who instead disavow their pasts, run the risk of keeping the disconnected fragments of their pasts fully alive, with the immediate and present characteristics of traumatic memory (1992: 89-93). One of the participants in this study exemplified this situation when, twenty-six years after she had left her abusive husband, she suddenly started having difficulty sleeping:

I thought I'd put it all behind me actually. But, ah, you bury stuff and stack more on top of it and you think it'll never come out but it does eventually.
(Gwynne, 74/26/27)

Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2002: 87) utilise the theory of incorporation when they comment that: "as the women stopped defining themselves in terms of the abusive experience, they incorporated the abuse as part of their past." However, Wuest and Merritt-Gray also restrict this therapeutic stage to only those women who no longer feel at risk, a qualification that would deny the majority of participants in this study the chance to move forward. In addition, it appeared evident that most of the participants here did not incorporate the abuse as part of their *past* but, either consciously or subconsciously, integrated the abuse into their ongoing understandings of self, where its impacts could remain relevant to their life-journey.

⁴³ This false promise was illustrated by several women asking, quite bitterly: "when will this end?"

Whereas concepts of recovery suggest a recuperative process with an inherent goal, that of being 'recovered', incorporation complements the 'journey' narrative used by many survivors and legitimises the adding of an extra dimension to the survivor's sense of self. This dimension allows the woman to step cleanly from *being* consumed to being the *consumer*, thus integrating her survivor identity alongside her other identities and progressing away from the abuse without being defined by it, and without fragmentation. As such the focus is on augmentation rather than recovery, allowing the survivor's experiences to inform her life-choices whilst remaining as much a part of her life in theory as they are in practice. In this fashion, many of the women were able to positively reconstruct their abuse by actions such as offering advice to others, changing their careers, or seeking further education in fields relevant to DV.

The findings of this study indicate that the concept of incorporation fits survivors' experiences and understandings better than that of recovery. The study participants, rather than speaking in terms of recuperation, used narratives that suggested an ongoing 'renovation', where both positive and negative building blocks incorporated and influenced their life-journey. These were part of a visible healing process that enabled the women to re-establish themselves despite their problematic circumstances. However, this visible healing belied the inner scars, which continued to impact on their wellbeing in a multitude of ways, bringing both positive and negative outcomes. Therefore, by shifting the focus from recovery to growth, the concept of incorporation recognises that the DV has caused fundamental alterations in the survivor that cannot be erased:

The residue of domestic violence is something that I will carry forever. It has changed me. (Questionnaire respondent, 57/19/16)

*I'm different, you can see that I'm different.
And I know that the earlier life has made me this way.* (Anne Nell, 71/19/31)

This recognition legitimises empowering moves to reconstruct or to 'own' both the abusive past and its ongoing impacts. Many of the participants in this study acknowledged this, with several displaying considerable pride in this facet of their selves, even commenting that they no longer regretted the trauma occurring. As such, incorporation describes a process by which a survivor is able to integrate her survivor identity alongside her myriad of other identities and continue her life-journey with it consciously onboard.

Incorporation, therefore, offers a plausible explanation for the existence of both the negative and positive long-term effects of DV in a way that the recovery construct simply cannot. Whereas recovery assumes repercussions are of limited duration, incorporation allows for subjective assessments of the impact of the past violence, as well as anticipating the continuing damage that can result from ongoing contact with the perpetrator. This then offers survivors a realistic appraisal of the post-relationship journey and legitimises the ways in which past experiences may influence current choices. Finally, the emphasis on incorporation removes the connotation of illness that demands a mythical framework of cure and restoration, and allows the survivor to take pride in her survival.

9.5 Survivor – an evolving but lifelong identity

Whereas notions of recovery may sit uncomfortably with the ramifications of severe trauma, the definitions of survival embrace the entire post-trauma journey. Survival holds connotations of strength, fortitude, determination, and even victory. As such, to identify as a survivor can be a liberating and empowering experience for women who, during an abusive relationship, have often associated themselves with, or been associated with, the identity of a victim. In fact, the term 'survivor' itself is typically reserved for those who, having once defined themselves as a victim, have now self-consciously redefined their relationship to their experiences (Naples, 2003).

Survivors of abuse often locate the victim and survivor labels as part of a continuum within a metaphorical journey away from the abuse (Young & Maguire, 2003). This was a viewpoint echoed by the majority of the interview participants in this study, whose narratives reverberated with notions of survival. In addition, they referred to a clear distinction between those still 'suffering' and survivors such as themselves:

Knowing that I actually survived those bad times... survivors need to be there to support other people who are suffering now. (Susan, 51/21/13)

I wished to be of some practical help to those currently suffering domestic violence, as well of those survivors recovering from the emotional and physical damage after leaving. (Rose, 69/26/25)

Whilst the women do not use the word 'victim', it is clear that they distinguish between themselves and those either still in an abusive relationship, or in the process of leaving. Both Rose and Susan make this delineation clear by offering their assistance, as survivors, to those who are currently 'suffering'.

The identification with survivor discourse is not limited to women who have been involved in an abusive relationship. As with concepts of recovery, the term 'survivor', with its inherent definition of having coped successfully with the difficulties of life, is readily adopted by all who have experienced past trauma. Thus those who have been raped can be called survivors, as can those who were interned in concentration camps (Bower, 1989), war veterans (Shay, 1994), and those who escaped from the towers on September 11. In fact, the last case exemplifies the association of the term survivor with hero-like status through creating a new term to describe the life-stories written by survivors – 'herographies' (Green, 2003: 96). Thus, connotations of survival include elements of courage, endurance, and/or bravery under fire.

There is at present, however, a worldwide move away from identifying women who have been either sexually abused or who have experienced DV as 'survivors'. This move owes its existence to a belief that identification as a survivor will always link "a women's life to that of having once been a victim" (Simpson, 2003: 7). It is postulated that, as the 'recovery' process progresses, the survivor identity can become too constricting and should be abandoned (Draucker, 1992; Herman, 1992; Matsakis, 1996; Phillips & Daniluk, 2004; Young & Maguire, 2003). It is argued, therefore, that the survivor identity actually stigmatises by no longer accurately reflecting the breadth of the women's

evolving sense of self (Phillips & Daniluk, 2004), and can in fact disempower women who wish to orientate themselves towards the future, rather than the past (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). This viewpoint has led directly to changes in social services. For instance, the ACT Domestic Violence Crisis Service have recently made a decision to drop the term 'survivor' in favour of the lengthier "women who have been subjected to domestic violence" (Simpson, 2003: 7).

Findings from this study, however, indicate that such a viewpoint has major limitations. Firstly, a phrase such as 'women who have been subjected to domestic violence' presents as unnecessarily convoluted and disempowering in that the use of the term 'subjected' victimises the women even further by denying them any agency. Secondly, the removal of the survivor identity from the vernacular robs women of a context of bravery within which to locate their abusive experiences. Thirdly, the presentation of a forward moving trajectory that requires the shedding of the 'survivor' label removes the element of choice and locates the entire journey within a dichotomy of success or failure. This does not accurately reflect the experiences of the majority of the participants in this study, whose words reverberate with notions of survival:

I am stronger – and made even stronger when referred to as a survivor (Yeppoon, 46/18/5)

Hey! I'm a SURVIVOR!!! That's got to make one feel stronger! I feel that I have risen from being a piece of flotsam, useless and unnecessary to becoming a real person. (Sweet, 43/12/6)

The major limitations of the 'shedding' of the survivor label approach lie in the assumption that the 'survivor' identity overshadows all other identities that the woman constructs as she moves away from the abusive relationship. Yet the narratives from the participants in this study strongly indicate that the majority of women, although heavily reliant on the survivor identity in the immediate post-relationship phase, were readily able to subsume this identity within their sense of self as they progressed. This did not mean that they wished to abandon that identity; just that it slowly became displaced as the focus of their journey and eventually became merely one part of their overall makeup. To completely shed the survivor identity is to deny a significant life-event that has shaped the woman, and her subsequent life. Yet therapeutic research has made it clear that whatever new identity the abused women develops in freedom "must include the memory of her enslaved self" (Herman, 1992: 93). That is, the identity of survivor becomes an integral part of the woman's post-relationship journey, even when it is relegated to the periphery of her sense of self. As can be seen in the responses above from Rose, Susan, Sweet and Yeppoon, all automatically identified themselves as survivors despite having been out of the abusive relationship for significant periods of time and having experienced many other life-events since the abuse.

When the removal of the word 'survivor' from the vernacular is located alongside expectations inherent within the 'recovery' schema, and its connotations of cure, a pattern can be seen wherein abused women are expected to be able to cleanly separate from their past at some stage. This expectation amounts to a particular post-relationship stage where women shed the identity of survivor and, having now 'recovered' from the effects of their abuse, are able to move forward cleanly. Findings from this research study indicate

that this is rarely the case. Instead, the majority of participants readily identified the longevity of the financial, emotional and physical effects of the violence, and, in many cases, were even able to partially validate their losses by their identification with the 'survivor' identity. As such, the women were able to draw significant pride from their status as 'survivors', whilst simultaneously treating it as just one of the many labels – like mother, teacher, feminist, university graduate – that shaded and moulded their lives.

The move away from identifying abused women as survivors is even more concerning when it is recognised that no comparable move is taking place with regard to war veterans, concentration camp survivors, or others who have survived severe trauma. In fact, given that the trend is restricted to women who have experienced sexual assault and/or DV, the situation must raise questions with regard to underlying gender bias and the public versus private dichotomy. After all, when a fireman's account of his September 11 survival can be called a 'herography' (Green, 2003), and we nominate a certain day every year for war veterans to commemorate survival and loss amidst a display of national pride, why are abused women alone being encouraged to shed their survivor identity and move on without it? Perhaps the reasons stem from fundamental differences within locations – war veterans and the like are willingly made visible through a vicarious sense of national pride – whereas national embarrassment and automatic protection of the status quo frames a preference for DV survivors to be rendered invisible.

9.6 Summary and recommendations

With most forms of trauma, such as a car accident or an assault by a stranger, the primary consideration is extrication from immediate danger – i.e. removal from the car wreck or escape/rescue from the violent stranger. Following this a period of recovery ensues, with the duration and nature dependent on the degree of trauma experienced. Once recovered, however, the survivor is encouraged to move forward, supported by a society more than ready to condemn and/or punish careless drivers and abusive strangers. DV does not fit easily within this framework. Firstly, the trauma experienced is not singular but complex. Secondly, extrication itself puts the survivor at her greatest risk (Ferrante, 1996; Lees, 2000) and thirdly, many battered women are obliged to have ongoing contact with the perpetrator of the crime. This situation is akin to having survived a serious car accident – only to be compelled to return on a regular basis to the scene of the accident, or to have been assaulted by a stranger – only for him to become a mentor to your children and thus a significant part of the rest of your life.

Critical examination of a popular, and influential, term such as 'recovery' is not an idle endeavour. Instead, there is an ongoing requirement for any preferred terminology to be analysed, rather than unquestioningly accepted as indicative of a particular 'truth' (Macdonald, 1998: 2). Whilst the power of the recovery model is evidenced simply by the number of participants in this study who remained confused by its implications, its profound limitations were also evident in the number who rejected it. Instead, whether or not they used the term, the women described the enduring effects of abuse in ways that suggested not cure but compromise, not recovery but incorporation.

The findings of this study indicate that an abusive relationship will impact, in a variety of ways and degrees, for the remainder of the lives of most survivors. To tell these women, therefore, that they are able to 'recover' from their experiences is to deceive them again. To tell them, however, that they are able to incorporate their experiences into both their sense of self and their ongoing journey is to offer them a realistic, achievable and potentially empowering goal. Piercy (1982) describes the past as the compost that feeds the present and writes that: "the past confounded me only when I believed it was passed and dismissed it" (1982: 197)⁴⁴. In a similar fashion, the vast majority of the participants in this study fought to understand their past and integrate it into their future. Those who eventually concluded that actual recovery is unattainable and the construct itself incompatible, are offering us a truth that underpins the long-term effects of DV overall.

- This report recommends that stakeholders in DV fields frame their responses to the long-term effects of DV within an understanding of the limitations of the 'recovery' concept.
- This report also recommends that current moves to encourage the 'shedding' of the survivor label should be critically examined, as the findings here strongly indicate that the majority of women with a history of DV find identifying as a survivor empowering, even after the abuse itself has become a less dominant issue within their lives.

⁴⁴ Piercy writes here in the voice of a fictional character.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Further information on methodological issues regarding *Battle-scars: Long-term effects of prior domestic violence*

Publicity

It was acknowledged at the outset of the research study that extensive publicity was essential to its success. Considerable effort was therefore expended on this area and careful consideration given to the publicity being accessible to both men and women. Explanatory flyers were sent to 148 venues, such as libraries etc, to advertise the study. In addition, letters and flyers were sent to 29 local Victorian newspapers, resulting in mention of the research in at least ten, including three that ran full interviews with accompanying pictures.

The research, and availability of the questionnaire, was also advertised in publications such as the *Herald-Sun*⁴⁵, the Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre newsletter and the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse newsletter. A website was also set up to allow access to the questionnaire online, and this was promoted and linked to a variety of related sites including:

- Women's Services Network (WESNET)
- Melbourne City Mission (MCM) Youth net
- VICNET Support Services
- Victims Of Crime Assistance League NSW (VOCAL)
- Relationships Australia
- Stop Domestic Violence discussion forum
- Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse website
- Infoxchange
- Anglicare and Flinders University
- Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre website

Finally, numerous requests were sent out for verbal/word of mouth promotion with positive results from several psychologists, and organisations such as the VOCAL solo mothers group, Hanover House, the Partnerships Against Domestic Violence Taskforce, the Victorian Community Council against Violence and the Salvation Army. The entire publicity campaign resulted in only one negative response and this was from a men's group, to whom a flyer had been sent, who felt that the questionnaire was designed to "portray men as evil bastards and women as the poor innocent victims."

Questionnaire

The main research tool was a comprehensive questionnaire that was designed to harvest broad data on the long-term effects of DV overall. The questionnaire was made available online as well as at 44 key community outlets (such as Neighbourhood Centres, Community Health Centres, etc) from June till August 2003 inclusively, a period of three months. In addition a mobile phone number was available for those who chose to phone and have the questionnaire posted out to their home address with a return-paid envelope provided. Due to the emotional nature of the issue, every attempt was made to design the questionnaire sensitively and the phone numbers of several support organisations were included for those participants who might be distressed by the subject matter.

In all, 162 questionnaires were collected by the end of the three-month research period. 28 of these were eventually excluded for the following reasons: male respondents (9), same-sex relationships (3), still in an abusive relationship (6), within one year of the abusive relationship (3), incomplete questionnaires (5), and other reasons (2). Forty-five percent of the questionnaires were received via the website and 33% through the postal option, with the remaining 22% being deposited in the community centre boxes.

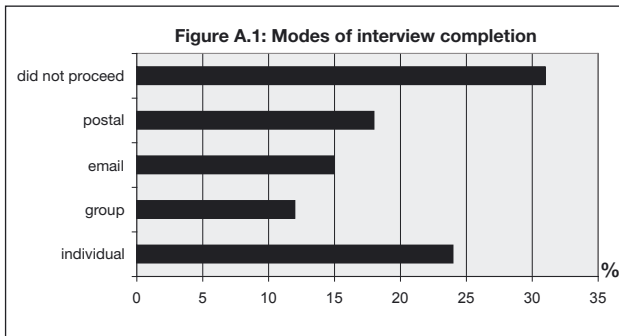
The questionnaire was designed to deliver an overall quantitative view of the long-term effects of DV. It should be noted, however, that the questionnaire was also designed to provide participants with an opportunity to include narrative so that they would not feel constrained by restrictive questioning. Over 50% of the participants took advantage of this opportunity and the extra information they provided informed the content and structure of the subsequent interviews.

In-depth interviews

The questionnaire also outlined the optional second stage of the study, an individual semi-structured interview designed to further investigate aspects of the women's experiences raised in the questionnaire. It is worth noting here that the findings generated by the interview phase far exceeded expectations. It was this rich data that made clear the limitations of the 'recovery' framework and eventually informed the conceptual approach of the thesis itself. In addition, the overwhelming affirmative response by questionnaire respondents (43%) to the interview phase was indicative of the existence of continuing long-term effects of DV that they wished to discuss. This response so exceeded expectations that several other interview options had to be devised in order to accommodate the extra number of volunteers.

Although different modes of interview were offered, all interviews had an open and fluid structure. This involved a number of open-ended questions that invited the respondent to reflect in detail about pertinent issues, such

⁴⁵ *The Herald-Sun* is a popular Melbourne tabloid-style newspaper.



(n=68)

as their feelings towards the perpetrator and their opinions regarding the long-term effects on their children. This structure was intended as a guide only with the objective being that each respondent tell their story without a sense of being judged or having to explain their actions. The emphasis was placed on exploration rather than explanation and this meant that in many cases, particularly in the group and individual interviews, not all of the interview questions were necessarily covered.

The individual interviews were conducted in a venue of the participant's choosing (in all but one case this was their homes) and lasted an average of seventy-five minutes each. Two of the group interviews were conducted at a respondent's home and the third was held in a local community centre. Group interviews were much longer with one lasting almost three hours. In the case of the longest group interview, participants continued the discussion of their own volition first in the centre's kitchen and then in the car-park for a further thirty minutes.

Analysis

At the end of the three-month research period, completed questionnaires were coded into Microsoft Excel. The data was then imported into SPSS where an overall summary could be performed using frequencies and cross-tabulations. The interviews were all taped and then transcribed, after which the tapes were erased⁴⁶. Relevant segments of the data were then incorporated into the quantitative data summary of the questionnaire and the remainder was analysed for relevance to the core research questions. Narratives were transported to a self-designed database that used the interview questions, and any additional information that had arisen, to organise the qualitative findings overall. This database was also used to house any narrative content that had been received as part of the questionnaires. After all qualitative material had been analysed and focal points made clear, this system enabled a simple search to retrieve information as required.

⁴⁶ This was done primarily because it was not uncommon for interviewees to request that a section of their interview not be used in the actual study. In addition, interviewees often used the real names of the people they were discussing.

Appendix B

Further information on the demographical background of study participants for *Battle-scars: Long-term effects of prior domestic violence*

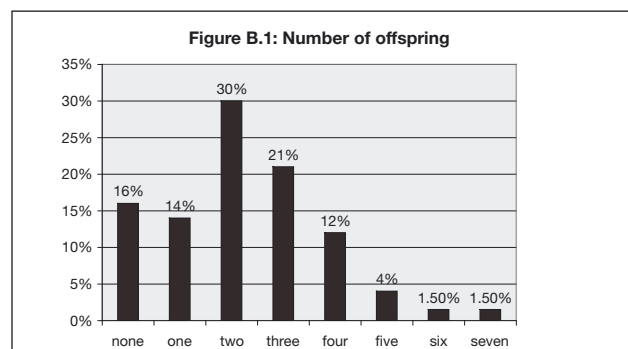
Background of participants

As the study was predominantly publicised within Victoria, the majority of volunteers came from this state. Four questionnaires were also received from Western Australia, six from Queensland, twelve from South Australia, and twelve from New South Wales. Two international responses were also received (one from England and one from Canada), and these were accepted as both women were Australian residents who had been living in Australia at the time of the abusive relationship.

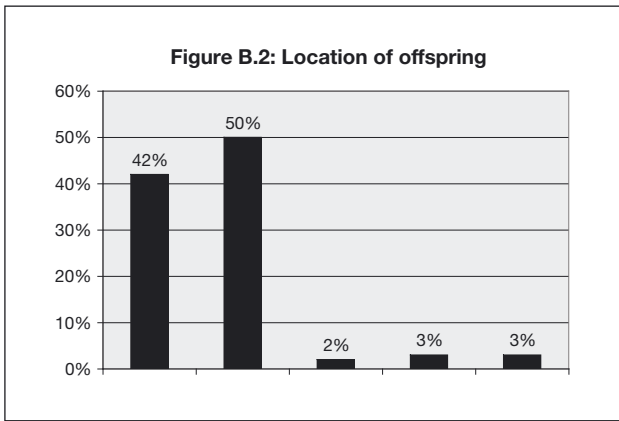
Postcodes were used to ascertain that, of these Victorian responses, 37% were inner-urban, 48% were outer-urban, and 16% were rural. Whilst the majority of the research participants were working outside the home for some part of the week, 52 were either full-time students or involved with home-duties only. With regard to educational levels, 19% of participants had completed their education at year 12 or under, 19% had attained TAFE qualifications, and 43% had a university degree. It is important to note, however, that this does not reflect educational levels at the time of the abusive relationship, as a considerable number (74%) of the participants were either engaged in further education at the time of the study, or had undertaken re-training of some type since the cessation of the abusive relationship.

Amount of offspring

Overall there was a total of 301 offspring, 130 of whom were aged eighteen years or over, and therefore deemed adults for the purposes of this research. The average number of offspring per woman was 2.2 (Figure B.1). Of these, 204 were the biological offspring of the perpetrator under discussion and the majority of the remainder were the participant's children born either before the abusive relationship or since. The location of the offspring at the time of the study is shown at Figure B.2. Several children of the perpetrator from previous relationships as well as children of subsequent partners of the participant are included here, but only where they were deemed to have been introduced into the familial structure in a relatively permanent sense that impacted on the survivor herself.



(n=134)



(n=301)