



RESEARCH PROJECT

STAYING HOME/LEAVING VIOLENCE

Interim findings

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Introduction

I would like to give you a taster of how women have responded to the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse research, “Staying home/leaving violence.” The research is exploring with women themselves the question of staying in or leaving their own home, when women are leaving a domestic violence situation.

A total of 29 women from South East Sydney, Western Sydney and the Far South Coast have participated in interviews which focused on how they left a relationship involving domestic violence. Women have responded to the research questions in a number of ways, indicating that there is no right or wrong answer to staying in your home or leaving it. Rather what we need are real choices so women can decide for themselves.

To date, the research has identified the following six (6) different types of responses to staying home/leaving violence.

Women’s responses

1. ***“If only women could stay”***

The first and probably the most common response was from a woman we’ll call Eve. She left her large and comfortable family home on the NSW mid-north coast to flee a long-term domestic violence situation. Eve ended up living in a substandard converted garage in outer Sydney — this was all she could afford—even though her own home came complete with a double garage. Eve would have loved to remain in her own home, to my research question she replied, *“if only women could stay!”* She believed there was no

way the violent man would have left voluntarily, and if he had been removed by the police that he would have returned. She said there was no way you could keep him away from the house, especially when he was in one of his drunken rages.

So these are two central issues the research needs to deal with, removal of the violent partner from the home, and keeping the violent partner out of the home over time

Eve, like a number of other women in the study, did not want to leave her own home, but felt she did not have a choice. This feeling of having no choices was a recurrent theme throughout the interviews, and something most of the women had in common.

Eve was an older woman in her early 60s, and instead of her age being a barrier to change it was actually a motivating factor in her decision to leave the violent marriage. In her own words: *"I'm getting to an age where I just wanted something better for myself."*

2. ***"What's the point of leaving, he would find me anywhere and I would be back to square one."***

Another response that was not so common but offers important insights is typified by a woman we'll call Nell. For this woman the violence began when she left her partner due to his gambling problems. (It won't surprise any of you that many of the perpetrators were gamblers and alcoholics.) He had been stalking her inside, outside and around her home for three long years, but instead of a charge of stalking laid against him, the perpetrator was charged with AVO breaches incurring small penalties.

To my question, have you thought about leaving your home, she was adamant, she said, *"What's the point, he would find me anywhere and I would be back to square one."*

For most of the women in the study, the men did find out where they were living, and with the dominance of family law orders, shared parenting and mobile phones it is unusual for a woman with children to be living at a location unknown to the man. One woman I interviewed actually had her location outed for the perpetrator by the local court on the AVO form.

An Aboriginal woman, we'll call her Kerry, fled her home and her violent ex-partner went to prison, so you might assume that she would be safe. However while Kerry was living in a halfway house, he found out her address and sent someone around to terrorise her in the middle of the night. In Kerry's own words:

"Well, I had to leave, he got my address, a friend of mine who I'm close friends with decided to tell him where I was and one night I was at home and he had been ringing me all week but I was pretty much leaving anyway because you know he got my phone number and stuff so the staff said it's

probably best that you leave so I was ready to leave anyway and one night I was there and there was a knock at the door and this man was standing there because it didn't have a screen door and I opened it, it didn't have a peep hole, when I opened it he kicked the door in ..." Kerry goes on to say how he trashed the place, and she had to leave her home, again.

3. ***"As long as he was aware of where I was living I never would've been safe."***

There was another group of women equally adamant that it would never be safe for them to remain in the home, and who wanted to flee to the safety of a refuge. They didn't believe there was anything that could be put into place to make their home a safe option for them.

Leaving home sometimes sets in train a series of short-term stays in refuges and with friends, all the time fleeing a violent partner. In the words of one young woman, whose partner pursued her when she fled interstate with her baby, *"As long as he was aware of where I was living I never would've been safe."* This woman did not believe that the police and courts could provide her with protection, in her own words: *"I'll be dead by the time the police arrive."*

An Indian woman wanted to leave her violent and unhappy home for the security and emotional support offered by a refuge. She was suffering from a mental illness, and suicidal, after sustaining 24 years of violence and abuse in two domestic violence relationships. She was fearful if she had stayed alone in her home that *"I might just kill myself."*

4. ***"It was just so relieving to go, like a big breath of fresh air."***

While leaving your home behind can have devastating consequences for some women, including homelessness and poverty, for other women leaving their home and setting up new housing can be positive and empowering.

For one woman in the study, we'll call her Sally, new housing was symbolic of a fresh start and a new life without violence. This is how she described her escape from her home on the south coast, with her three young children. *"It was so relieving like I just, I'll never forget that feeling as I was driving down the driveway like, I was petrified that he was going to hear the car start up and he was going to come running out so I was really concentrating on just getting the car started and getting it going because I thought once the car's going he can't catch us sort of thing, but I'll never forget getting to the bottom of the driveway and it was just so relieving to just go, like I'm gone, I'm out of there, like a big breath of fresh air."*

For one of the Aboriginal women leaving her home meant leaving an environment of drug addiction and dealing. Moving from western Sydney to the far south coast was, in her own words, *"the best thing that's happened for me"*.

Remaining in a home that held the memories of violence and abuse was something most of the women spoke about. This was another reason Sally wanted to leave her home. In her own words:

“Yeah, because there was so many memories in the house, like I mean there was like holes in the walls for instance where he’d kicked the walls so stuff like that I would have, it would have ended up being my responsibility to get it fixed or I would have had to still keep looking at it everyday ...”.

5. ***“I run, I leave him, I leave my children with him because I am new in Australia I don’t know somewhere to go and I don’t know anyone.”***

For many women, how they perceived their ‘home’ was central to the question of whether or not they felt entitled to remain in it. One Filipino woman, the new arrival to Sydney quoted above, did not feel ‘at home’ in her new country, and had no sense of having *any* home here. She referred to her home as ‘his’ home, which she fled, leaving her three children behind.

The research has demonstrated that women may lose their children when they flee a violent home. It is not always possible for the children to go with their mother, some refuges will not admit boys older than 12 years and adult children may not want to leave their home and neighbourhood. Three of the women in the study left their children behind when they fled violence, these women were left devastated and grieving their loss.

The story of the Filipino woman is particularly tragic. She reared her three young children by herself in Lebanon, when her Lebanese husband walked out on her and came to Australia. After seven years of absence, during which her husband made no contact with his wife or children, nor did he provide any financial assistance, the woman decided to come to Australia with her three children to find out what had happened. She stayed with her husband for one short month in Sydney, only to flee his violence and abuse and end up on the street with nowhere to go. In her own words, *“I run, I leave him, I leave my children with him because I am new in Australia I don’t know somewhere to go and I don’t know anyone.”*

When I interviewed her she was living in refuge accommodation, while her three girls were living with her husband. The man did not allow the children to visit their mother at the refuge, permitting a visit two hours every fortnight at a local shopping centre. When the woman sought housing in order to allow her children to be reunited with her, an officer’s response from the local Department of Housing agency was that they could not house her if she did not have her children currently living with her.

If it were not for the considerable care and attention provided by the refuge outreach workers, this woman may well have taken her own life.

Some of the Aboriginal women interviewed did not have a home, in the white or Anglo sense of that word. They were living with relatives, or living a

transient lifestyle, so the idea of being able to remain in their own home did not make a lot of sense. One Aboriginal woman was living with her partner's mother, so the question of removing her violent partner from the home was not a viable option. For one woman remaining in a home has probably never been an option, more a matter of always moving on. Similarly, the idea of leaving violence did not make sense to some of the Aboriginal women interviewed; in the words of one woman, *"You don't really ever leave the violence, because it's all around you, if you know what I mean."*

6. ***"It wouldn't be the right thing to do to leave a man in his own home and chuck out the mother of three children."***

Finally, there was a group of women in the study who did have a sense of their home, and their children's home. They had a sense of entitlement to it and were determined to remain in their home, with their children, and without the violent partner. Out of a total of 29 women interviewed, nine (9) women remained in their own home when leaving a domestic violence situation. An additional two (2) women who experienced more than one domestic violence relationship, both left and remained in their home.

Some of these women got the man out of the house themselves, through sheer force of will. This is the story of Cher, a working class battler from the inner city,

"It all started after 26 years of our marriage, I began to try to shift my husband away out of the house because I'd just had enough of his you know abuse and my children, my two boys were well and truly grown up they were 26 and 24 and my daughter was just turning 16 and I thought well now he can't kill my kids because they are too big, he wouldn't be able to kill my boys anymore and certainly won't get near my daughter to hurt her because uhm, I just won't let him so I said to him, "you get out and don't come back", you know...been hanging around all these years threatening our lives and whatever anyway he went which was very much surprising to me..."

Interviewer: *He must have known that you meant it when you said that.*

Yeah I told him that I was going to uhm, I just threatened him you know if you don't get going I'd be going to the authorities and you'll be in big trouble and anyway he went and he took a room in the pub where he drank cause I said to him, you know you're always up there why don't you just go and live there so he got a room in the pub and ..."

A young Tongan woman was able to get her violent husband to leave the home, only to have other factors conspire to render her and her two young children homeless. The woman got the man out by packing up all his belongings, putting them by the front door and telling him to go, which he did. He was a Pacific Islander and went to stay with his extended family, coming back to the flat only to visit his children. However when the woman tried to change the lease of the privately rented flat into her name, the real estate agent conducted an inspection and discovered extensive damage done to the

flat by the violent man. As a result the tenancy was not renewed and the woman found she was placed on the TICA “bad tenants” list, which may prevent her from renting other properties on the private market.

For many women it will not be an option to remove the violent partner by themselves. It may be very unsafe for the woman to tell the man to leave, and the man may ignore her demands. In such cases police removal of the violent partner is critical, as occurred with a young Lebanese woman who we’ll call Anna.

After a particularly violent incident involving sexual assault, Anna wanted her husband out of the home. In her own words, *“I told him to pack his bags and leave and he took it as if it was a big joke and I was shaking like hell, I was devastated.”* Then Anna rang the police, had the police remove her husband, and took out an AVO with an exclusion condition to keep him out of the home.

Anna considered that the perpetrator would abide by police and court rulings, and (to the surprise of the interviewer who thought that he might do a ‘runner’) when she contacted the police he put his jeans and bumbag on to go with the police to the station. Interventions by the police and courts may be most effective for perpetrators who are either (apart from the domestic violence) law abiding, or who feel cowed and intimidated by the law.

It is interesting to note that Anna was bemused by my research, and was stunned to find out that not all women stay in their own homes, like she had, that in fact the more common response is to leave the home. She says, *“I understand the research and everything but I don’t understand why would they take the mother out and take her to a refuge.”*

This is how she responded to my question about what made her decide to stay in her own home:

“Well I’ve got nowhere else to go, and I mean it’s easier in my opinion for him to leave than me with 3 kids to be chucked out and not knowing where to go.”

I asked her if she had considered going to a refuge.

“Didn’t even think about that, didn’t even think about that, I never would think that a magistrate would order a mother of 3 to leave the house, that wouldn’t be civil at all, it wouldn’t be the right thing to do to leave a man in his own home and chuck out the mother of 3, I don’t think a magistrate would do that but if he did for any stupid reason...”

And while it is true that a magistrate will not order the victim of violence to leave her home, if a court allows the man to remain or return by denying an exclusion order this may effectively make the woman leave, or in Anna’s words, “chuck her out”. Certainly Anna felt that she would have to leave home immediately with her three children if the magistrate did not grant the final order excluding her husband.

Conclusion

From the interview data collected and in consultation with Clearinghouse staff and the project's Steering Committee, a service framework and pilot service model/s are being developed, which are able to support women and their children to remain safely in their own home.

The four (4) key components of the framework are:

- ⊕ Removal of the perpetrator
- ⊕ Keeping the violent partner out of the home
- ⊕ Safety issues for the woman and her children
- ⊕ Longer term support and prevention of future violence

Services are invited to provide input into the detail of the framework, and to put forward suggestions for the pilot model/s.

Services are also welcome to make any comments on the research and the initial findings as presented in this paper.

It is anticipated that the final report will be available by December 2003.

Please forward your comments and suggestions to Robyn Edwards on 02 9385 3843 or email robyn.edwards@unsw.edu.au

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