

# **STAYING HOME/LEAVING VIOLENCE**

PAPER FOR NATIONAL HOMELESSNESS CONFERENCE

## **BEYOND THE DIVIDE**

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## 1. Introduction.

Hello everyone. It's great to be here at the conference, to talk about the initial findings of new research currently being conducted in NSW, aimed at preventing women from falling into homelessness.

The research, named *Staying home/Leaving violence*, challenges conventional wisdom that a woman leaving a domestic violence relationship also has to leave her own home (often with several kids in tow).

The National SAAP Data clearly tells us that there is a connection between domestic and family violence and women's homelessness. Indeed the most common reason women with children give for accessing SAAP services is domestic and family violence.

SAAP data for NSW tells us that domestic violence was the main reason for using SAAP services for 54% of female clients with children, and for 39% of female clients without children aged over 25 years. (2001-02)

It's great that the conference agenda clearly reflects the connection between domestic and family violence and homelessness. *Beyond the Divide* is an opportunity for us to consider ways that women and their children can remain in their own home, when they are leaving a domestic violence situation.

## 2. The Research.

The research is being conducted by the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, and has been made possible through a grant provided by the NSW Department of Community Services.

In depth interviews are being conducted with women who have left a domestic violence situation, in order to explore the question of how women can be enabled to remain safely in their own homes, with the violent partner leaving.

The research is based on the principle of choices for women. It's not saying that women should stay in their homes, or that they should leave their homes. Rather there needs to be some choices for women and our service pathways should reflect these choices. All too often services have assumed that when women leave violence, they also need to leave their home.

The research started in October last year, and to date I have interviewed 12 women, from South East Sydney, the NSW far south coast and Western Sydney. Women's ages range from the late 20s to early 60s. Eight (8) women were from Anglo backgrounds, three (3) from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and one (1) woman was Aboriginal. All women were referred by community based organisations, a number of which were SAAP services. The twelve (12) women represent about half the total number of women I hope to interview. So far I have about 400 pages of raw data, just from the interviews.

### 3. Key themes.

Today I'd like to discuss five (5) themes which are emerging from the research findings: *(provide overhead)*

- Do women want to remain in their homes, or leave?
- Safety issues
- Blame and responsibility
- Victimhood and women's agency
- Advantages in being able to remain in the home.

#### 3.1 Staying or leaving home

Broadly, there were three (3) different responses to my question, "Would you have liked to stay in your own home when you left a domestic violence relationship, with the violent partner having to leave?"

The first response was typified by a woman we'll call Kerry. To my question, would you have liked to stay in your own home, she answered, "Well Yeah!" If she had not been so polite she probably would have said "Well, der!"

To my follow up question, "Would your man have left the home, if you had stood there and said OK, you go, there's the front door". Her answer to this, "No Way!"

So this is one of the key issues the research has to come to grips with, removal of the violent partner.

Kerry did leave her home to flee the violence, and spent the next two years with her two kids staying in a string of refuges, with her mother, and in half way houses. She now has something more permanent, through a Community Tenancy Scheme.

The second response was typified by a woman we'll call Sally, who had three children under 8 years.

For Sally, leaving the home was an important part of leaving the violence and the relationship. New housing was symbolic of a fresh start and a new life without violence. This is how she described her escape from her home:

"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 sort of thing and yeah it was like, and it was a really enjoyable trip up to XXX, like we had to drive up to XXX and it was like

all the way we were like happy, just knowing that we had that new life to come to..."

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 and it was just, because there was so many like memories in the house, like uhm, 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 ..."

The third response was typified by a woman we'll call Cher.

After 26 years of a violent and dangerous marriage to a drunkard who never paid a penny towards rent or the mortgage, Cher was adamant she was going to stay in her home, and get him out. In her own words:

"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 ...."

Cher, like other women who remained in their homes, had a sense of entitlement to the family home, after all she had paid for it, every cent. She was a working class battler, had 3 kids, worked for over 20 years, survived a violent marriage and paid off her own home. To my mind she is a truly heroic woman.

I believe that the best way to approach this question of whether women want to remain in their own homes, or leave the home, is to provide real choices to women so they can make their own decision about their housing. This means breaking the nexus between leaving violence and leaving your home.

### 3.2 Safety for the woman and children

It has been accepted wisdom for a good 30 years that a women in domestic violence needs to flee her home, in order to be safe. The recent Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisation's (AFHO) policy statement on domestic and family violence states: "At present in Australia most women and children who do not wish to live with violence in the home are forced to flee, as their safety cannot be assured within the home." (p24)

Let's examine this a bit more closely. I want to ask can we assure women's safety if they flee their home? Both Kerry and Sally fled their homes, but they both experienced further violence from their partners, who found out where they were living.

In Kerry's situation, her partner went to prison, so you might assume that she would be safe, at least while he served his prison term. However, while Kerry was living in a half way house, he found out her address from a friend 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 then 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, again.

Sally was a woman who moved towns to get away from her abusive partner. However, he simply found out which school the children were going to, and he moved right next door to the school, and proceeded to stalk and harass his ex partner.

When we consider this issue of safety, we need to be looking at the reality of domestic violence and the knowledge base that we have built up. This tells us the following:

- There is a heightened risk of violence for a woman when she leaves a domestic violence relationship. However we don't advise a woman to remain in a violent relationship because of this heightened risk.
- Most men do not come back to the woman kicking down the door and punching their way in, in the words of one woman from the study most men are "sucking" their way back in, with flowers, sorries and the like.
- Most men do know, or find out, where the woman is living. This is particularly the case where children and family law orders are involved.

In the words of Kerry, the reality of domestic violence is that he could always come back one day, especially if there are children involved: "Women that

are in domestic violence are going to live with that, especially if you have their children...like they could come back...whether they do or whether they don't you're still going to always have it in the back of your mind like are they going to come back, I don't think anything's going to change that..."

My argument here is that the woman's lack of safety is related to the often relentless nature of domestic violence, regardless of where she is living. Her safety, or lack of it, is not tied to whether she has left her home or remained in it.

The research is exploring with women a range of different safety strategies, if women do choose to remain in their own homes. One woman, who I will call Denise, chose to return to her home when the violent partner left with another woman. He was a very dangerous man who made numerous threats to kill her. These are some of the strategies Denise used to build up her safety.

"Um, taking out an AVO, that has made me feel secure, you know, and just to make sure that they do act on it, you know the police, and just be persistent with it that it does get presented to the other partner, because sometimes it can drag on, they can have files, oh yes we're slowly getting there, just make sure that you keep on..."

*Interviewer:* So did you have to do that, follow up the police?

Yes I did, to make sure, you know I was on the phone all the time to make sure, I wasn't secure until I knew they'd actually served that interim on him. And then I felt at ease, but until then you've got to just make sure they do serve it, because otherwise you're still living in fear, you know cause he still can come on the premises until that interim is actually served to him in person.

How did the police respond, how did you find them?

Good. If you just tell them the circumstances and that you've been threatened and that you've got the fear of your husband coming near the premises or you know, that you don't want to live in fear, of your ex, that you want to live in peace. I'm sure they would understand.

We all understand that.

Especially if he is a violent person. Also it's good to have a dog. (laughs) For security. I've got two German Shepherds. They always let me know if someone's coming to the door, coming into the front yard. As long as they are fenced in and you've got a sign beware of the dog. You're protected.

That's great. They're good company as well, aren't they.

Yeah, they are. And you know you can leave your premises and know that nobody's just going to go through your backyard or touch anything that they

shouldn't. I really think that a good dog around the house is worth it. (laughs)  
Yes, and also a phone.

Yes, of course, a mobile?

Yes, or a hands free. If it's stormy, you can't use an ordinary house phone, where with a hands free it's OK. I really think it's essential to have a phone on. Because you just never know when you might need to contact someone in a hurry. You know in an emergency.

They are really good suggestions, all of them. They've worked for you from the sounds of it.

Oh yes, and also change your locks on your house.

So you did that?

Yes that was the first thing that I did when I moved back into the house.

Did the Housing Department organize that, the change of locks?

Yes, they did. I asked for the locks to be changed. So they gave me another key, because I was worried he might have got a double cut of the key, and he just thought he had the right to come in any time because the house was still in his name, and it was the first thing I did. And also I put security pins in the front windows, that's just caution against anyone coming in and breaking in."

Safety issues will continue to be critical to the research study, and will be further explored in the next round of interviews.

### **3.3 Blame and responsibility**

The issue of blame came up in each of the 12 interviews, and guess what, in each of the cases the man has blamed the woman for his violence. Not one of the men admitted to the woman that he had a problem with violence, it was all her fault.

This is how Sally responded to my question, "Did he think he had a problem with violence?"

"No he didn't think he had a problem whatsoever...like everything was somehow brought back to be my fault...I mean it was as simple as if I hadn't spoken to him in that tone of voice then he wouldn't have got angry..."

Another woman, Jill, was blamed for her partner's explosive violence which resulted in physical violence to her, extensive damage to their home, and a siege situation involving the police. Often women internalize the blame, in her own words:

“I didn’t want him blaming me for anything else, cause he said, and still to this day, we’ve hardly ever talked about it but if I would mention it to him today, he would still tell me that it was my fault that the siege happened because I opened my mouth in the beginning, I said something about him drinking so I started it.

*Interviewer* Funny how the innocent party gets blamed.

I got blamed for the whole lot, I said ‘yeah that was me with the petrol can and smashing windows left right and centre’.

You can’t take the blame for that.

I did for a long time though, I said well, God if I would’ve just done what mum said you know ages ago and just shut up and gone along with him and kept him happy none of this would’ve happened...”

Another woman, we’ll call her Amy, thought her partner’s problems with violence could be addressed by him going to counselling. This is her story: “...and all I kept saying is it’s so simple just get violence counselling you’ve got a problem, and then he’d turn it around and say no you’ve got the problem you’re the violent one, you’re the one that made me be a gambler, you’re the one, I’ve never hit a woman in my life except you and then yeah you’re the one with the problem cause you get me so angry...”

This issue of blame and responsibility is central to the research question, which is asking who needs to bear the consequences for the violence and leave their family home, the victim or the perpetrator?

This woman blaming may be one of the factors forcing the woman to flee her home. One of the women, we’ll call her Anne, is talking about how the police offered to help her collect her belongings from her home, after she fled a domestic violence situation. I ask her the following question in relation to the possibility of police removing the perpetrator from the home:

“But they (police) didn’t say to you we’ll let you stay there and get him out, they didn’t say that, did you ever expect that they might say that?”

No, for some reason, no, you always think it’s you that’s got to go...and I think too why we think like that is because it’s drummed into us it’s our fault why the blues are happening, I think that’s why that it’s just automatically that the woman leaves...”

We have been talking now, in the women’s movement, in government bureaucracies and the community sector, for a very long time about the perpetrator being held accountable for the violence. Despite this women are still blamed for the violence and bear many of the consequences of the violence, including having to leave their own homes.

### 3.4 Victimhood and women's agency

Another theme coming out of the interviews relates to women's own strength and agency. We all have a picture in our heads of a victim of domestic violence, bruised, cowering, fearful, submissive and fleeing to a refuge in the dead of night.

We don't always see the other picture, of a woman using her own agency, or authority, or strength, to stand up for herself, get her house back, get her kids back, and get her life back. This is what I saw when I interviewed Denise. Denise had been a victim of domestic violence throughout her 20 year marriage, and in the end her husband literally threw her out of the house. However, she successfully fought for the transfer of the Housing Department tenancy from her husband's name over to her, regaining some control over her housing and hence her life.

(Interviewer summarises situation) "So the house was empty. That's great you came back, and negotiated with the Housing Department, so you could move back there, and eventually the Housing Department agreed. Is that right?"

Yes.

So he, your ex, still wanted his name on the lease despite all this?

Yes.

So how did you get around that?

Well, I just kept ringing them (Housing Department) and telling them to ring him and get him to sign it over, and so eventually he did sign it over because yeah I mean he couldn't hang on to it. He wanted to transfer this one up to Coffs Harbour so he could get a house at that end. But I was working at this end, (laughs) and that stopped that, cause I thought I'm not going to give up.

Well done. So how did you feel when it was signed over?

Oh wonderful, it was great. That I had an actual you know, the house was in my name, and I thought he didn't have no more part of it or control over it, that he couldn't use that against me. Cause that's the type of person that he was.

So you had a lot more control over your housing and your situation?

Yes, yes"

Eleven of the twelve women interviewed had children. These women showed their agency and strength in the way they were motivated and determined to protect their children, often putting themselves at risk.

This was Cher's story,

'It was really bad and he'd tell me to shut the kids up because he was doing, he'd be doing the scratchings on a Saturday morning for the race horses and he'd say shut those bloody kids up and you shut up and I can't hear the bloody wireless and stuff like that and if the kids make one little sound he used to grab them and he'd take them up the garden and he'd put them in the toilet and he'd lock them in the toilet and I'd just say no please don't, I'll do anything I'll do anything for you, I've got to go and get my kids you know and I'd go up there and get my kids out of the toilet...'

All of the women took some kind of action against the violence. Cher rang the police during a violent incident, despite the fact that her husband threatened to kill her if she ever rang for the police. In her own words:

"This night that he was pushing me around in the lounge room I knew that he lost control and you know I got really, really scared so I just ran to the phone and I grabbed it and I dialled 000 and he said, "how dare you ring the police on me" he said, "you wouldn't have the guts to tell the coppers what I'm doing", and I said, "wouldn't I" and I said, "would you please come to XXX Street, I'm being bashed up by my husband" and they came...and she (policewoman) said, "do you want to press charges?", I said, "no, I just want him out of this house", and she said, "okay then", and she took his car keys off him and his front door key and she said, "go and get a blanket and a pillow", she said, "go out and sleep in your car and don't come in this house until a decent hour in the morning", and she said to me, "if he comes in here harassing you just ring me straight away and I'll come back out", and the next morning he came in about 6:30 or 6 o'clock and he said, "how dare you ring the police on me" and he started again and I said, "oh well f.... off, you're not doing it to me anymore", and he said, "I'm going" and he left the house again and he said, "I'm going", and I said, "oh good" ...

Jill spoke about what happened when she stood firm against her partner, a very large man, when he was "running at her" during her second pregnancy. In her own words, "He had hurt me again like not just once or twice but it, the pattern of you know it could be every couple of weeks or every couple of days, whatever he felt like if I said something he didn't like there was always the threat where he'd come running at me and I'd always run and then, one day I didn't run I just stood there and I didn't even know why I did it like I could've smacked myself in the head for doing it because well how stupid is it to just stand there and wait for him."

And what did he do?

He stopped, he didn't touch me and I was, I was more scared of why didn't I run, why did I stand there and face up to him and I hadn't planned it like that or anything and the bluff worked and I thought oh my God, because I didn't show that I was weak and all of that..."

Woman's agency was clearly demonstrated by those women who told their violent partner to leave the house, in what can be seen as a reversal of the

stereotype of a woman fleeing to a refuge. This is Amy's story of getting the man to leave, after a very violent incident. "...cause when I told him to get out he was just sort of like, 'you can't make me get out' and I had this iron will and I just said, 'you get out and don't ever think you're coming back.'"

### **3.5 Advantages for the woman in being able to remain in her home**

All of the interviewees identified a number of benefits for women who were able to remain in their own home, on leaving a domestic violence situation.

These benefits for women included:

- being able to get on with your life
- less disruption for the children
- not having to go onto the refuge circuit
- not losing everything you have
- a sense of justice, in the words of one woman, "Why should I leave, it was my home?"

Cher spoke about the importance of her family home: "It's only a little old joint that I bought...well it was a home for me and my kids to live in, that's all I wanted was a roof over our heads."

Denise spoke about the importance of having some security: "I really love where it is (her house), you know where it's situated and I thought well you know I've got to have something for the kids to come back to if they need to, and to have some security, cause I don't want to be running around lost. That was the family home and I must try to do something to keep it..."

Kerry's story reminds us that when you've got a home it is worth doing everything you can to hold on to it. After years of living in refuges and temporary housing with two young children, this is what she said about her new Community Tenancy Scheme home: "I love it...I always remember the first time I saw it I cried, I opened the front door and was like a little girl that had just opened a present."

## **4. Conclusions**

I would like to say a few words of caution, which relate to the legacy of domestic violence and which remind us that enabling the woman to remain in her own home is no panacea to the scourge of domestic violence. Like women's homelessness, domestic violence needs its own prevention strategies.

The interviews have shown that it can be very difficult for some women to remain living apart from their ex-partner. There is often an emotional connection with the man, and when children are involved there is often regular contact.

Women who were able to remain in their own homes still had considerable problems, related to the legacy of domestic violence and the years of violence and abuse they sustained. Some women felt traumatized within their own homes, and became virtual prisoners within the four walls. Women were not always relieved, when the violent partner left, due to the emotional connection, feelings of loneliness and financial concerns. It was not easy for them, just because they had their own home.

However, as housing advocates we need to do what we can to prevent women from falling into homelessness, when they do leave a domestic violence relationship. It is totally unjust to expect the victim of violence to leave her own home, possibly pushing her into long term homelessness and poverty.

In conclusion, I would like to ask you, is it a scam, a sham, or a scandal that women have to flee their own home when they are leaving domestic violence? I think it's probably all three, and it's about time we collectively did something about it.

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*Your comments on the paper and the research study are very welcome, and can be made to Robyn Edwards on 9385 3843 or email [robyn.edwards@unsw.edu.au](mailto:robyn.edwards@unsw.edu.au)*

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## Staying Home/Leaving Violence

- Do women want to remain in their homes, or leave?
- Safety for women and children
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