

Submission to the National Children's Commissioner

Examination of children affected by family and domestic violence

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Situation Summary

The abuse I suffered throughout my pregnancy, destroyed the joy of having my first child, which should have been one of the most special times of my life

I could never fully articulate how it feels to hold your breath waiting to hear a precious heartbeat at your ultrasounds, when your pregnancy has been tormented by horrendous family violence

On the final assault, I knew my daughter and I were facing the reality that we would eventually be killed

Given my daughter's fragile age and critical period of her development, if we had not escaped the violence it would have had severe developmental, social, emotional and behavioural consequences

The family violence that myself and my daughter experienced escalated during my pregnancy and continued after the birth of my daughter.

I suffer from a rare auto immune disorder, which has no cure and is a life threatening condition, requiring to be treated with chemotherapy. This condition meant that my pregnancy was high risk for me and my unborn baby and I was required to be placed under the care of a high risk obstetrician.

The perpetrator was educated on the risks of a possible pregnancy in association with my potentially life threatening illness, including the possibility of foetal or maternal death.

Throughout my pregnancy I was very concerned that my baby would arrive prematurely due to the unrelenting stress of being physically and emotionally abused.

My daughter was born prematurely with a very low birth weight of 2.4 kg, she was extremely fragile, vulnerable and was borderline on being admitted to the special care nursery. I was required to return to the hospital for her monitoring the very day after she was able to be released home, due to this fragility.

The violent crimes committed left both my daughter and I distressed and profoundly traumatised

It deeply saddens me that I was a victim of repeated violent crimes, but more importantly that my daughter was a victim as well

It breaks my heart that my daughter was exposed to such violent and aggressive behaviour, terrified living in that environment, the perpetrator having no awareness of the fragility of a 4 and a half month old and prematurely born new baby and risked his own child's safety.

To hold a secret of this kind was soul destroying

ABUSIVE BEHAVIOURS:

My perpetrator was physically, verbally and emotionally abusive during the entire span of our relationship, even during my high risk pregnancy. Also sexually abusive on the final attack, where I was indecently assaulted. I had been spat on, kicked, punched, slapped, choked, pulled by my hair, suffered with a black eye, held up against walls, intimidated, pushed to the ground/bed, held down by my wrists/neck.

I had required physiotherapy after one assault where I attended on 3 separate occasions to rectify my injuries, although was unable to disclose at the time as the perpetrator attended all appointments along with me. After I had left the abusive relationship and was medically examined, I was informed that vertebrae behind my ribs had been fractured; they believe this was from this prior assault consistent with the account I disclosed that happened years earlier.

My daughter and I had objects thrown at and around us including: car keys, mugs, glasses, cutlery, remote controls, pillows, doonas, plates, a sandwich press, books, magazines, towels, phones, hot and cold drinks and sprayed with water. I was repeatedly called vulgar names and sexist remarks including 'woman' and told my place was in the kitchen.

On the final assault in October 2012, I was rendered almost unconscious from being choked; I suffered momentary deafness in my right ear and needed medical care to ensure my eardrum was not ruptured, redness and broken capillary blood vessels in front of my right ear. I had a swollen right cheek bone. Also I had bruising and broken capillary blood vessels and swelling under my right eye, which days later formed into a bruised, swollen black eye. I had finger marks, redness and broken capillary blood vessels on my neck and jaw line. I incurred redness and bruising on my chin, and also redness behind my left ear. I suffered with a lacerated and swollen ankle, and further large severe bruising and swelling on my right shin. I also had bruising and swelling on my right wrist as well as bruising and swelling on my outer arm-both on my left and right. My perpetrator dissolved my chemotherapy treatment in water at this assault. I received medical treatment for these injuries from my GP. It was very difficult for me to care for my daughter for a few weeks after the assault as I was in a great deal of physical pain.

Psychological / Emotional / Verbal:

Throughout the pregnancy, the perpetrator would state that he did not want the baby or myself.

The perpetrator referred to me as 'fat' sporadically throughout the pregnancy; this affected my overall confidence when already dealing with both a high risk pregnancy and multiple medical concerns for my own health. Further this made me feel conscious of my weight and subsequently could have placed my baby's weight and growth in jeopardy.

My bonding and attachment with my daughter was disrupted after the final assault. Due to the level of stress and shock my body was subjected to, my breast milk supply rapidly deteriorated to the point that and I was no longer able to feed my daughter. At the time, this left a huge emotional scar on me and feelings of inadequacy, as I had planned to breastfeed my daughter until required. I was stripped of this intimate bond with my daughter as I was forced to place her on formula and bottle feed her. I was also under a great deal of stress at this time, as my daughter initially refused bottle feeding and she subsequently lost weight.

The perpetrator regularly used offensive and vulgar language to me in the presence of my daughter. Directing his offensive and vulgar language to me through my daughter. Stating on one occasion to my daughter "your mummy is a C--- isn't she". This statement was made to degrade and humiliate me. It was an inappropriate comment to make, immaterial whether my daughter was at a developmental age where she could comprehend the meaning of the statement.

Physical:

I was abused physically during my pregnancy on more than one occasion I was pushed in the stomach

On one occasion the perpetrator forcefully pushed a door into my stomach while trying to escape his violence and move into the bathroom

On other occasions I was forcefully pushed onto a bed and on the floor whilst pregnant without any consideration of potential injury or consequences to myself or our unborn baby.

I was driven recklessly in the car during my pregnancy. The perpetrator would exceed speed limits and at times would go through red lights.

On one occasion the perpetrator forcefully slammed the car brakes on deliberately in nature causing the seat belt to pull with extreme force on my pregnant stomach. The trauma received from this incident resulted in some vaginal bleeding, which I told the perpetrator had occurred as a result, this raised my anxiety and significant concern for the health of my unborn baby- thankfully I did not miscarry my baby.

When 8 months pregnant both myself and the perpetrator went on our last holiday as a couple to [REDACTED] prior the baby's arrival. The perpetrator physically assaulted me the week prior to leaving for the holiday resulting in my body being badly bruised, so when on our holiday the perpetrator insisted I wear a long sleeve top despite the very hot weather to cover the bruises as he did not want people potentially seeing, commenting or questioning the origin of the bruises, he stated he would 'suffer with me by also wearing a long sleeve top in the heat'.

I was concerned that I would deliver my baby with bruises on my body that would reveal the physical abuse I was experiencing. These concerns were also present when I had to attend her regular ante natal appointments and scans nervous that my injuries would be seen, so I would dress to cover them.

On the final assault the perpetrator raised a glass vase lid above my daughter whilst she lay in her cot, gesturing to throw it at us, I stood with my arms outstretched across the cot as I was shaking knowing that if he was to throw it at us, it would hit me and hopefully I could protect majority of the impact for my daughter. Further on the final assault he threw a book at the wall next to my daughter's cot, this book landed in her cot hitting her feet.

On another occasion the perpetrator kicked me so severely in the shin again whilst holding my daughter, the force of this kick resulted in being kicked through the plaster wall behind me where I was standing. I sustained a painful lump and significant bruising on my shin on this occasion.

I was purposefully punched in my tender lactating breast with extreme force with a closed fist resulting in me being pushed from one side of the lounge room to the other side. This resulted in a significant bruise on my breast and made breastfeeding excruciatingly painful and difficult each time my daughter would feed. At the time my daughter required 2-3 hourly feeding intervals. It was difficult to breastfeed as the bruise was so large; I was forced to feed more privately and discretely until the bruise faded.

Unfortunately I was forced to wean my daughter onto formula due to the stress of the violence and unrelenting intimidation and abuse, my breast milk deteriorated completely. I had intended to breastfeed for as long as my daughter may have required to and I was deeply saddened as a result of this decision being taken away from me.

On more than one occasion the perpetrator would become aggressive and physically violent when my daughter was in my arms, using offensive language and becoming physically violent i.e. hitting, slapping or kicking me while my daughter was in my arms.

On one occasion I was forcefully kicked while holding my daughter in the hip that resulted in me becoming unstable on my feet and losing my balance endangering my daughter, almost dropping her from my arms onto floorboards, this bruise on my hip was documented and witnessed by a GP and a photograph provided at court.

Another time the perpetrator held myself and my daughter up against the wall as if to punch me, instead punching his own fist into his hand and smiling that I had cringed in fear whilst tightly holding my daughter.

During the assaults, my daughter would become distressed, cry and appear very scared and frightened in that environment clinging tightly to me to ensure her safety. It would take considerable time to console, reassure and calm my daughter.

When the perpetrator was becoming heightened or violent and I would ask for my daughter to be returned to me and he would forcefully push my daughter into my body and say "take it", manipulating my daughter's body in such a way that she was an object rather than a fragile and premature baby.

The perpetrator would forcefully throw objects toward myself and my daughter when violent. These objects were potential weapons that frequently threatened my daughter's life.

This repeated abusive behaviour resulted in my daughter becoming startled, jerking her body and terrified, before she would cry and scream in distress.

I would attempt to pick my daughter up to protect her by moving to another room however he would follow us.

On occasions I was forced to leave the house as I felt it was unsafe for both my daughter and I to be in the house.

Whenever the perpetrator displayed violence this would always affect my daughter's routines, she would not settle easily and would wake more frequently through the nights and be quite clingy for days.

Another incident involving the perpetrators erratic and reckless driving was when attending the Maternal and Child Health Centre for an appointment. My daughter was 8 weeks old at the time. The perpetrator drove with such speed that my daughters head was moving side to side in her rear car seat and when I went to my daughter's assistance to support her head, he stopped the vehicle after mounting a gutter and forcefully held my head down on top of my daughters head. I could feel my head pressing into my daughter's small skull and sinking into her soft spot as her head still wasn't formed entirely.

When my daughter was just 2 and a half months old, a Men's Behavioural Change Program that my abuser was engaged in, contacted me stating that the management team of the program would be directing the perpetrator to leave the family home for one week, as his behaviour was too unsafe for both myself and my daughter. If he did not agree to this recommendation and leave the program stated they would notify Child Protection and/or Police for the family's protection from his behaviour. He did leave the house as requested however; on his return one week later he continued to be abusive toward us.

Financial Abuse:

This had a deep financial impact on me and my daughter as I was on unpaid maternity leave after just having had my baby, 2 days after the assault, the perpetrator commenced transferring money out of our joint banking account to a new banking account he had created in his own name, so our daughter and I could not access these funds. Then 8 days later, he organised for his entire salary that we were reliant upon to be paid into his new account, which then left me and our daughter with no financial support at all.

Consequently, I initially had to rely on family and friends to assist with purchasing essential items such as food, nappies and formula, as I was no longer able to breastfeed.

Intervention Required

My daughter was very afraid of men after we escaped family violence and I had to address these anxieties by surrounding her with positive and safe male role-models. My daughter continued to be unsettled and showed signs of trauma and was very easily startled. My daughter was required to undergo regular medical checks, ensuring the early exposure to family violence had not affected her developmental growth.

At 6 and half months my daughter required regular observation and monitoring with the Universal Maternal and Child Health Service to ensure her early exposure to family violence had not affected her development. When my daughter was 13 months old she required further early intervention with a General Practitioner, an Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Nurse additionally to the universal maternal child health service, (the enhanced role service provided additional support for vulnerable families experiencing significant early parenting difficulties and for children who are at significant risk of harm) and further also intervention with a children's family violence specialist.

She was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and it was acknowledged that suffering this type of severe family violence would have raised the stress hormone "cortisol" in utero for my baby.

The professionals' observations included:

That after living in an environment that my daughter reflected the experience of family violence in an elevated and abnormal startle response, demonstrated a fear of loud noises, separation anxiety, fear of various environments particularly if new to her, fear of males, and unstable emotions.

Unusually for her age, she could not cope with shopping centres, supermarkets, or strange adults approaching her to say hello.

She presented as highly anxious and could not walk away from me (i.e. out of touching distance) and mainly needed to stay on my lap or in my arms and was very easily upset.

She has been observed to shake if an adult's hand went towards her too quickly.

She would find change a lot to cope with in addition to her other anxiety, and she showed reduced appetite, frequent interrupted sleep, frequent night terrors, easily frightened, and became upset during transitions between normal activities.

At stages my daughter would develop stuttering, unable to get her words out when anxious.

At 13 months of age, she commenced nightmares and was very distressed in her sleep, this would occur 3-4 times per week

At 2 and a half years she was able to begin to articulate in words or communicate in ways to show me that she was frightened or anxious or point to things that distressed her

Research:

Current research in regard to the negative impact of Family Violence upon all children of all ages is conclusive. Attachment patterns are understood to develop prior to birth and after birth. Initial attachment patterns are considered to affect brain development, wellbeing, relationships and interactions throughout the life cycle (Bowlby 1982; Main et al. 2005; McCain & Mustard 1999; Prior & Glaser 2006).

HISTORY

Intervention Order:

After the final assault I was too terrified to apply for an intervention order, the police actioned a complaint and warrant intervention order on behalf of myself and my daughter for one year in 2012 and then I obtained a 5 year intervention order for both my daughter and I, as the perpetrator was found guilty of contravening this family violence intervention order on six occasions.

Criminal Charges:

The perpetrator was charged with:

- Recklessly causing serious Injury
- Recklessly causing Injury
- Unlawful assault
- Indecent assault

I have grave concerns for the lack of recognition for charges being place for children of family violence crimes. No charges were able to be placed for my daughter even though she was deemed a primary victim of the crime as she was not at an age whereby she could provide evidence.

My daughter may not have been of an age whereby she could articulate her story, but this did not mean she was not affected by her early exposure to family violence and this particular assault whereby her life was also in threat on the evening having had a glass vase lid help above her whilst laying in her portacot and having had the perpetrator throw a book that hit her during the attack.

The perpetrator was founded guilty on both violent actions toward my daughter in both court hearings yet no charges pertained to this. Children's rights need to become a greater prioritisation and the recognition that family violence commences from utero. I feel new legislation would be paramount to ensure children that are not of an age to provide evidence are still accounted for and recognised in these hideous crimes.

Previous Criminal History:

Upon pressing charges I was made aware that the perpetrator had a criminal history in existence I had no awareness of.

Bail:

Immediately an appeal was lodged by the perpetrator to a higher court and the perpetrator was granted bail for a lengthy 8 months due to the Magistrate not deeming him as a 'flight risk', even though he posed significant risk to myself and my daughter. No risk assessment was ever conducted. I did not know how I would now protect us and keep us safe and felt powerless and vulnerable. I then was faced to live in a trauma filled space for 8 months feeling almost unable to leave my home, paralysed by fear and terrified of seeing my perpetrator or being followed or assaulted. My emotional and physical health begun to suffer immensely during this time, to the extent that my chemotherapy treatment began to fail and I was placed on organ transplant treatment.

Breaches of Intervention Order:

Initially a Complaint and Warrant Intervention Order was taken out by police for 1 year on behalf of myself and my daughter, as I was too fearful to seek one. I currently now have a 5 year Intervention Order for both my daughter and myself.

The conditions provided on my intervention order were completely unrealistic and were not as restrictive as they should have been. For example a distance of 5 meters of approaching me made me extremely uncomfortable and when I questioned the reasons behind this I was told that the perpetrator needs to live freely in the community and to be able to recognise me when approaching me. I was shocked that the perpetrators welfare and rights were being place above that of mine as a victim.

Within 7 weeks of the initial intervention order, the perpetrator commenced breaching the order. I was required to return to court to vary the conditions whereby I had to request that a communication clause be removed as the court had enable the perpetrator to be able to communicate through a variety of means as long as he did not commit family violence. I again was made feel extremely uncomfortable and needed to face my perpetrator in court again to have this clause removed to ensure he could only communication through a solicitor to my solicitor, again having to be an advocate for myself.

I was highly concerned that the breaches I reported were minimised and reduced. Initially 20 plus breaches existed, however these were reduced for court purposes to only 8, and then by the actual court hearing day they were reduced to 6. I was stood in the hallway by my prosecutor and had her suggested to me to dismiss a couple of breaches, as the perpetrator was not going to plead guilty to some, one breach which was of the seriousness of attending my residence.

Again only due to my ability to be an advocate for myself I proceeded against this suggestion and the result was successful with the perpetrator pleading guilty to all 6 breach charges. I should never have had to endure this conversation.

My perpetrator received only 2 months imprisonment initially for 6 breaches to my intervention order and then in the higher county court this was reduced on appeal to serve merely 50 hours of community service for the 6 breaches.

I have major concerns that when reporting breaches they are immediately dismissed by police and no statement is taken as they tell you as a victim that in reality they know that it is a too slighter breach and would not 'hold up'. It begs the question then as to why conditions on an intervention order are placed only to not be upheld by a magistrate. It is saddening that the police have experienced so many dismissed breaches by a magistrate that they do not now even proceed to take them to a court hearing.

My intervention order- conditions including 1 (further committing family violence) and 3 (keep the protected person under surveillance) and 4 (multimedia published communication) were contravened some of a sexual violence nature and even with supplying the evidence for this, the Family Violence & Sexual Crime Command strongly advised me not to pursue these breaches as even with the evidence we had it would not be upheld in a court by a magistrates and they did not wish to re-traumatise me having to provide evidence and have to confront my perpetrator knowing I would not be successful and that the perpetrator would perceive this as another win.

Criminal Court Proceedings:

Magistrates Court Hearing

I found my 2 day hearing in the Magistrates Court the most damaging and gruelling experiences of my life, giving graphic evidence, having to relieve the entire assault again, be crossed examined and face my perpetrator.

I found the court processes unable to effectively validate my violent experience, unable to provide me with a sense of safety within the court setting. I can confidently state that I was left re-assaulted by the court process and justice was not provided. I discovered that the court system has an inability to work as a whole and was unreliable and inconsistent.

My hearing took an excruciating 11 months before it was heard, as I had to endure 4 lengthy adjournments which was unacceptable and heightened my anxiety to have to re-appear continuously. I did not feel that the adjournments were necessary and were delay tactics by the defence.

It was difficult that I also had to face a delay in my 2 day magistrates court hearing, having to wait 6 days before the second day commenced which was extremely difficult to face re-attending the second part of my hearing after a break, this certainly was not ideal and exacerbated my health complications and further my post traumatic stress at the time.

After all evidence was heard, including 4 separate witnesses, 21 photographic evidence of my injuries suffered, the offenders video interview, my OOO call and a submitted GP medical report. The Judge heard the multiple and failed attempts of rehabilitation of the perpetrator, the perpetrators lack of remorse or insight into the crime, continued abuse, the seriousness of the crime, the offender pleading not guilty and still my perpetrator was sentenced to just 14 months Imprisonment term for this crime in the Magistrates Court.

County Court Hearing

I then had to re-live the entire ordeal once again for a 3 day hearing in a higher County Court whereby my attacker continued to plead not guilty once again. I was faced to give evidence and be cross-examined for a second time. During my county court hearing I was confronted with a legal study high school students entering unannounced into the court room and sitting in on my hearing when I was disclosing intimate details regarding the crime and describing the sexual assault that had occurred, this was highly insensitive and unsettling situation that could have been avoided.

I was under the impression that having my case heard in a higher court would provide justice to myself and my daughter and carry a lengthier sentence; however I found the County Court system more abhorrent than the Magistrates.

The original sentence of 14 months imprisonment was severely reduced on appeal in this higher court to a 2 year community corrections order serving merely 250 community hours, the perpetrator reassigned to the same rehabilitation programs previously completed, so essentially set free to walk out the front door alongside me.

Sentencing Remarks of Judge:

The County Court Judges sentencing remarks to my ex-husband were ***“the way in which you behaved was appalling...you went beyond what was in any way acceptable in what you did. What you did was absolutely disgraceful...Ms McKellar suffered significant injuries. They were serious injuries... You did not just carry out one action, you carried out multiple actions...you have committed this offence of recklessly causing serious injury after you had gone to a men’s behaviour change program....so that is concerning. It suggests that you are not capable of learning”***. Yet she reduced the sentence from 14 month imprisonment to a community corrections order with merely 250 community hours.

On the final assault I was not just psychologically or physically abused, but also sexually assaulted. The perpetrator was charged with Indecent Assault however, in my case the charge of Indecent Assault was not upheld, with the Magistrate stating to my horror ***“we are not able to accurately say how that infliction of pain actually occurred, she did not see what he actually did and that being the case how can we say that that is a deliberate action on his behalf”*** even though the court heard in evidence that my ex-husband had pulled a towel from my body leaving me naked during the hour long assault and 21 photographs were produced of my injuries to the court, with photographic evidence of finger marks bruising to my wrist was evident from being held down on a bed whilst he berated me with obscene indecent verbal assaults, sexually orientated.

Having been sexually assaulted by the perpetrator then increased and heightened my concerns of his inability to have respectful boundaries of the females body and the lack of respect with his previous years of sexist and offense remarks, which therefore led to fears and heighten concerns if he were ever to be around my daughter, grave concerns of him ever attending to intimate tasks such as changing nappies, dressing her or bathing her etc. being a female baby girl.

Victim Impact Statement:

I have attached my Victim Impact Statement and have highlighted the red section, which is what the Judge would not allow me to read, even though it fully complied with the charter and in effect she sent me a message that I must remain silent about the crime yet again after being brave enough to finally speak out.

Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal:

Initially I was the only one deemed as a primary victim of the crime. The system failed to view or recognise my daughter and her suffering. It took one year of fighting for her rights and being her voice for the tribunal to acknowledge that she too was also a primary victim of the crime and the tribunal then officially deemed her as so.

Federal Circuit Court:

The lack of information sharing between the federal circuit court and criminal courts is appalling and needs to be improved.

Animal Abuse

I witnessed terrible animal abuse across the relationship, one episode where my perpetrator threw one of our dogs over a handrail, off our decking down a flight of stairs onto a bricked paved ground. My pet dogs would often view the assaults and be seen to shake or cringe during these attacks. Research has shown consistent patterns of animal cruelty among perpetrators of family violence and child abuse. "Family abuse and violence derives from a need to control and intimidate others who are more vulnerable. The abuser abuses the companion animal not only to injure the animal but to intimidate other family members, inflicting emotional and psychological harm. Thus, all family members are either directly or indirectly the target of the abuser and the abuse. When animals in a home are abused or neglected, it is a warning sign that others in the household may not be safe." (Joan E Schaffner "Linking Domestic Violence, Child Abuse, and Animal Cruelty" 2006).

Supplementary Material:

Since August 2013, I have been privileged to be actively engaged with various individuals regarding the family violence system and driving systemic reform. The individuals who have taken time to hear my insights on the current system and the opportunities for improvements have included both the previous and current Governments. Currently, I have been engaged on the issue of family violence with the Premier's office, the Honorable Attorney General's Department, various Police Commissioners, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner and with the Lord Mayor of Melbourne.

After my manifestly inadequate County Court outcome regarding a final extreme violent assault I suffered in 2012 from my perpetrator, I wrote a personal letter to the then Attorney General regarding my experiences. I was grateful to be invited to meet face to face with the Honorable Attorney General Robert Clark and his advisors regarding my matter.

I had the opportunity to speak to Attorney General around the systems failures, the perceptions and suggested improvements. Through this process I was successful in contributing to the development of bills from my work and was pleased to see these transform into legislation. The legislation that I was able to contribute towards included:

- police to issue family violence safety notices (FSVNs) to protect victims 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, instead of only outside of 9am to 5pm weekdays
- allow interim intervention orders to become final orders without need for a further hearing, if both the court and victim consider it appropriate and the respondent doesn't wish to contest the order
- lift current bans on the reporting of family violence intervention orders when reporting charges and convictions for breaches of such orders, so that adult victims can choose to speak out. Allowing adult victims to publish or authorise the media to publish the existence of a family violence safety notice or intervention order together with the identity of any offender who has been charged with or convicted of contravening the notice or order and the identity of the adult victim

I continue to be engaged with the current Attorney Generals' department on family violence improvements.

Previous Chief Police Commissioner Ken Lay and his team deemed my case as a significant failing of the system, whereby he delivered his address to the International Criminal Law Conference on 9th October 2014, using this forum to highlight various aspects of his push for reform within the broader justice system from my personal lived experience. He spoke of the realities I had discussed with his family violence and sexual crime command team regarding family violence, including the types of abuse involved, types of injuries suffered and the impact on children and the suffering of this ongoing. Further, the response by the justice system to my experience and how it left me living in fear.

I have partnered the Victoria Police as required in assisting on the below areas with the Sexual and Family Violence Crime Command:

- Identifying deficiencies and positive actions which can lead into internal policy reforms
- Working with Police Prosecution to review their practices around family violence and in particular victim support, advice and guidance
- Examination of the legal implications of social media and the potential need for legislative remedy. Commencing discussions with America/Australia facebook in respect to content removal found in breach and investigating potential means of speeding up information exchanges where breaches are alleged
- Feeding into member awareness and training
- Assisting in training programs and development
- The development of a regular survivor forum where the family violence sector could hear the experiences, good and bad, with the hope of improving the system for those it affects most
- Sitting on Victoria Police committee meetings to inform and guide practice

I have also been engaged with the Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick, in supporting her male champions of change initiative to develop a better understanding of family violence, community attitudes and gender inequality to influence major workplace initiatives. I have addressed approximately 25 senior business leaders/CEO's and diversity experts from major businesses and organisations in Australia. I have been engaged with Lt General David Morrison in his efforts to bring about change in the Army and he has presented my journey and insights at opportunities.

I have established a strong working relationship with the Lord Mayor Robert Doyle, assisting me to address family violence at various levels from community grassroots to initiating law reform. I have been actively presenting at family violence information sessions, at support groups for women and through community health services hearing their stories and the system failures for them. I have engaged with various services, including physiotherapists to inform them of the importance of the potential 'signs' of family violence and injuries they may be treating that might not be consistent with explanations.

Further I now speak with both Universal and Enhanced Maternal Child Health Services in creating more awareness, education and how nurses could start the 'conversation'. Further to develop procedures and processes they can implement into practice, to have standard questioning around the issue of family violence, normalise the issue and provide a consistent nurse at each appointment so a victim may have the opportunity to disclosure if they have built up rapport and feel safe.

I dedicate a great deal of time in educating and empowering other women suffering from violence or whom are in an unsafe environment by sharing my lived experience and my journey. I also present on my journey through the legal system and offer support and education on presenting an account of what victims can expect, highlighting their rights and further what I found helpful or unhelpful. I have offered de-briefing support to women and children as required. I also support development of survivor advocate reference groups.

I am uniquely positioned to bring about important context due to being a survivor of domestic and family violence, and also having over 12 years experience as a qualified social worker and experience in policy development which has assisted me in facilitating change and also highlighting that family violence can happen to anybody- no one is immune. I am also a trained media advocate; I am trained to deliver the correct and key messages regarding family violence.

I am part of the Herald Sun "Take A Stand Campaign" and have been previously invited to speak along with Chief Commissioner Ken Lay and Senator Michaela Cash at the Vic Health to assist in the launch of the 2013 community attitudes survey results. I have attempted to shine a light on the injustices faced in the legal system and have raised some pertinent issues for the Sentencing Advisory Council about the current failings and assisted 1800 Respect with reviews and support with new technologies.

I hope to be a voice that makes a difference in shaping the future direction of family violence and can effectively highlight the entirety of the systems failures whilst providing practical solutions in moving forward and rectifying issues.

I am passionate to contribute to creating a system that works as a whole, both reliably and consistently and one that not only protects children but validates and recognises children rights and experiences.

My Thoughts:

"Obligation sits with all of us to understand and prioritise the relationship between early life experiences and cognitive, social, emotional, and physical health and the consequences of chronic exposure to violence for the unborn child and in early childhood"

"We must remain dedicated and advocate for children exposed to family violence, ensuring their experiences are validated and that they are acknowledged to be victims of these violent crimes, even if they are not at a developmental age to articulate their experiences"

"I hope to assist in providing a wider appreciation of the devastating impact of family violence on the unborn and developing child, influencing decisions that will create a safer, more predictable and enriching world for children"

"My daughter's brain development was heavily focussed on strengthening its strategies for survival in her hostile world, which disrupted her attachment and compromised her right to feel safe, calm, protected and nurtured"

"The family violence my daughter suffered resulted in her developing hyper-vigilance, feeling highly sensitive, overacting to triggers and nonverbal cues that other children would find non-threatening"

"I had to prioritise my daughter's early intervention and recovery, whilst acknowledging and addressing my own recovery, to ensure I could support and nurture her in reducing the negative physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth impacts from her early exposure to family violence"