

Moving Forward

Women's journeys after leaving an abusive relationship



The Moving Forward research study focused on women's journeys away from domestic violence and, in their words, 'moving forward' in their lives. This qualitative research study explored the experiences of women who had left an abusive relationship, the challenges they experienced in trying to rebuild their lives and the type of support that they found helpful, or not helpful, in doing so.

The research was conducted by The Benevolent Society. A full report is available at www.bensoc.org.au

KEY POINTS

- The effects of domestic violence were long term and continued for many years after the women had separated from their abusive relationships, irrespective of whether there was continuing contact with their ex-partner.
- Women experienced profound and long term effects on their psychological wellbeing, such as poor self-esteem, anxiety and depression, and in most cases continued to blame themselves for what happened.
- Women used a range of personal strategies to move forward after leaving the abusive relationship.
- Legal, justice and support services for women were sometimes helpful but the women's experiences were mixed.
- Some women did not access any of the available support services.
- Several of the research participants had come into contact with support services only as a result of seeking services for their children.
- Cost, location, hours of operation and concerns about lack of anonymity prevented women from accessing services.
- Support from family and friends was very helpful, but not all women had this support.
- Women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds reported unique experiences after they had separated from the abusive relationship. These women experienced attitudes of shame and familial blame which were based on cultural and religious norms and expectations.
- Negative community attitudes towards women who had experienced domestic violence and women's continuing feelings of shame and guilt were reported as barriers to moving forward.
- This research points to the need for services for women who have left an abusive relationship to be free, anonymous, flexible, available long-term, and for continued efforts to address community attitudes to domestic violence.

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THE AIMS

The aim of the research was to explore the journeys that women experience after they have left a relationship involving domestic violence, and how they cope.

The study looked at the types of help from family, friends, community or other services that women found useful in rebuilding their lives, as well as aspects that they found unhelpful.

METHODOLOGY

A literature review revealed limited Australian research into the experiences of women who had left an abusive relationship and the types of support that helped them to move forward.

Most previous studies have focused on what women need in order to leave the relationship and the actual act of separation. Few have explored what women need as they rebuild their lives after leaving the relationship.

This literature review informed the development of the qualitative research component of Moving Forward.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with eight women who had been separated from an abusive relationship for a minimum of one year and

who considered themselves to be physically safe from their abusive partner.

- The women interviewed had been in an abusive relationship for an average of 20 years.
- The length of time they had been out of the abusive relationship ranged from two to 13 years.
- Half of the women were from a CALD background.
- All the women had children from the abusive relationship.
- Five of the eight women had accessed domestic violence support services, three had not.

Interviews were also carried out with six staff members from counselling services and refuges who had long term experience of working with women who had left an abusive relationship.

" I feel strong about what I talk about now because I feel better... Yes there were times in the past where I started talking about it [and] used to get really upset, but I think as a person I've accepted how it is now. And I think when I look back, I think I climbed Mt Everest."

Acknowledgments

This study was undertaken by The Benevolent Society's Social Policy & Research team. The research was led by Dr Genevieve Nelson and Kate Spalding. The research would not have been possible without the generous participation of the women who shared their experiences with us, and the workers who also contributed their views and experiences. Our thanks go to them. We are also grateful to Orotan for providing financial support for the research.

The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society is Australia's oldest charity. Established in 1813 we have been caring for Australians and their communities for nearly 200 years. We are a secular, non-profit, independent organisation working to bring about positive social change in response to community needs. Our purpose is to create caring and inclusive communities and a just society.

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THE FINDINGS

The experience of domestic violence

- The women had, in most cases, experienced multiple forms of abuse including physical, verbal, emotional and financial abuse. In some cases their children had also experienced and/ or witnessed the abuse.
- In discussing their experience of leaving, most described a point at which they were finally able to leave 'for good' after previously feeling that they couldn't get out of the relationship. This was sometimes triggered by a specific abusive event or sometimes through the intervention of friends or others.
- Most of the women continued to have some contact with their ex-partner. Some continued to experience abuse as a result of this contact or described living in fear of abuse occurring again in the future.
- Some had undergone identity changes or moved location to avoid contact with their ex-partner (two had moved to Australia to do so).

"I honestly think that the emotional bruises are the ones that do more damage. Your bruises and that heal."

The impact of domestic violence

The women described the practical challenges as well as the emotional and psychological effects which they experienced after leaving the abusive relationship.

Immediately after separation, the effects included:

- Financial difficulties as a result of leaving the relationship with no money at all and the pressure of trying to provide for their children
- Difficulties finding affordable rental accommodation

- Challenges related to seeking custody of their children
- Feelings of loneliness and isolation from family, friends and community
- Loneliness as a direct result of no longer being in a relationship with their ex-partner
- Difficulties making decisions after having had their life controlled by their ex-partner for so long.

"It's just that fear of not knowing and the fear of consequences of leaving. That whole fear, it just immobilises your every move."

Longer term effects

The women also described the profound long-term effects of the abuse particularly on their psychological health and wellbeing. These included negative effects on self-esteem and memory as well as feelings of guilt, particularly concerning their children.

Most of the women had been prescribed some form of medication for anxiety and/or depression. Some women continued to experience depression years after leaving the relationship. Some reported symptoms of post traumatic stress, describing suicide attempts and continuing suicidal thoughts.

Many of the women still blamed themselves for what had happened. Further, a number of the women talked about themselves as though they were two different people – the self that had existed in the violent relationship and the new, stronger self.

For some women, practical barriers to re-entering the workforce also persisted, as a result of changing location and /or child care responsibilities.

"My major one... is get rid of the guilt and it's not your fault. And I'm not, you know, this bad person. That takes a lot of time."

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Moving forward: what helped

The women described a range of strategies, services and influences that had helped them move forward after leaving an abusive relationship.

Personal strategies

Women used various personal strategies to reduce their feelings of guilt, worry and fear, to change their thoughts to believe that the experience had not been their fault, to build their internal resilience and to reclaim their dignity.

They talked about the importance of:

- Holding on to hope for their future, of setting goals and making plans
- Practical activities like writing, walking, exercising and reading which had a positive impact on their functioning and wellbeing
- Rebuilding skills and connections, returning to work or education, and
- Doing things for others such as focusing their efforts on their children, or helping other women who had been in domestic violence relationships.

"Hearing other people's stories, jeez that helps, ... It happens to anyone, not just specifically you."

Experience of services

There were three main types of formal support that the women had received: legal and justice services; domestic violence services; and general services. The women described mixed experiences of using these services and had varying opinions about their effectiveness and impact on their journeys in moving forward.

Legal and justice services

Contact had mostly been with the police and courts.

- Women's experience of the police was mixed, with some describing extremely negative experiences.
- Women reported mixed experiences of obtaining apprehended violence orders.

"That whole passion for everything comes back... You suddenly realise the great things. You can actually dream. You have time to dream and not only do you have time to dream, but there's not anything to stop you from having those dreams. Your future is without that war zone that you live in."

- Experiences of prosecutions at court were also mixed. Some felt they had been treated fairly and with dignity, usually where the outcome was a conviction of the offender. Others spoke of not being believed by the legal representatives and judges overseeing their case.
- Most described positive experiences with court support services.

Domestic violence services

These consisted of counselling, support groups, refuges and other services for women and children. Five of the eight women had accessed support of this sort – three had not accessed any of these sorts of services. The experiences of those who had were mixed:

- Some women described very positive experiences of counselling particularly where they had developed a supportive relationship with the counsellor. Others described negative experiences, where they had not made a connection with the counsellor or where they felt the counsellor was patronising or judgmental.
- Women who had attended support groups benefited from hearing other women's stories as well as sharing their own and realising they were not alone in having experienced an abusive relationship. The staff interviewed felt that support groups were important to allow women to make connections and friendships, although the women interviewed did not describe this as a significant motivating factor.
- Many women described accessing services for themselves only as a result of their children's needs. Obtaining health care or counselling for their children had led to them hearing about and seeking support for themselves.

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Informal support

Informal support emerged as a vital part of women's journeys away from domestic violence.

- Some women described the importance of the support they had received from family in helping them move forward, including from their children.
- The women's experiences of support from friends and the wider community were mixed. Where they did have supportive friends, those friendships played a positive role in moving forward.
- Some women reported having no support from friends, or not having a single person to turn to.

Barriers to moving forward

Barriers to seeking support and moving forward included:

- Not feeling able to seek help
- Inaccessibility of services that could potentially provide help
- Experiencing negative attitudes from service providers and/ or family and friends
- The long-term impact of abuse on their health and wellbeing.

Service barriers

Barriers to accessing support services centred around the cost, fears about confidentiality not being respected, and lack of accessible, flexible services.

- **Cost:** financial difficulties made it difficult to access some services. All the women who participated in the research had to surrender their home, the majority of their personal belongings and their financial savings when they left the abusive relationship. Paying for therapeutic services (e.g. counselling) was considered low on the priority list when compared to providing food and shelter for themselves and their children.
- **Worries about anonymity:** some women stressed the importance of their experience remaining hidden from friends and colleagues and therefore emphasised the need for services to be anonymous.
- **Inaccessible services:** the women reported difficulties accessing services due to restrictive operating hours and lack of services outside business hours. Most women were engaged in

full-time employment and were unable to seek services unless they were offered outside of business hours. Some also had a limited capacity to travel to services due to the cost and time involved and poor public transport.

“When I divorced, I lost touch with everything because I was not – he was the one who contacted everybody and write to everybody. I was not allowed to contact anybody. I lost contact with everybody.”

Attitudes

The women and staff talked about the barriers to moving forward created by the attitudes of some people in the community, including:

- Not being believed by professionals, or by family and friends
- Experiencing negative or blameful attitudes from people around them.

This often resulted in women being reluctant to share their experiences of abuse with others.

Women from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background

The women from CALD backgrounds reported some additional challenges in moving forward.

- None of the CALD women interviewed had shared their experiences with anyone outside their immediate family. They had very limited social support to draw on.
- These CALD women experienced negative attitudes from their immediate family regarding separating from the abusive relationship, particularly when they divorced their ex-partner.
- Two of the women had fled to Australia from other countries to avoid continuing contact with their ex-partner. They described the challenges of arriving in a foreign country under these circumstances.
- Cultural and religious expectations played a strong role in feelings of shame and guilt, particularly cultural attitudes about divorce.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This research highlights the long-term impact of domestic violence on the health and wellbeing of women and the need for changes in government policy, service delivery and community attitudes.

Support for women who have experienced domestic violence

The findings point to the need for support services to be:

- Long-term: services are needed across the whole spectrum of phases of moving out of an abusive relationship, that is, when women are still in the relationship, at the crisis point of exiting the relationship, but also to assist women moving forward after the relationship has ended.
- Free: all the women in this study had experienced financial hardship post separation. Services which are free remove one barrier.
- Anonymous: services that can be accessed on an anonymous basis are important so that women can feel there is no risk of their identity being revealed to their ex-partner or others to whom they have chosen not to disclose the abusive relationship.
- Flexible: services must be available outside work hours, in accessible locations and through outreach programs. Soft entry points should also be available via services that are not domestic violence specific, such as general practitioners, services for children and other non-government community service organisations.
- Responsive to women from CALD communities: services must be sensitive to the family, cultural and religious contexts in which some women from CALD backgrounds have experienced domestic violence, as well as the heightened experiences of shame and resulting lack of informal support after leaving an abusive relationship.

The research highlights a need for all providers of services to women who have experienced domestic violence to review the accessibility and flexibility of their services and review their responsiveness to women from CALD backgrounds.

Community attitudes

Women who have experienced domestic violence need to feel that they will be supported by the community and by professionals when they seek help. The research findings highlight the need for continued educational and other strategies to change community attitudes towards domestic violence and towards women who have experienced domestic violence. These should focus not only on increasing community understanding of domestic violence and its unacceptability, but also on increasing the community's awareness of the long term impact that domestic violence can have. This research also suggests the need for additional training of professionals, such as counsellors and psychologists, GPs, other health professionals and other formal service providers, in responding to women who have left abusive relationships and in referring them to appropriate services.

Government action

The research highlights a need for federal and state governments to:

- Improve the availability and accessibility of government funded support services that can assist women rebuild their lives after leaving an abusive relationship.
- Ensure that support services are available long-term, not just in the immediate period during and after separation.

The development of the NSW Domestic and Family Violence Strategic Framework, the new National Women's Health Policy, the Family Support Program and the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children all provide important opportunities to address the issues identified in this research.

Future research

This study highlights the need for more research with women who have separated from an abusive relationship. Future research should explore women's journeys after separation, and what strategies, support, and services are helpful post separation. Quantitative research is also needed to determine the number of women who are experiencing the long-term impacts of domestic violence in Australia and how many of these women are not accessing services.