

Submission: Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor

Background

My name is Geraldine Bilston.

I live in Dromana, Victoria, I am a mother and have a daughter named Katie.

Katie and I are family violence victim-survivors.

It was February 2014 that Rosie Batty suffered the incomprehensible, tragic loss of her beautiful son Luke. A horrible, senseless, brutal act of family violence by his father, that shocked the Nation. Rosie's response and ability to find her voice in such a traumatic event forced us to look family violence dead in the eye, and compelled us to do more to change the horrible suffering so many were living with at the time.

It was at that exact time that I was living my own hell, in my home just 15 minutes down the road from Rosie, with my partner. My daughter was just a year old. She was developing a deep seeded fear of males while I was battling to keep things as calm as I could. Every day I would choose my words and actions carefully, running risk assessments in my head, and deciding on what to do to keep him pleased and add no stress, in the hope that I would not cop a barrage of abuse. My self-esteem was at an all-time low. I loved him, but despised him. I hated myself for being trapped. I would stand in the bathroom and literally whisper out loud to my reflection things like "I don't want to be here anymore" and "one day you'll get out of here". He was destroying me, but deep in the pit of who I was there was something stirring; a little spark that needed something to set it alight.

Rosie would spend the next year following Luke's death speaking publicly, completely changing the landscape of family violence in our country. People were listening. And what they heard was the direct voice of a family violence victim. On January 26 2015 Australia thanked and congratulated Rosie by making her our Australian of the Year. I saw it. I was proud of her. Her courage would act as that something I needed to set my own little bit of hope alight.



Just 6 days later I was thrown around by my partner. Right in front of my daughter. But this time it would be the last of it. I left. I was bruised, and broken, but I was out.

Rosie had spent the year making inroads with politicians and people in positions of power, but what she may not have been told is, that she completely changed the course of life for some victims, like me.

I may not have ever found my own courage had it not been for hers.

The Royal Commission into Family Violence was established around the same time, and finalised in March 2016. At the time I was still in the process of finalising my matter. I spent just under two years in and out of court; IVO applications, criminal charges and family court proceedings. It was very re-traumatising. This is my sad story, but it is a sad story with a happy ending.

I was so well supported, not just by my incredible family and friends, but also by services like Safe Steps. There were things that failed me, but the system was slowly changing, and I was lucky to be benefiting from it. Increase in service support; *some* acknowledgements of the very real abuse I had suffered in courts; and an outpouring of support for my daughter Katie while she recovered from growing up in her formative years in an environment where she watched the constant abuse of me, her Mother. We were free, and with the help of many, we made it through not just the abusive relationship, or our escape, but also navigating our way through the system, and slowly we put our lives back together, and found our freedom.



In the time since then, I became a volunteer with Safe Steps in their advocacy program. Here I was trained in some media and public speaking techniques, and began to share my experiences and insights. This work has included addressing a range of workplaces, events and education sessions to raise awareness. I also began speaking with the media. Once I began to engage with the media, and promote these things on my own social media platforms, I began to be inundated with disclosures of family violence from other people, some friends and family members, and others were strangers.



In 2020 I began my role on VSAC. And was thrilled to be appointed to Deputy Chair in May this year.

I make the below remarks in relation to my experience both as a victim-survivor, as well as an advocate and being exposed to the experiences of those around me.

Lived-Experience Advocacy and Reform

Having the opportunity to advocate and provide my lived-experience to reform has been an incredibly healing gift.

My advocacy journey began in 2017 with safe steps in their advocacy program. I received some basic training in public speaking and media. It really helped me develop skills in this area, it also gave me an opportunity to form friendships with other victim-survivors. Through the advocacy program I was put forward by safe steps to speak at a number of corporate events, fund raising, and media opportunities. In 2019 a segment on FM radio led to another opportunity with ABC's "You Can't Ask That" (YCAT), which gave me a small profile and following, particularly amongst the family violence sector, and I established strong friendships with each of the YCAT participants. It was after this that I began to be asked to speak at events with requests coming directly to me as well as through safe steps.

In January 2020 I began my role on Victim Survivor Advisory Council (VSAC).

In March 2020 I appeared on ABC's Q and A program sharing part of my experience including a 000 call I made during my escape.

Having these opportunities to revisit and share some of my experience of domestic abuse/family violence has been very healing. I have felt validated, heard, and that I have had an impact in creating change. At the same time, as confusing as this may be, I have also felt frustrated, hurt and sometimes angry.

I have very rarely received payment for my advocacy. There have been a handful of times I have been offered payment, which I have very gratefully accepted. Advocating is hard work. It takes time to prepare and be ready, not just emotionally, but as a speaker who knows the topic and conversations and how to apply it effectively and professionally for the audience. These are skills and it disappoints me that I am often told by those who have booked me how impactful I have been in speaking, and yet still rarely receive any money for doing so. Not only has this been a case of volunteering my time, it has actually cost me money. I have had to pay to travel, park my car, take time off of paid employment etc. And while the opportunities are things I have wanted to do, the frustration and anger can creep up on me, where I see other professionals in the sector being paid every day for the work they do, and yet victim-survivors are pushed forward in front of media and audiences for maximum affect without any remuneration. I have sometimes felt used.

The friendships I have made during my advocacy and VSAC have been very special. It is very healing to have people to speak with, learn from and get to know, who have shared similar experiences, and understand my own pain. Having said this, I have also had negative experiences with others. There appears to be competitiveness, bitterness, and jealousy amongst some. I continue to find it deeply hurtful and upsetting to be spoken about, and judged by other victim-survivors. I have been accused of chasing money, which I have never understood, as I have so rarely received it. I really wish there was more unity amongst us. I have always felt so happy and supportive of anyone speaking out and receiving opportunities to use their lived experience. I have sometimes not received this same support in return. And like other workplaces, there appears to be some who are determined to speak poorly of those who have produced good work, or have developed a strong skill set and are using it effectively. But unlike a workplace, there is no accountability or consequences for unprofessional behaviour.

Something else that troubles me about my own advocacy is that I very rarely get to effectively communicate the positive aspects of my life today. I have this really strong desire to share with people, especially current victims that I am happy, that I am at peace, that I have re-partnered in a loving and respectful relationship, and that in my daughter you would not find a more confident or happy 7 year old. While I understand the importance of acknowledging the pain and trauma many victims continue living with, it is sometimes frustrating to only have the chance to relive and retell the very worst parts of my experience, I would really dearly also like the opportunity to share our happiness. I sometimes wonder if when talking about family violence in the media we ever give victims a reason to want to leave, or any hope that it's possible to escape and be happy and free. What makes the media is always the most horrific parts of our stories, without much hope for a happy ending. Mine is a sad story, but it does have a very happy ending. My scars exist, but I wish I could explain how truly grateful I am to just be alive, safe, free, loved, respected, and happy. I want family violence workers to know that the work that they dedicate themselves too, and push for every single day, can completely change a person's life. I feel eternally grateful for this second chance at life. I want victims to know it is possible to escape and go on to be free and happy.

Despite the challenges I am facing within my role on VSAC, it is also one of the most rewarding positions I have ever had. Having the recent opportunity to contribute to a perpetrator accountability consultation and seeing the way each member of VSAC's contributions were articulated in a document afterwards, was incredibly uplifting. As a victim, it's not just about finding my voice and speaking, it's about being heard. My heart is so very grateful for this opportunity. Working alongside Family Safety Victoria is a true blessing. Their support, and generosity in listening and supporting me is something I am truly grateful for. I am inspired by their dedication to their work. What I do wish is that this opportunity extended beyond VSAC. Victim-survivors have so much to offer, with many wanting to contribute in some way. It has not been until this year that I have begun to push back on invitations to contribute voluntarily. I feel indebted to the family violence sector, and so it is very uncomfortable and difficult for me to expect payment for my time. It would be great to see support agencies/charities etc have actual concrete budgeted ways to include victim-survivors in policy, consultation, boards and advocacy. It would be wonderful to see the whole sector, not just Family Safety Victoria (VSAC), tapping into the voices of lived experience, and to always have options for remunerating victim-survivors for their time and work.

Family violence is an issue I will always feel deeply passionate about. VSAC has shown me that I want to continue to work within this sector beyond my time in this role. I have recently begun studying for a "Graduate Certificate in Family Violence", and hope that at the end of my term with VSAC I may be able to find paid employment in a professional setting. I have also recently seen the Victorian government advertising the need for lived experience within its family violence workforce. This is great, but I am still unclear what/if any actual concrete pathways exist for having victim-survivors upskill, train, and enter the workforce within the family violence sector. My course is costing me \$9,500. This is a huge investment for someone who has already taken huge financial hits throughout my relationship and escape, if it were not for my supportive parents and partner, I could not afford to undertake this course. I am also unsure about what my future job prospects will be. I have some understanding of the things I may like to do however despite having a profile within the sector I have not received any real guidance, support or mentorship in being able to move forward as a valuable employee in the future. I feel enthusiastic but uncertain about what prospects I may have once I have completed, and paid for, this qualification and at the end of my position on VSAC.

One of the most difficult aspects of being used within the media as a family violence advocate has been the amount of disclosures I have received, both from women I know and those I don't. The very vivid details of the pain some of these women have experienced/continue to experience is quite distressing. Especially as someone not equipped to support them through to safety. I have learnt to push back to professional services, and where possible have set my social media platforms to a place where I cannot receive messages from people I don't know. These are things I learnt to do after/during and was not adequately prepared for it. We should equip people better for this.

Sexual and technology based abuse

I think generally speaking there has been a huge increase in acknowledging and calling out different forms of family violence. But what I also see is an un-comfortability with sexual abuse within the context of family violence. To be honest, I feel uncomfortable myself. It remains the part of my experience of family violence that I continue to find the hardest to recover from and talk about.

Being sexually abused and denigrated by your partner leaves your self-worth in such disarray, that even to this day, 5 years after leaving, I sometimes wonder if there will ever be a time I don't think of my experiences and feel sad, and question who I am or my own self-worth. I still can't make sense of what I went through, or how I loved a man that continued to do such perverse and soul destroying things to me. It's impossible for me to help you understand when I don't understand myself. I put on a brave and happy face, but underneath these parts of my experience still leave me feeling very broken. That this sexual abuse also included the likely distribution of naked photos and videos of me on the internet haunts me. I have a terrible feeling I can never shake, that out there in the world, are photos and videos of me that I do not authorise or want people to see. You can only imagine the fear and humiliation that this brings. Social media companies continue to dodge their responsibility in stamping this type of abuse out. And perpetrators are rarely charged or held accountable for their crimes.

I am aware of the recommendation for collaboration between family violence and sexual assault services. I think this is really important, and did not exist when I escaped. I have only relatively recently sought out specific sexual abuse counselling which has been beneficial. (Noting that I did receive general counselling from the time I escaped.)

Recent Disclosures / Case Studies

REDACTED ALL CASE STUDIES

Conclusion

It is my personal view that family violence reform continues to gain strength and momentum. I am proud to live in a state that is proactively tackling this issue.

I have the deepest respect for the family violence workforce.

The way these people show up, day after day, and show such dedication and commitment to their work, is to be commended.

I hope that they always feel the gratitude I hold for them... it is that work, that commitment, that is changing the system. And for people like me, it literally changes the course of our life.

That Katie and I had the opportunity to access support and escape safely and freely will never be lost on me. We went through something awful and traumatic, we were very nearly just another statistic, but we are here today; safe and free and happy. The same system that re-traumatised and sometimes failed us, also saved us.

I will never forget the kindness and support and help that we have been shown by so many. Many of those people literally saved our lives. It's difficult to remember the times when I was too fragile to advocate for myself, but there were workers there who when I reached out for help, they stood so strongly for me. I could not have managed and executed our escape or recovery on my own.

To say thank you seems so very inadequate.....

There is still so much work to do. Things are not perfect. But the work is being done. As a united team I know we can do even more. I remain deeply concerned about the family violence crisis we are facing in Australia, but I am also enthusiastic about the work that is being done, and I find myself hopeful for a future where every single person can live freely and safely in their own homes.

