Safe@Home

Consultations with victim-survivors

What they told us about 'safe at home'

McAuley Community Services for Women
A ministry of the Sisters of Mercy

Safe@Home

About this report

McAuley Community Services for Women (McAuley) supports women and children who have experienced family violence and homelessness. In a submission to the 2015 Royal Commission into Family Violence, McAuley's main recommendations centred on the adoption of a 'safe at home' approach.

A 'Safe at Home' approach addresses this key question: why should victims of violence be the ones to leave? 'Safe at Home' is a prevention of homelessness response with safety a key criterion. It has a human rights basis and aims to rectify the injustice of women and children fleeing their homes for their own safety. Victim-survivors are enabled to live safely at home, remaining connected to their communities, schools, and workplaces.

Since the Royal Commission, McAuley has remained concerned at the continuing, and growing, association between leaving a violent relationship and a drift into homelessness for women and children. This link has persisted and worsened even against a backdrop of record investment in family violence services since the Royal Commission, and even though a 'safe at home' approach is noted as one of the seven targets of the Victorian Government's Ten-Year Plan: *Victim-survivors will be supported to remain safely in their homes and connected to their community.*

In 2021 McAuley initiated a roundtable of services who play a role in supporting those affected by family violence and homelessness. This group has committed to exploring the systemic factors which are preventing women and children from being 'safe at home' and developed a systems map.

As part of learning what was happening and what was needed, McAuley consulted with women who have lived experience of family violence and homelessness. This report summarises what we have learnt over the past seven months of hearing their stories and perspectives.

McAuley is extremely appreciative of the open, thoughtful and honest conversations we had with victim-survivors. We thank them for trusting us with their stories.

Their insights and reflections will continue to shape our 'safe at home' work and will provide an ongoing check for whether we are moving in the right direction.

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Executive summary

An essential part of the 'Safe at Home' project has been getting the perspectives of victim-survivors of family violence. McAuley has undertaken a wide consultation to learn more about their experiences. We asked them whether they had an opportunity to stay or leave their homes after family violence; the impacts of those outcomes on themselves and their children; and how systems could have supported them better to make those choices.

The steps we took to gain women's perspectives were:

- We conducted longer-length interviews with 13 women who had faced, or experienced, homelessness because of family violence.
- We took a 'census' of the situations of 65 women who had been supported by McAuley's employment and family violence outreach programs in June 2021.
- We consulted with two victim-survivors advocacy groups.

The stories we heard were unique and compelling, ranging from those who'd slept in cars and parks after leaving family violence, to those who had opted to stay at home but had encountered considerable obstacles and difficulties in doing so.

While there was almost universal agreement that staying home should be ***a choice***—and one which could deliver many benefits—the women we spoke to were clear about the need for each woman's individual preference to be respected. They also emphasised that information, time, and space were needed before making decisions which frequently had profound consequences.

For many women, the trauma suffered in the house itself, and the long history of fear and terror they had experienced, made them question the whole concept of 'safety'. With that 'house' not even feeling like a home, a decision to leave was for some their best option, and importantly, part of their journey to recovery.

While the women's individual circumstances and opinions varied greatly, they can be understood through a framework of the four 'safe at home' pillars[1]. Researchers have conceptualised these as being crucial elements in fostering a 'safe at home' approach:

- A focus on maximising women's safety – this includes policing and criminal justice responses and upgraded security.

Women we spoke to lacked confidence in policing responses—though for many, this was also about the unrelenting nature of the violence, and perpetrators' complete disregard for the law. They felt the perpetrator was frequently not 'kept in sight' and they weren't informed of what was happening during court processes or upon his release from prison. This led to a constant, heightened sense of anxiety and fear, and made it almost impossible to imagine a future where they remained safely at home.

[1] Breckenridge, J., Chung, D., Spinney, A., & Zufferey, C. (2015). *National mapping and meta-evaluation outlining key features of effective "safe at home" programs that enhance safety and prevent homelessness for women and their children who have experienced domestic and family violence: State of knowledge paper* (ANROWS Landscapes, 05/2015). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

It was clear that security upgrades and the installation of cameras did not, by themselves, allay these fears. Many reported difficulties with slow and bureaucratic processes to obtain them, and basic mistakes in their installations. Some had never learnt they existed.

- A coordinated or integrated response involving partnerships between local services

Overall women had experienced the family violence service system as fragmented, had struggled to locate the help they needed, and had to tell their story too many times. They felt the system did not give them enough time, was crisis-oriented, and was difficult to re-engage at later points. While many emphasised that they had encountered workers whose support had been instrumental to their recovery, they also commented on a lack of flexibility in support, workers who appeared overwhelmed, high turnover of staff, too many workers for each 'problem', and the rigidity of a nine-to-five service system.

- "Safe at home" as a homelessness prevention strategy – ensuring women are informed about their housing options.

Many women did not recollect any discussions about whether they could have stayed home. Some were extremely surprised to learn of some of the legal protections they could have accessed to make it viable. Lack of housing options and affordability made it impossible for many to either stay home, or afford to set up and sustain different forms of housing.

It was also clear that even though after leaving family violence many women were 'housed', they were still homeless. They had left behind (and often never saw again) many things that had essential value to them: photos, mementoes, their own clothing and jewellery, as well as the practical things – one woman had even been unable to take her young child's pram with her. It was common to hear of women who had moved seven or more times, cycling through forms of temporary government-provided accommodation that did not meet their needs (such as lacking cooking amenities) and were in particular unsuited for children.

- Recognition of the importance of enhancing women's economic security.

The importance of income and employment in women's capacity to stay home safely is critical. Early evidence is available suggesting that women who've found work through the help of McAuley's specialist employment agency are faring better in their ability to stay home, and this gives them confidence to maintain their own security.

The impact of having ***no*** income — and no means of accessing it or taking steps to remedy this situation — was also evident in the situations of women without permanent residency, who find themselves in limbo, unable to obtain employment or qualify for government benefits. This is a situation which requires urgent attention.

Part A: 'Losing everything'

"It doesn't matter if I stay or go, you're still not safe. If I stayed it wouldn't have mattered, because we have had to move seven times anyway"

From April to October 2021, McAuley has conducted interviews with 13 women, who had experienced, or risked, homelessness because of family violence

We asked each woman about her experiences, learning more about their housing, employment, legal and income situations before, and after, leaving violence. We also asked them their views on whether they thought with a different approach, they could have stayed, or returned, home safely. We also spoke to one woman who has been able to maintain her original housing.

Seven were born overseas, and three had experienced homelessness more than once because of an abusive relationship. This particular cohort included four women who were not permanent residents; their situations were extremely complex, as they didn't have independent income, and in two cases the houses they left was owned not just by partners but by other relatives.

Leaving became a critical turning point

"I lost everything – my job, my friends, everything I was connected to"

The most significant and overwhelming theme which emerged was a lack of awareness of any right to stay, or return, home. None could recall any conversations or advice from the multiple organisations they encountered about the possibility of the perpetrator being excluded; even if this would have been impractical or extremely difficult, this option was, in their recollection, not even explored.

The point at which they left, or were helped to leave, their home after violence became pivotal to their later story. It set off a chain of events where the abuser's right to stay quickly became entrenched, while their own drift into unstable accommodation and poverty felt inevitable. For two women, leaving led to an immediate loss of employment; in both instances, their husbands had worked for the same employer and retained their jobs. For another, homelessness led to the removal of her child, who now lives with her abuser.

Other intangible impacts that followed — leaving behind possessions and documents for example — meant women who'd left were immediately wrong-footed and disoriented. They were already 'behind the eight ball' in having to re-establish simple things like access to accounts, while the fact that they had to rely on others to get basic item such as underwear, tampons, or shampoo made them feel 'less of a person.'

Some women saw the fact that their abuser could stay without any of these disadvantages as sending an implicit message that he retained power and control while reinforcing that they must 'hide'.

The justice system

One woman who is a survivor of a stroke and cancer described an incident where, having lived in her car with her son for three weeks, she was escorted back home by police to collect her things, including medications and feeding tubes. When arriving her abusive husband was present; she was subjected to a torrent of abuse and backed up against a wall. Even though this happened in front of a young and inexperienced police officer, the perpetrator was not arrested as the officer's priority was to get her out safely without destruction of her possessions and essential medical equipment. She saw this as instrumental in giving her abuser a sense of invincibility, as he continued his harassment of her and went on to break intervention orders 13 times.

Women had had both positive and negative experiences with the police, and one woman who had experienced violence much earlier in her life, and then again when she was in her 50s, noted a significant improvement in how police listened to her story and took it seriously.

A couple of women had found the police were proactive; in one situation, for example, where the perpetrator's family had convinced her to retract her statement about the violence, police took her aside. 'The police realised it was not of my own will, asked him to wait outside and talked to me, advising me to not withdraw the order,' she said. However she had also slept the night at the police station previously because there was 'nowhere to go' and was not referred to any other agency, only finding out about safesteps when she attended court.

Another woman has moved interstate with her child who is less than one-year-old, because her ex-husband has never been imprisoned despite assaults which resulted in ambulance attendances and a violent incident which was witnessed by a neighbour. With the perpetrator having only received a good behaviour bond despite injuries to herself and her child, she has seen no alternative but to move state, and away from family support, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A confusing and lonely journey

"I was so scared, and so broken"

Women spoke of the wearing down experience of multiple moves, confusion, a paralysis where it is impossible to plan for your future as you await the next move. Several had been given incorrect advice about their eligibility for support and some had drifted between the homelessness and family violence 'systems', such as the experience of one woman living in short-term housing provided by a homelessness service: her family violence 'case' was closed when she said she now considered her risk 'low' – because she currently had a roof over her head. 'If you were homeless out on the street, they would understand you are still at risk,' she says.

"It would be good having people all in one service. You need it at the right time, and the right place. It can be quite overwhelming, repeating yourself. You start to give up".

Could these women have stayed at home?

"We lost our lives, and he has everything"

When asked as a hypothetical their thoughts on whether abusers should be removed while survivors stayed, women overwhelmingly saw this as a much fairer solution in theory but expressed fears about whether it would work in reality, even with the availability of personal safety initiatives. This was usually due to their knowledge of the unrelenting nature of the violence. 'These men: their whole mission in life is to find and destroy us:' one said.

Continued flouting of intervention orders made them doubtful that these could have worked. 'You are only one intervention breach away from being killed,' said another.

As to whether staying or returning home may have been a realistic choice for their own specific situation, three believed they could have stayed and retained their housing. Significantly, this included the two women who had lost their jobs at the same time that they left violence, and a third who was able to continue her employment after she became homeless – indicating the importance of economic security in any effective 'Safe at home' strategy. Another woman said, however; 'You don't always want to stay, because of memories of the trauma.'

"Why should he be able to turn my life upside down?"

We were only able to speak to one woman who maintained her original housing. Her story sheds light on some crucial factors in this outcome. She was in secure employment, able to continue to pay her rent, and early on, obtained information on her legal right to change the name on the lease. She was also fiercely committed to staying home even after facing a barrage of harassment, abuse and home invasions, seeing it as a matter of justice that he should not 'take everything away from me.'

She nonetheless faced many obstacles that could have easily deterred her: an eight-week wait for a case manager to even be allocated to her so that the process of obtaining security equipment could begin; many difficulties in communication with police about the status of the perpetrator's court proceedings, including not being informed he was out on bail; and not least, the perpetrator's continued defiance of orders and a pattern of harassment and stalking calculated to shake her confidence and peace of mind.

The damaging emotional effects of this relentless behaviour undermined every aspect of her life. She would watch TV with sub-titles so she could remain vigilant about another break-in, and often barricaded herself in at night with a chest of drawers. Even with the improvements that have resulted from the installation of security measures, she still describes herself as a 'prisoner inside my own home.'

Part B: Snapshot of McAuley clients June 2021

We conducted a 'census' in June this year of 65 women supported by McAuley programs, in particular our employment support program (McAuley Works), and those supported by our outreach services. The situations of 65 women were reviewed by a combination of input from their case managers and direct consultation.

One compelling finding was that in 40 of these cases, (62%) the perpetrator was the one who remained in the family home.

We also found:

- 60 women (77%) had at least one experience of homelessness (including stays in crisis accommodation or refuges)
- Only 24 (37%) had accessed personal safety initiative equipment such as cameras and security upgrades.

Employment as a 'safe at home' key

We looked more closely at a cohort of 49 women, either currently or previously supported by McAuley Works. McAuley Works is believed to be the only employment support program in Australia located within a family violence organisation, in acknowledgement of the reality that women's employability is often severely undermined by experiences of family violence. On the other hand, unemployment and lack of independent income often trap women in violent relationships and make it harder for them to leave.

As women's economic security is one of the 'four pillars' of safe at home, we were interested to explore the role of employment in their ability to sustain housing.

We found that 39 (79.5%) were working, and 22 of these (56%) were in full-time roles, despite many still dealing with ongoing violence.

Of those not working, perpetrators remained in the family home in nine cases.

Women supported by the program all rated employment as 'very important' to their ability to maintain housing. They strongly viewed their job as a factor in their ability, or potential, to sustain a mortgage or afford a rental.

"Securing employment is a lifeline for me and my family. It would mean that we would be financially stable and there would not be that constant threat of not being able to pay the rent and again becoming homeless"

"I am still being watched and controlled. I feel that because I have no financial security that I won't be able to continue to live in my own home so I am constantly living with the fear of being homeless. Having a secure job would take so much pressure of me. To have financial security again would be a dream come true. Living on Centrelink is not living."

"Having the support of McAuley Works enabled me to stay in my home and find a job. {My case manager} built up my confidence, and job opportunities, and job opportunities were coming my way. Unfortunately, I was physically assaulted which left my face and body badly bruised. This damaged my confidence, but while I was healing, she helped me rebuild and I was able to secure a permanent job.'

Were they able to stay 'Safe at home'?

Similar issues to those experienced by the women described in Part A —in particular the persistence and relentlessness of the violence —meant that very few had achieved a 'safe at home' outcome. Even for the women whose partners had been incarcerated, the dread of his release continued to overshadow their sense of being able to create a new life.

One woman's words*: 'I still fear my ex as he has no respect for the law'* reflected a common theme, with women describing feeling 'trapped' and 'isolated' and having a strong expectation that they would be tracked down wherever they went.

'I still have to park the car in a certain position so I can leave quickly if required.

"I know he has been in the house, because I find the toilet seat up."

While some had found security equipment and cameras to be solutions, others described cameras being damaged or stolen by perpetrators. One woman had encountered serious issues with the way personal safety initiatives had been installed. She was living on a rural property, the sensor cameras weren't appropriate for a farm, and the perpetrator was allowed to enter the property and photograph the location of the cameras ostensibly so he could avoid breaching the intervention order.

'All my surveillance was compromised, and the court failed to protect me,' she said.

Part C: Victim-survivors advocacy groups

McAuley consulted with two groups of victim-survivors: the Victorian Victim-Survivor Advocacy Committee (VSAC), which advises Family Safety Victoria, and NOOR (Narrating Our Own Resilience) survivor-advocates who are from culturally diverse backgrounds. We consulted in small groups, as well as with individuals.

These two groups provided us with expert advice on 'safe at home' issues, based on their own lived experience of family violence and navigating the service system.

While within the two groups there was always a diversity of opinions, some clear themes emerged:

'Safe at home' gives power back

Even if 'safe at home' had not been an option for these women as individuals, there was a strong sense of it being a social justice issue, and an inherently fair outcome. There was recognition of the immense disadvantages that can flow from uprooting, including the actual moving costs as well as the disruption to schooling and family connections. This view was however tempered many times by the words: 'in an ideal world…'

They recognised that it would only work if you had real options and were very well supported.

"The last thing we need is to be uprooted – like plants we adapt, but it's like we are pulled out by the leaves and put straight back into new soil – we need the 'Seasol' if we are to thrive"

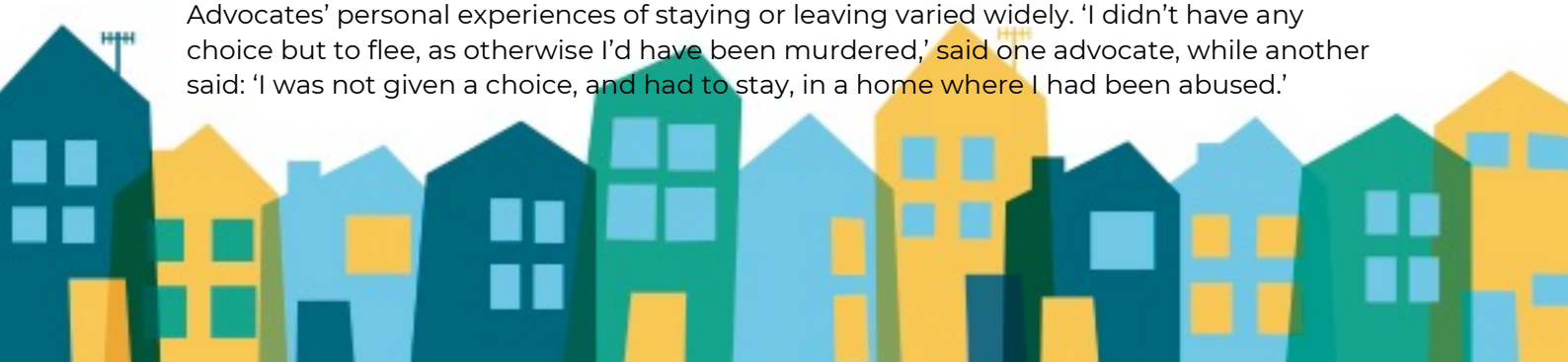
'My solution isn't everyone else's'

'Part of my long-term healing was to move. It was never a home anyway, it was just a house.'

The advocates were strongly of the view that 'safe at home' should be part of a ***suite*** of options offered to women and not be in any way imposed or a new 'norm.' A couple of women felt they had been expected to stay home, and that this could also have disadvantages. Advocates agreed that: 'You can't cut and paste from one life to another' and wanted a system response which recognised the 'dignity of risk' and put women at the centre of that decision.

Some felt 'safe at home' itself could be an emotive phrase that didn't match their own experiences 'as our four walls weren't safe.' Another advocate said she found the term 'safe at home' painful, as she had never, as a relatively new arrival, felt safe in Australia or at home, and she thought it could be a concept which might not resonate with women from different cultural backgrounds.

Advocates' personal experiences of staying or leaving varied widely. 'I didn't have any choice but to flee, as otherwise I'd have been murdered,' said one advocate, while another said: 'I was not given a choice, and had to stay, in a home where I had been abused.'



Advocates also pointed out that 'safe at home' isn't a concept that could work for situations of family violence involving young people where the perpetrator is a sibling or parent. We also heard that women living with a disability encountered difficulties in locating housing that was safe and affordable ***as well as*** accessible**.**

The individual experience of some advocates was that the trauma they had experienced within the house had made it in effect the last place they wanted to be, with often visible, daily reminders of physical damage wrought by the perpetrator – broken doors and holes in the walls.

'I'm still in the house where I was abused and there are still rooms I won't go into – rooms where my children witnessed the violence. I don't sleep well. I have cameras, security roller door. I am protected but this is not the same as safe. And I sometimes wonder if I'd relocated, would things have been better?

'Are we safe anywhere?'

Even though for some of the advocates the violence was several years in the past, the feelings of fear persisted. Advocates mentioned the concept of 'psychological safety', recognising that this ongoing fear, even where there might appear to be no immediate risk, would probably never leave them, and was easily triggered by even random encounters with the perpetrator, particularly within small communities.

They also noted that horrific violence against women could be, and was, carried out in apparently 'safe' settings, including the murders of women in public places such as outside court, a kindergarten, or in a car with their children. One advocate said: 'You need to understand the mindset of a perpetrator – and their sense of ownership and entitlement.'

'What does safety even look like? I'm still scared many years later, and life is never the same.'

'The system isn't good at giving you time'

A very strong message from the advocates was the difficulty in making decisions about staying or leaving, at the fraught time of a family violence crisis. One advocate said: 'You need breathing space, when you're in the eye of the storm.'

It doesn't work, said another, 'to be asked if I wanted to stay home, at a time when I'm traumatised and heightened, and when we know we're much more unsafe and perpetrator's anger is escalating.' Another said: 'The concept of choice is hard when you're being asked about staying at a place where you've felt small, vulnerable, 'deconstructed'.

"You're talking about a time when you can't make even the simplest, most inane choices, as you have no emotional energy"

"Having been under extreme control – not even able to choose your own clothing, or buy a lip gloss – your own choices have been suppressed so long that these big decisions are really difficult"

The justice system: 'a place that reinforces the trauma'

The Family Court system in particular was viewed as a setting which was unable to deal fairly with issues of family violence and shared care of children. These perceived failings have implications for 'safe at home' outcomes.

'The presumption of shared care trumps safety and healing,' said one advocate, with others saying, 'the big black cloud of custody arrangements' deters some from even thinking of leaving and 'is a failure of us as a community.'

'The family law courts were used as a weapon to try and destroy me,' said another advocate, while others spoke of the disconnection between state systems where the violence had been proven and accepted, yet the Federal family law court system was either unaware of or did not take this evidence into account.

We also heard from one woman who, after unrelenting violence from her former partner, decided to return to her country of birth where she had family support, only to find that he was able to place the child on a 'watch list' and prevent her leaving.

The difficulty in getting legal aid especially for property matters were also mentioned as a significant barrier to women being able to achieve fair outcomes which would enable them to stay at home; it also means some women were subjected to the prospect of being cross-examined in court if they and their former partners were unrepresented.

There was considerable pessimism about the protective factor of intervention orders. 'They know where we live, as soon as we move; they are just a piece of paper.' Advocates commented on the lack of long-term oversight of perpetrators, and failure to be informed about his whereabouts if released from jail.

Flexible support? – paternalistic and hard to access

The advocates had not had positive experiences in accessing flexible support packages, and one woman had only found out they existed in a discussion during our consultations. They saw the process as slow and bureaucratic and judgemental about what they needed, with one woman citing the refusal of her request for a laptop which she felt would have been instrumental in helping her begin applying for jobs. Security upgrades had sometimes missed key safety checks, such as in one example where locks and protections were fitted to a front door only leaving the back entrance completely exposed. It was also noted that security upgrades aren't portable for women who choose to, or must, move again; and women with a disability have had issues where it's been unclear who should pay for home modifications.

'Someone to lift the burden'

The quality and nature of the support provided were seen by the advocates as essential factors that could play a part in being able to stay safely at home if that was their choice. The frustrations of a fragmented service system were however obvious.

"You repeat your story over and over and begin to feel worthless"'

"You feel fatigued at having to fight so hard for everything"

"You feel so diminished – you're always trying to take next steps when you can't even think"

Advocates wanted to see a more stable workforce, 'workers who believe in us and don't see it as just a job'. They also saw the system as crisis-focused and not flexible enough in providing out of hours responses. One barrier they saw to 'safe at home' outcomes was a system that focuses on 'closing' cases and makes it difficult to re-engage down the track as needs change.

Advocates wanted workers who would 'work WITH me and give me options', and greater opportunities for workers with lived experience and peer support. 'Peer support helped me let go of the guilt and shame,' said one: 'I realised it isn't actually me.' Having more workers with lived experience could also help 'give a picture of what life in the future CAN be like – that perspective can give hope.'

Diversity

The advocates also pointed out some specific challenges faced in diverse communities or groups of people. For Indigenous women, or those from culturally diverse backgrounds, there was a sense of visibility, and possible judgement of their choices and decisions, as well as the fact they felt more exposed and more easily able to be tracked down.

"*Your mob knows where to find you even if you move."*

Indigenous history of interactions with police also led to wariness and lack of trust while the devastating impacts of Stolen Generation practices led to fear of asking for support with their children.

The situation of women who are not permanent residents of Australia is particularly fraught. Not only are they unable to work, but they also cannot receive government benefits or even qualify for childcare support. The wait for a decision one way or another leaves them in limbo, with one advocate still waiting for a decision after lodging all paperwork in 2018.

Solutions: what could help a 'safe at home' response work?

Advocates had many ideas for improvements to the service system, one strong recommendation being women leaving violence having immediate access to a set amount of money, to spend ***as they saw fit*** to help them in the difficult first few months. This was not a massive amount, with suggestions that between two and ten thousand dollars would make a real difference; but that it needed to be available swiftly, with one advocate pointing out that even a seven-day wait could be too long if you are trying to make urgent arrangements to leave home or go interstate.

They also mentioned that access to childcare at that point would make a real difference.

> "You're exhausted, at wit's end, literally bruised, yet you have to try and 'be there' for your children – I went back (to violence) countless times because I was just so tired and the thought of even a half hour sleep… I really needed that practical help with the day-to-day care".

Free childcare was also mentioned as a potential game-changer in giving women time and space to contact services and plan their next steps.

Advocates suggested there was a lack of information available about their right to stay home, or access to services generally, and further information and the development of a service directory, would be valuable in reducing the amount of time they spent trying to find out their options and having phone calls which led to dead ends.

There was some support for the introduction of ankle bracelets for perpetrators as a way of reducing the constant fear about their whereabouts. Advocates had a mixed response to the idea of introducing mandatory 14-day barring orders, unless they were very well supported by responsive policing, which wasn't the experience of many of them. They also raised the issue of the misidentification of the 'perpetrator' and whether this could be counter productive to women and used in a punitive or retaliatory way against them.

In summary the experiences of all women consulted showed that five years on from the Royal Commission, many of the issues explored at that time remained problematic. It was clear that 'safe at home' was an option they wanted to see but that individual decision-making, with time and space to explore the possibilities, would be needed for it to work. The pervasive fear of perpetrators who don't respect the law also made many doubtful it could ever work, but income, work and flexible, holistic support could be keys to making it a viable children for more women and their children.