

Staying Home Leaving Violence: Listening to women's experiences

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Abbreviations

AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AVO	Apprehended Violence Order
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
CS	NSW Department of Human Services, Community Services
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
LAC	Local Area Command
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
SHLV	Staying Home Leaving Violence
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre
UNSW	University of New South Wales

Executive Summary

This Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) report discusses findings from a small qualitative research study conducted in partnership with the NSW Staying Home Leaving Violence Program. Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) is an innovative and developing program which provides practical and emotional support to women leaving domestic violence, with the aim to support the victims to remain safely in their own home. SHLV works in collaboration with the police and courts in removing the violent offender.

The Staying Home Leaving Violence Program Overview (Community Services, 2010) identifies two major intended results for the funded SHLV services: clients are free from domestic and family violence in their home, and remain so over time; and domestic and family violence victims experience long term stability in housing, income, education and healthy relationships.

The broad aim of the study was to build the evidence base for SHLV and inform service delivery at a critical time as the program is implemented across the state. The focus of the study was on women and children's safety, post-separation violence and abuse, housing and women's use of SHLV services. Qualitative research methods were chosen as the most appropriate way to engage with and listen to women's experiences of leaving a domestic violence relationship and accessing a SHLV service. One-on-one interviews were conducted with a total of 17 women, from the three research sites of Eastern Sydney, Blacktown and the Bega Valley.

All women interviewed for the study were living in stable accommodation, at the time of interview. Nearly all women, including those living in private rental, had been in their accommodation for over 12 months. A majority had been in the same housing for over two years. The study findings provide evidence of a stability of housing which is unusual for women leaving domestic violence relationships.

Most women affirmed they were now living lives (relatively) free from violence. To the question 'Do you consider you are now living a life free from violence?' fourteen women were able to answer 'yes'. The study provided evidence that the support provided by SHLV had been a factor in achieving this. Some women qualified their responses by saying they still had memories of violence which would never leave them.

Women's responses also need to be qualified with the disturbing evidence around post-separation violence and abuse. Most of the seventeen women recounted incidents of violence and abuse from the ex-partner, occurring after they had left the relationship. The study suggests the following factors pose significant challenges to women's safety post-separation:

- The profile of the domestic violence perpetrator;
- Mixed policing responses and inadequate responses to ex-partners' threats of future violence;

- Living in isolated towns or on properties outside of town;
- On-going family law conflicts;
- Change-over of children between parents;
- The use of technology, in particular mobile phones and texting, to harass, threaten and abuse; and
- The perpetrator knows (or can find out) where the victim is living when she has moved and changed location.

The study found that post-separation violence and abuse occurred regardless of where the woman was living and regardless of whether or not she had remained in her own home. Indeed, the only woman who had not experienced any form of violence or abuse from her ex-partner since separating had remained in her own home, while the woman who reported feeling least safe had left her home and re-located.

The study's findings demonstrate the need for improved policing responses to offenders' threats of future violence against the woman. The attitude of 'we can't do anything until he does something' needs to be replaced with an adequate police response which recognises that a threat of violence is a domestic violence incident and/or breach of an AVO. Considering that many of the threats included threats to kill, there is an imperative for police to respond.

All women in the study provided positive feedback about the local Staying Home Leaving Violence service. Women spoke about the role of the worker/s in supporting them, responding to their needs and those of their children, organising safety upgrades to the home and supporting women to re-build lives free from violence and abuse. Women affirmed the importance of emotional support as well as practical, the support being longer-term and not crisis oriented, and that support was there when the women needed it. Many women reported that they would not have made the progress they had made, for example taking out AVOs and reporting breaches, protecting their children, maintaining stable housing, re-gaining their confidence and self-esteem, if it had not been for SHLV. For most women it was the qualities and skills of the support worker which made the difference.

SHLV is based on promoting choices for women when they leave domestic violence, including the choice to remain in their own home. It has always been recognised that not all women will choose this option and some women will want to re-locate. Some women in the study reported they would not have felt safe remaining in their home. Some wanted to re-locate and saw this as part of a fresh start and new beginning, without the memories of violence which remaining in the home may have brought. SHLV is based on the values of women's empowerment, decision-making and choice. Not all women will choose the option of remaining in their home; but for those who do it is critical there are SHLV services in place to support them. The study concludes that local and state-wide partnerships across nongovernment and human service agencies provide an opportunity to improve service provision for domestic violence victims and address systemic problems.

1 Introduction

This report from the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) discusses findings from a small qualitative research study conducted in partnership with the NSW Staying Home Leaving Violence Program. Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) is an innovative and developing program which provides practical and emotional support to women leaving domestic violence, with the aim to support the victims to remain safely in their own home. SHLV works in collaboration with the police and courts in removing the violent offender. The state-wide program, and this study, are funded and supported by NSW Department of Human Services, Community Services (CS).

The program offers:

- Comprehensive risk assessment and safety planning;
- Security upgrades to the home;
- Court support for applications for exclusion orders and at family court proceedings;
- Liaison and collaboration with the police;
- Case work to address financial, tenancy and other personal issues; and
- Referrals to legal advice, counselling and other support services.

The study listened to the experiences of women who have accessed the first three pilot SHLV services: Eastern Sydney, Bega Valley and Blacktown services. The study focus was on exploring women's perceptions and experiences of safety post-separation, within the context of victims remaining in their own home. It aims to inform the future development of the program and implementation of services across NSW, by examining the experiences of women who made use of the pilot services.

The report has been written as an accessible research document. Section 2 provides brief background information on SHLV; Section 3 outlines the aims of the study; Section 4 the methodology; Section 5 discusses the key findings and Section 6 offers some conclusions.

We wish to acknowledge and thank the 17 women who gave their consent to be interviewed for the study, staff of the three participating services, and officers from CS who supported and provided advice on the research.

2 Background

Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) was born out of the experience of Homeless Women's Speakouts Against Violence, held in Sydney's inner city in the late 1990s. At the Speakouts, it became evident that many of Sydney's chronically homeless women had fallen homeless years (sometimes decades) earlier when they were forced to leave a violent home. The women presented as homeless, living in poverty, physically unwell, sometimes mentally ill and some having lost contact with their children due to homelessness. These women's lives may have been very different if they had been enabled to remain in their own home, with their children, and have the violent partner removed.

The findings of the Speakouts are reflected in data presented by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2010). The data consistently show that domestic violence is a key driver of homelessness in Australia, and the major reason why women and children fall homeless.

In response to the voices of women attending the Speakouts, in 2003 the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse conducted the qualitative research study, Staying Home Leaving Violence. The study explored, in partnership with women who had left domestic violence relationships, how they (and their children) could be enabled to remain safely in their own home rather than being forced to leave their housing. In response to the study's recommendations, three pilot services were funded in Eastern Sydney, Bega Valley and Blacktown to test the practice framework outlined in the research report (Edwards, 2004).

The Bega pilot was established in 2004 and auspiced by Bega Women's Refuge; Eastern Sydney was established in 2005, auspiced by Housing NSW and physically located within a nongovernment organisation; and Blacktown was established in 2006 auspiced by the WASHHOUSE. Following successful evaluations of the Bega (Foster et al, 2006) and Eastern Sydney pilots (RPR Consulting, 2007) Community Services has funded additional services to complete 18 SHLV services across NSW. The first round of new services was established in 2009/10 and the remaining established in 2010/11. The 18 services and auspice bodies are listed in Appendix two. Auspice organisations include women's refuges, family support services, women and children's services, a community health centre and legal centre and NSW Police and Housing NSW. This diversity may pose some challenges for program implementation; however it also offers the potential for program enrichment, development and partnerships.

The state wide program and local services are guided and supported by working partnerships across the NSW Human Services government agencies. These involve partnerships with Community Services, NSW Police, Housing NSW, Attorney-General's Department (including Legal Aid Commission) and NSW Health.

The Staying Home Leaving Violence Program Overview (Community Services, 2010) identifies two major outcomes for each of the funded SHLV services, based on a results framework:

- Clients are free from domestic and family violence in their home, and remain so over time; and
- Domestic and family violence victims experience long term stability in housing, income, education and healthy relationships (p2).

Given the current roll-out of the final round of SHLV services and the development of the Program across NSW, this small qualitative study is timely. It is anticipated the findings will be useful for individual services as well as Community Services. We emphasise, however, the study is not an evaluation of services or the program.

Other Australian states, notably Victoria and Western Australia, are also implementing programs (referred to as Safe-at-Home) with similar aims to SHLV. This report will contribute to the small but emerging body of literature in Australia on the safe at home models, of which SHLV is part (see for example McFerran, 2007; Murray, 2008; Tually et al, 2008). It was outside the scope of this study to discuss the national and international literature on the safe at home models. However, a literature review currently being conducted by Victoria's Monash University should provide a valuable knowledge base for Australia.

3 Aims of study

The broad aim of the study was to build the evidence base for Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) and inform service delivery at a critical time as the SHLV program is implemented across the state. The focus of the study was on women and children's safety, their housing and use of SHLV services.

Specifically, the study aimed to provide answers to questions relating to women's safety post-separation. It aimed to examine:

- Women and children's safety if they remained in their own home;
- Whether the ex-partner has returned to the home and caused further violence and abuse;
- Benefits and advantages for women and children who remained in their own home, along with any disadvantages; and
- The role of SHLV services in enhancing women's safety and stabilising their housing.

Importantly, the study aimed to listen to the experiences of women who had left domestic violence, in order to better understand experiences of post-separation violence and how Staying Home Leaving Violence can best support women's and children's safety.

The study aimed to embrace women's choices in making decisions about leaving domestic violence, including decisions about whether or not they wanted to leave their family home. Staying Home Leaving Violence, from the beginning, has been based on the values of women's empowerment, decision-making and choice. Not all women will choose the option of remaining in their home; but for those who do it is critical there are services in place to support them.

4 Methodology

Qualitative research methods were chosen as the most appropriate way to engage with and listen to women's experiences of leaving a domestic violence relationship and accessing a SHLV service. The complexities of domestic violence, and the sensitivities involved in asking women to report their experiences, led the researcher to employ face-to-face, in-depth interviews with each woman.

The study adhered to human research ethical standards and respondents freely gave their consent to be interviewed. Ethics approval to conduct the study was granted by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Recruitment occurred in accordance with requirements of the UNSW HREC; this included recruitment through services rather than direct approaches to participants, referred to as 'arms length' recruitment. Women were assured of the confidentiality of data and that they would not be able to be identified in the research report. The researcher considered the safety of the women at each step of the research study.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with a total of 17 women, from the three research sites. Each interview was conducted in person by the same researcher, with the exception of one respondent who prepared a written response to the interview questions. Where women consented, interviews were taped to ensure accuracy and allow the women's voices to be directly included in the research report.

A collaborative and consultative approach was adopted from the beginning of the study. Discussions were held with NSW Community Services, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, NSW Women's Refuge and Resource Centre and the three SHLV services regarding the purpose of the study, its methods and research questions.

The following key research questions were developed, based on knowledge of the domestic violence literature, the experience of practitioners and consultations with stakeholders:

- What has made it possible for the women and children to remain in their own home?
- What have been the benefits and disadvantages for women and children in remaining in their own home?
- Has the violent offender returned to the home and caused further violence and abuse, and what were the circumstances of his returning?
- If there has been further violence and abuse what was the police response and how effective was the response?
- What are the most effective safety strategies women have found to help them and children remain safely in their home?
- How safe does the woman feel in her home?
- What services have women and children used and how useful have the services been?

- What are the women's likely long term outcomes in relation to housing, employment and financial security?
- Do the women consider they are now living a life free from violence?
- How could things improve for the women and children?

The researcher, Robyn Edwards, is skilled in the area of working with and interviewing women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse. She conducted the original Staying Home Leaving Violence research, thus bringing an important context and understanding to the current study. Expert advice on the methodology, project monitoring and quality control were provided by Professor Deborah Brennan, the Social Policy Research Centre's Deputy Director.

The study was conducted over a four month period, August – November 2010. All interviews were conducted during September and October 2010.

This was a small-scale time-limited study and hence has its limitations. Despite attempts to recruit Aboriginal women to the study, only one Aboriginal woman was able to be included. To protect her from potentially being identified in this research report, references to her Aboriginality are not made. Any future study may need to have a longer time-frame, and possibly different methodologies, in order to include the voices and experiences of Aboriginal women and their communities. Furthermore, the time-frame did not permit interviews to be held with SHLV service providers in order to seek their input and perspectives. However, it is anticipated this report will be used as a tool for consultation and discussion with the SHLV services, and in particular with the three services which supported the research.

We again emphasise this study was not intended as an evaluation of SHLV. Different methodology would have been utilised were this the case.

The next section outlines the findings from the study.

5 Research findings

This section begins with a description of the demographic characteristics of the study cohort. It then discusses each of the key findings arising from analysis of the 17 interviews. The section concludes with a brief summary of findings.

5.1 Description of study cohort

Seventeen women comprised the study cohort; five from Eastern Sydney, five from Blacktown and seven from the Bega Valley. The youngest was 22 years of age, the oldest 52 years, and the average 37 years. Ten women were from Anglo-Australian backgrounds; of the remaining seven, the backgrounds were Aboriginal, Scottish, Australian/Greek, Russian, Bosnian, Arabic and South American. All women had at least one child; some women had large families including one woman with seven children. The seventeen women had a total of 46 children between them; most children were living with their mothers with the exception of a small number of adult children.

Nearly half of the women (8) were engaged in employment, either full or part-time, at the time of the interview. A number of women (including some in part-time employment) were completing education at TAFE or university level. Some of the women currently not working due to caring for babies or young children had worked in the past. The majority of women came from a working class background. This may be related in part to the socio-economic profiles of Blacktown and the Bega Valley. However, women from Eastern Sydney (including two in Housing NSW tenancies) also came from working class backgrounds.

Of the seventeen women, nearly half (8) were living in private rental accommodation. One of these women was receiving a 12-month rental subsidy through the NSW Start Safe Program; a number of other women had received bond assistance and/or a rental guarantee through Housing NSW or the local community housing program. Three women were living in Housing NSW accommodation; two from Eastern Sydney (one of whom was paying full market rent) and one Western Sydney. None of the women from the Bega Valley had secured public housing even though some had applied. One of these women had five children, two of whom were blind. Four women (two from Western Sydney and two from Bega Valley) either owned or were purchasing their own home. Another woman was living in a home purchased by her parents with her new partner; the last woman was living with her parents, though she saw this as a short-term solution while her babies were still young.

Prior to leaving the relationship the women had experienced many different forms of domestic violence including physical violence, emotional violence, sexual violence, controlling behaviour, threats and intimidation. A small number of the women had survived two domestic violence relationships. Most of the women experienced some form of violence and abuse post-separation, including threats to violence. Particular mention is made of threats because of their seriousness; sometimes they were threats to kill by their ex-partner.

5.2 Key findings from the interviews

Key findings from the interviews with women are identified and discussed. Findings are grouped under the following themes: stability of housing; lives free from violence; violence and abuse post-separation; perpetrator characteristics; policing and court responses; women's safety; Staying Home Leaving Violence service provision; children's needs; women's strengths; and choices for women.

Stability of housing

All women interviewed for the study were living in stable accommodation, at the time of interview. Nearly all of the women, including those living in private rental, had been in their accommodation for over 12 months. A majority had been in the same housing for over two years. The study findings provide evidence of a stability of housing which is unusual for women leaving domestic violence relationships.

Two thirds (11) of the seventeen women, on leaving the domestic violence relationship, had remained in their family home with their children. Importantly, at the time of interview, nine of these women (over half of the study cohort) were still living in the same housing. One woman with two young children spoke about the benefits of remaining in her own home.

The kids have been here since they were born...this is their home, they know all the neighbours...it's close to the park, the beach...I love the area, I've got cheap rent, I'm happy, I've been here for four years, I don't want to move.

A woman from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background spoke about the benefits of remaining at home, after her violent ex-husband of 28 years left. She said her house now feels like a 'holiday home'.

Peaceful, there's not that anxiety there, from Friday to Monday morning [he was] totally drunk, every weekend.

Another woman reflected on the benefits of remaining in her home.

I didn't have the cost of finding alternative accommodation and the disruption to my daughter's routine and life was kept to a minimum.

Analysis of the interviews suggests that Staying Home Leaving Violence is fulfilling one of its key roles, namely to prevent women's homelessness and facilitate their housing stability on leaving domestic violence relationships. The major way SHLV does this is through supporting women to remain in the family home, if this is what women choose to do. However, SHLV is also supporting women who do move premises to maintain their new tenancy.

The women move for a range of reasons including not feeling safe or secure in the home, moving cities or interstate to be closer to their family (particularly mothers), the ex-partner refused to leave, the family home was owned by her ex-partner's family, and a desire for new

beginnings and a fresh start. One young woman with a 6 year old daughter was thrown out of her home by her violent partner, when she was six months pregnant.

Sometimes, SHLV assisted women maintain a tenancy, as in the case of a woman from Western Sydney who secured a private rental tenancy through Housing NSW's Start Safe program. Start Safe was able to organise and subsidise the housing while SHLV offered practical and emotional support to help the woman maintain her tenancy. The case suggests the potential for collaboration between the Staying Home Leaving Violence and Start Safe programs in NSW, both for women remaining in their rental accommodation as well as those women securing new accommodation.

The interviews provide data about the barriers women face in remaining in their own home when they leave domestic violence. One of these barriers may be the very natural urge to flee from a crisis. In the words of one woman, 'I got so many speeding fines trying to run away from my life'.

Other barriers, related to ownership of property, were faced by a woman in her forties with three children who initially remained in her home of ten years, while the ex-partner went to live with his brother. However, the home was owned by her ex-partner's parents who organised the sheriff to arrive and evict mother and children, allowing the violent partner to take up residence again, with the older daughter. The mother-in-law informed her: 'You'll take nothing, you'll get nothing.' Another woman with five children (two were blind) living in rental accommodation was informed by the police they could not remove her ex-partner. The six of them stayed with her mother until the ex-partner agreed to go, 'I just waited for him to go.' As he had never paid rent on the property (she always paid the rent), she was confident he would eventually leave, which he did after two weeks. She explained her reasons for wanting to remain in her home,

Because I'd left him about six years earlier and I'd left him the house, I'd moved in to my mum's with the kids, he trashed the house, didn't pay the rent...this time it was you're leaving and I'm staying in the house...I didn't think it was right to take five kids out of the house that they knew, when one person can get up and go.

Only three of the women had Housing NSW accommodation, and for two it had been a long struggle and wait to secure the tenancy. The woman from Western Sydney with seven children had to wait in women's refuge accommodation until her housing application reached the top of the wait-turn list. This had some serious consequences for the family. 'I lost [12 year old son] because he was too old for the women's refuge, the option I was given was to put him into a youth refuge'. She talks about how he was a good child and excellent student and she would not allow him to go to a youth refuge; the result was he returned to his father. The interviews provided narratives of other women who were seeking Housing NSW tenancies, and one who was seeking a transfer before her ex-partner was released from prison. Women provided the view that the agency does not consider domestic violence or a woman's safety as sufficient reasons for priority housing approval.

Lives free from violence

The goal of any domestic violence intervention must be to prevent future violence and abuse in the lives of women. The majority of women in the study (14) affirmed they were now living lives free from violence. To the question asked of all women towards the end of the interview, 'Do you consider you are now living a life free from violence?' fourteen women were able to say 'yes'. Many of the interviews provided evidence that the support provided by Staying Home Leaving Violence had been a factor in achieving this. Some women qualified their answers by saying they still had memories of violence which would never leave them. One woman responded in this way,

Yes, definitely, people have noticed the change in me, I can go out now and do a lot more things, [my daughter] can go and do more things, we aren't frightened, we don't have to be answering to him all the time.

Other women spoke about how they were not as fearful as they had been when in the domestic violence relationship, suggesting how the dynamics of power and control can shift when a woman leaves a violent relationship. Women can experience empowerment and agency, while still being aware and vigilant of the potential for further violence and abuse from their ex-partner.

I've got strong women around me, and the support I get from my mum and family...I used to be fearful, but I can deal with it now...I don't want to live the rest of my life not enjoying life, and the girls lives [her daughters], I don't, I'm not going to let it, the more distance I have from him the more I can see him for who he is, I know he's capable of really bad stuff, but he better stay away from me.

It is important to consider the three responses where the women said 'no', and their reasons. The first woman reported her ex-partner would not accept the separation, he was constantly harassing her and there were unresolved family law matters regarding their three children. She could not see a time that she would ever be free from his ongoing harassment. 'This is life-long for me, this is not going to go away.' The second woman had been seriously affected by domestic violence, she had psychological problems and possibly post-traumatic stress disorder. She said no because she had fears that 'she might lose it' and become violent herself. She was only 22 years old and had two very young children; the support and assistance being provided by SHLV was critical. The third response is a reminder about the long-term potential for violence from domestic violence perpetrators, and that when examining domestic violence there is no such thing as 'no risk.' The woman answered the question in this way:

Life will never be free from the potential for violence whilst we remain living in this area [country town]. I intend to leave the area once I complete my university degree and would only return if the ex-partner dies.

Making different choices about new relationships is an important part of securing violence-free futures. Three women spoke about non-violent and intimate relationships they had been

able to form with new partners which were positive and helping to re-build their lives. Other women indicated they were happy and felt safer to be on their own and support their children.

Violence and abuse post-separation

The interviews provide disturbing evidence of post-separation violence and abuse. Most of the seventeen women recounted incidents of violence and abuse occurring after they had left the relationship. One woman spoke about how the violence escalated at the time of separation.

His worst violence tendencies come just after he leaves me, for some reason it makes him feel better, that's the worst time for me because he will do anything to hurt me. I've always said to people that the reason I go back to [ex-partner] is because it's easier to live with him than without him, because he makes your life hell.

She reported that when they separated he posted on facebook how he 'hates my guts and hopes I will die'; how he would send 200 text messages a day 'I'm coming to your house to stab you'; he painted himself as the victim and said she was denying access to his daughter, something she was not doing. This woman had re-located from the Central Coast to the western suburbs of Sydney to be close to her mother; despite ending the relationship and moving, she continued to be abused.

Threats to women were made through mobile phone conversations, text messaging and at the place of change-over if the father had access to children. For example, one woman was being harassed daily, with up to 120 text messages a day, most of which were abusive, 'describing me as the opposite to what I am, he made up this person, this person who he hated.' Some men felt entitled to make threats against their ex-partner at the court-house, or at the front of the police station, when he was being charged for breaches of an AVO and/or assault.

The data suggest a number of factors pose significant challenges to women's safety post – separation. These include:

- The profile of the domestic violence perpetrator (discussed below);
- Mixed policing responses (discussed below);
- Living in isolated towns or on properties outside of town;
- On-going family law conflicts;
- Change-over of children between parents;
- The use of technology, in particular mobile phones and texting, to harass, threaten and abuse; and
- The perpetrator knows (or can find out) where the victim is living when she has moved and changed location.

This last point is important, within the context of Staying Home Leaving Violence and women's safety in remaining in their own home. Common sense would suggest that a woman may be at greater risk of post-separation violence and abuse if she remains in her own home, because the perpetrator knows where she is living. However, evidence from the interviews shows that invariably the ex-partner knows where she is living, even when she does move. The woman who re-located after being evicted from her home by her in-laws moved to rental accommodation at a busy urban location with her two younger children. Asked if her ex-partner knew where she was living she replied: 'Of course he knows where I live.' Her older daughter told him. In other cases where the woman had moved, the solicitor provided her new address 'by accident'; family law papers disclosed the address; a parenting order gave the women's address as the place for contact; one woman hoping to reconcile invited her ex-partner into her new home. Two women reported their ex-partner did not know where they had re-located to, however also said he could easily find out. They attributed the reason he had not pursued them as to his being in a new relationship.

One woman sustained a serious assault and rape in her own home following separation. The researcher asked whether with hindsight she wished she had moved and re-located. She replied, 'no, because he would have found me anyway...' The study has found that post-separation violence and abuse occurred regardless of where the woman was living and regardless of whether or not she had remained in her own home. Indeed, the only woman who had not experienced any form of violence or abuse from her ex-partner since separating had remained in her own home.

Violence and abuse following separation took a number of forms. One of the most common, and most worrying, were threats by the ex-partner to commit further violence. Often these were threats to kill the woman. One woman was receiving death threats:

You aren't going to be a real good mother when you are six foot under...you'd better not go out in the street because I'll run you over you fucking bitch.

A woman from a CALD background recounted a violent incident post-separation, 'because he thought that I was giving him dirty looks.' He said, 'I'll fucking swallow you whole bitch, what are you looking at me like that for'. Another woman received text messages, 'see you tomorrow slut, all youse cunts you are all dead, your family are all dead.'

One woman had been reporting death threats to the police, 'I was telling the police, this man is going to kill me.' She said the response was always the same, 'We can't do anything until something happens.' This is despite an incident where her ex-partner rang the local Community Service (CS) office demanding more access to his son. When this was refused pending the outcome of the family law matter in court he told the CS officer, 'well the only solution is if I blow her head off then', and hung up the phone. CS was very concerned by the threat and informed the woman and local police. The police response was that they could not do anything as CS was a 'third party' and not captured by the current AVO conditions. The ex-partner did shoot both the woman and the woman's current boyfriend; both sustained

injuries, the boyfriend came close to death. Her ex-partner committed suicide on the afternoon of the shooting.

A number of perpetrators threatened to kill themselves; some told their children. Women reported that they lived with the fear their ex-partner would commit suicide, and take the children with him.

Perpetrators often used conflict and disagreement over family law matters as an avenue and tactic to continue the violence and abuse. Change-over locations would become sites for further harassment. A number of women spoke about being worried for their children's safety and well-being during access visits with the father. One woman said her ex-partner would 'intimidate me, harass me, bring my child late, sometimes not return [child], at change-overs he was intoxicated and I could smell alcohol on him.'

Did the violent partner return to the home, gain entry and cause further violence and abuse? The answer to this is (in most cases) no. However women reported incidents where the ex-partner did return to the outside of the home with a volley of threats. One woman said the offender gained entry to the house, however her adult son was present, forced him to leave and called the police. In one of the more disturbing examples an ex-partner returned to the home when the mother and children were away for the weekend, got inside and completely trashed the house. As a result the woman does not feel safe in the home anymore, and her older child has been experiencing nightmares. Her ex-partner was in custody at the time of interview; she is seeking a Housing NSW transfer prior to his release.

The one woman who has experienced no violence or abuse from her ex-husband explained: 'I know him as a person, he will not come and harm me, the AVO it's a good thing for him, he's scared of the police.' Her narrative is important because it places the focus on the profile of the perpetrator as being one critical factor in post-separation violence.

Perpetrator characteristics

Possibly the major challenge and threat to a women's safety post-separation is the profile of the domestic violence perpetrator. The women interviewed for the study had intimate and detailed first-hand knowledge of the perpetrator's behaviour. They described men who were physically violent, alcoholics, gamblers, drug abusers, with criminal convictions, refused to accept the relationship was over, threatened to commit suicide and told their children this is what they would do (and it was their mother's fault), never contributed to rental payments and did not help with raising or caring for the children. They described men who sought to control their actions, behaviours and friendships. There were perpetrators who made constant threats to kill the woman, both during and after the relationship, leading women to believe 'he is capable of anything' and 'thinks he is above the law'. Some perpetrators tried to paint the woman as the abusive person and a 'bad mother.' Some were repeat domestic violence offenders.

Despite the fact that most of the perpetrators were also fathers, the interviews suggested that the men had provided little assistance in caring for their young children. For example one woman with five children under the age of 11 years, when asked if the father had helped with

their care said, 'no, his help was yelling at them, they were scared of him.' Another woman commented that the father was 'more interested in his drugs than a commitment to his family.'

There was an important exception to the typical perpetrator profile. A woman described her ex-husband as someone who was scared of the law and therefore she was confident he would not break the conditions of the AVO which included an exclusion condition. This group of perpetrators was also described in the original SHLV research, with a description of a physically violent man who 'turned to jelly' in court in front of the magistrate (Edwards, 2004, p 31).

There was no evidence from the study that men were homeless because they had been removed from the home. Women reported that the men had housing, typically they were back living with parents or siblings. The men were not always happy about this; however as one woman reported, her ex-husband was earning good money as a mechanic and could have afforded to pay for accommodation rather than living with a family member. She also said he spent all his money on alcohol and gambling.

The interviews suggest the need for stronger criminal justice responses for certain perpetrators, particularly those who are serial domestic violence offenders and/or exercise dangerous levels of violence and threats against women. The example was provided of one perpetrator who went to court with over 40 charges, many of which involved serious levels of violence. To the victim's dismay, he was not given a custodial sentence. It is critical police build an accurate and full profile of the perpetrator's history, and act on this history when providing support and advice to the victim. Warning how dangerous perpetrators may be on release from prison, one woman recommended they be required to wear an electronic monitoring device on wrist or ankle, to keep them well away from the home of the domestic violence victim.

Policing and court responses

The majority of the women (13) had an AVO with an exclusion condition, current at the time of interview. In most cases the children were listed on the order. A further three women had AVOs which had expired two years after the separation, and for different reasons decided not to renew them. One woman did not seek an AVO as she knew her ex-partner would contest it and this would become another 'battle-front'. She reflected, 'his drug is to get me to fight with him, that gives him the power, so I've stopped any contact with him...I don't talk to him unless it's about the children.' She knew that an AVO was an option for her in the future if she changed her mind. Most women with an AVO reported that it had helped, in part, to protect and keep them safe. One woman spoke about how an AVO taken out on her behalf by the police, 'calmed him [ex-partner] down, he backed right off'. Another woman reported how a police constable encouraged her to take some action and seek an AVO. The constable asked her, 'Do you want to keep living like this, or do you want to do something about it?' This simple and straight-forward question 'made me wake up'; the woman agreed to go to court where the AVO was granted.

One of the gaps in the data is whether police were routinely taking out a Provisional Order (previously referred to as a Telephone Interim Order) at the time of an incident, while the AVO application was being made. A Provisional Order can be a powerful and immediate first step in the process of legal protection and can include an exclusion condition to prohibit the offender from returning to the home.

All women in the study had contacted the police for assistance, generally at the time of the domestic violence incident and/or during the AVO process. The interviews provided strong evidence of good policing practices. These included removing the offender from the home, placing him in custody, taking out an AVO on behalf of the victim, responding to breaches of AVOs, accompanying the offender to collect his belongings from the home, providing advice and counsel to the woman about her and her children's safety, and police referrals to the local SHLV service. Some women also remarked that officers were 'supportive' and 'attentive', for example police informed her when the AVO papers had been served on the offender, kept her informed of the progress of court cases, or had the patrol drive past her house to monitor her safety and any possible breaches of an AVO by the offender. Significantly, women's positive experiences of the police in the past help her to feel safer now, as she has faith that the police will respond to any future incidents of violence.

Unfortunately, not all women in the study had faith in the police. This lack of faith resulted from an inadequate and inconsistent policing response to the domestic violence they had experienced. This was particularly the case outside of the Sydney metropolitan area. Some women reported police took a long time arriving at a domestic violence incident; did not respond to reports of AVO breaches; did not believe women's reports of breaches or consider them serious; and did not consider threats of violence as something they were required by law to act on. 'It's the same old thing, we can't do anything until he does something.' One woman from a rural area spoke of how the officer sided and colluded with the offender, doing nothing when the offender breached the exclusion order. She said she would never go to the police again for help.

Most of the women had experienced breaches of their AVO. There were cases where the policing and court response to the breach was very good - the offender was charged with a breach, police collected the evidence, the case went to court, the conditions of an AVO were strengthened, and there were consequences for the offender such as being placed on a good-behaviour bond with a warning from the magistrate that next time he would receive a prison sentence. However, lack of evidence was often a barrier to police charging the offender and taking the case to court, demonstrating the need for improved evidence collection strategies by police. One woman spoke about difficulties proving breaches of her AVO she had reported to the police.

He has been driving past my place at night, I can't prove it, he drives past, honks the horn and screams out [name of child], he tailgated me in the car, hassles me over the phone.

The study's findings demonstrate the need for improved policing responses to offenders' threats of future violence against the woman. The attitude of 'we can't do anything until he

does something' needs to be reversed and replaced with an adequate police response which recognises that a threat of violence is a domestic violence incident and/or breach of an AVO. Considering that many of the threats included threats to kill, there is an imperative for police to respond.

Women's safety

All women were asked to consider the question 'How safe do you feel in your home now?' They were asked to provide a score along a continuum: 1 *not safe at all*, 3 *not very safe*, 5 *reasonably safe*, 7 *very safe*, 10 *completely safe*. The majority of women (11) answered this question by scoring a 5 (reasonably safe) or 7 (very safe), or somewhere between. The lowest score was 4. Two women scored between very safe and completely safe, and three women said they were completely safe (10).

The woman who gave the lowest score (4) explained she did not feel safe 'because being with him [ex-partner] opened my eyes to just how violent someone can be.' Of interest is that she re-located and said her ex-partner does not know where she is living. Despite this, and having a new and positive relationship, she felt the least safe of all women interviewed, a reminder of the longer term effects of domestic violence on women's sense of safety and well-being. It is likely she is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, following a violent incident two years ago. She has recently bought a guard dog and said that is helping her feel safer.

This woman's case is clear evidence that it is not always wise or safe for a woman to remain in her own home. She was very frightened during the time (5 months) she and her young child did remain at the property on the outskirts of a small country town, even though her brother and then mother stayed with her, and the ex-partner was serving a prison sentence for the assault.

I would wake up in the middle of the night, I was so sick of being so scared, I was jumping at any noise, I'd get up and go outside and say 'just come and get me, I don't care' I thought I was going crazy. When [SHLV worker] said about changing the locks and windows I'm like 'are you kidding?' If he wants me he will get me, and the next time he will kill me. I know what he's like, he's a psycho. I need 6 foot fences and 24 hour security guards, then I'll feel safe.

This woman needed to leave her home, which she did, first escaping to Sydney and then returning to live close to her parents at a new location. Her ex-partner has not pursued her. Staying Home Leaving Violence has been able to provide ongoing support and assistance to help her deal with the emotional scarring of the domestic violence relationship.

One woman who said she felt completely safe qualified this by explaining her ex-partner was serving a long jail sentence and she felt safe when he was locked up. However, 'I'd be right off the page here [at the opposite end of the continuum] when he is released.' This perpetrator was extremely violent and had held her at gunpoint, raped and battered her. The same woman spoke of the real threats to her safety prior to him going to jail. She was living on a

property outside of town, and like other women living in rural locations faced particular risks to her safety due to physical isolation and the time required for police to arrive at an incident.

Another woman who scored 10 reflected that the period of time since the separation (3 years) had helped her feel safer, especially as her ex-partner had not made attempts to pursue her. The third woman who scored 10 spoke about how ‘all the neighbours look out for me now.’ She was confident her neighbours would call the police immediately they saw him; she had confidence the police would respond, because she has experienced good policing responses to date. She has an AVO with exclusion condition, and knows what to do if he does come near the house. She is confident of the formal and informal supports she has in place, including the local SHLV service and her adult sons who have played a protective role. The way she talks about her ex-partner (as a wayward child) demonstrates she has re-claimed control.

The women who scored a 5 (reasonably safe) were asked what would need to happen for them to move up to 7 (very safe). Responses included: ‘I don’t know, it’s knowing him and knowing what he’s capable of’; ‘I worry about the influence and pressure from other people [her husband’s family]’; resolution of family and local court cases and ‘I pray he might find a girlfriend’; ‘his verbal abuse is the thing that’s in the way at the moment, and my anxiety about his verbal abuse...he’s like trying to fight the government’; ‘I’d need to know he was locked up for a long time’; ‘for him to leave the country’; ‘if my ex-partner stops being so controlling, somehow he found out where I live, somehow he found out where my boyfriend lives...I don’t know what he would be capable of doing’; ‘my safety will be improved when that person is out of my life, in jail or court orders say no access [to son]...while he’s around I’ll always be looking over my shoulder.’

Women who scored a 7 (very safe) were not asked what would need to happen for them to move up to 10 (completely safe). This was in recognition that many women in the community would not answer completely safe. Furthermore, the women in the study had all experienced violent and abusive relationships and it may be unrealistic for them to ever be able to answer in this way. Given there is no such thing as ‘no risk’ in domestic violence cases, it may not be wise or prudent for women to claim complete safety.

Women’s sense of safety will be enhanced when she has confidence the police will respond appropriately to any future violent incident/s. Women who reported good policing responses in the past were confident the police would help them again. For this woman her neighbours, police and SHLV all combined to help her feel reasonably safe.

I feel OK because all my neighbours know, I’ve got the security door on the front and I’ve got an alarm [SHLV organised for her], if something happens my neighbours will ring the police.

Another woman listed the safety strategies which had been most effective for her: practical support from SHLV project staff, the AVO and charges successfully laid against the ex-partner, security locks and improved lighting in the home, and support from members of the local community. Many of the women attributed feeling safer in the home to the services provided by Staying Home Leaving Violence.

Staying Home Leaving Violence service provision

Without exception, each woman in the study provided positive feedback about the local Staying Home Leaving Violence service. In particular, women spoke about the role of the worker/s in supporting them, ‘being there for them’, responding to their needs and those of their children, organising safety upgrades to the home and supporting women to re-build lives free from violence and abuse. Women affirmed the importance of emotional support as well as practical, the support being longer-term and not crisis oriented, and that support was there when the women needed it.

I needed someone there when I wasn't doing OK...as a domestic violence victim you can get that empowered, but then one week later you can be on the floor thinking where is my life?

Many of the women reported that they would not have made the progress they had made, for example taking out AVOs and reporting breaches, protecting their children, maintaining stable housing, re-building their confidence and self-esteem, if it had not been for SHLV. For most women it was the qualities and skills of the support worker which made the difference, as reflected in these words,

She's been supportive in every aspect of everything that's gone on for me in the last 12 months, she's the one person I've called on for everything, not just for the domestic violence, but for my personal things.

Referral pathways to SHLV were usually through the police and/or the women's domestic violence court assistance scheme. SHLV workers often attended the local court on AVO ‘list day’ and were thus able to connect with women seeking exclusion orders as a condition of the AVO. Police referrals to SHLV in the Bega Valley have been lower in number; some women in Bega were referred by the women's refuge which auspices SHLV. The interview data provided evidence of effective service networks which included SHLV; it was sometimes through these networks that women would be referred.

One of the first tasks the SHLV worker organised was a safety audit of the woman's home, conducted in dialogue with the woman and always listening to her needs. As a result, a number of safety upgrades are implemented. These may include: change of locks, security front and back doors, window locks, identifying a safe room, sensor lights, peep-hole, a house alarm and/or personal alarm. Generally, women affirmed the safety upgrades had made them feel safer, more confident and helped them sleep at night. One woman who had re-located to a small town spoke about the assistance provided by SHLV.

They (worker/s) came to my place and said ‘what do you need?’ I wasn't feeling safe at that time because my ex-partner was following me...they provided me with lights, a key-hole, security door and windows...and they were the ones who referred me to family support if I needed help with (young son).

SHLV plays a key role in liaison with the police, supporting women to report all breaches, and advocating appropriate police action in response to breaches. SHLV workers sometimes

accompany women to court, and liaise with police prosecutors and the court assistance scheme to strengthen conditions of an AVO to better protect women in the future. SHLV advocacy for women includes requesting priority and urgent attendance of police in the event of further violence.

Significantly, none of the women had experienced any periods of homelessness since leaving domestic violence. The interview data provided evidence of SHLV advocating for women's long-term housing needs including: supporting women to remain in their own home, assisting with social housing applications and transfers, responding to women's need to re-locate prior to an offender being released from prison and provision of support to a StartSafe client. SHLV, being an outreach service, is able to continue providing support to women if they do change housing and remain living within the service boundaries. The current expansion of services throughout NSW offers the possibility of referring women to the local SHLV service, if women move out of area.

Children's needs

One dominant and recurring theme throughout the interviews was women's motivation to protect their children. Mothers were concerned for their children's safety, happiness and emotional well-being. One woman spoke of the great love she had for her children, her commitment to being a good parent and how she was a 'fiercely protective mum'. Women spoke about how they had to stay strong, in order to help their children.

Many of the children had witnessed the domestic violence, and women were concerned about the short and long-term effects on their sons and daughters. Sometimes women felt guilt and blame regarding what their children had been through. Sometimes women's motivation to leave the relationship was their children; they wanted to give children a better life free from violence. This is one woman's story before she left the relationship:

It was horrendous, he was spitting at me, it was a daily verbal barrage of attacks...the sad part is that the children were witnessing more and more of his violence...he was throwing things at me, throwing full roasts at my head, in front of the children...it was humiliating, being treated like a dog and even dogs are treated better, it was animalistic...my daughter was picking up broken plates from the floor.

Another woman spoke about how her son (6 years at the time) has suffered a lot; he witnessed his father shoot his mother's new boyfriend, and then shoot his mother. She said her son has learning difficulties, and that the school provides extra support and tuition for him.

Ex-partners often exploited child change-overs to continue the violence and abuse post-separation. Children were witnesses. One woman described an AVO breach her two children witnessed at a change-over outside a fast food outlet: 'you're a pig', 'you're a bitch', 'you're a slut'. When she reported the breach to the police she was informed there was insufficient evidence to charge the offender and take him to court.

A number of women spoke about the dilemmas and fears they faced regarding the father's access to children. These women did not believe their children were safe with unsupervised access, and were going through the lengthy and difficult family law process of seeking parenting orders and supervised access. One woman described her concerns and the decision she made following a conversation with an officer from CS. She had been allowing access visits on most Sundays, but he would return the young children early because 'he wasn't coping.'

I was becoming more and more nervous about this, because if he wasn't coping to what degree is he not going to cope? It was quite scary. I heard on the grapevine that if I wasn't giving him access it would be a bad mark against me. After many calls to DoCS when I relayed my concerns about my children being in an unsafe and threatening situation, he has threatened to throw them down the stairs if things don't go his way...finally someone from DoCS said to me 'if it's a threatening situation you don't have to give them over', and I thought well I won't again until there is a court order.

While some women spoke about the emotional strain their children had gone through and were still experiencing as a result of the domestic violence, other women said their children felt relaxed and happy at home now the violence had been excluded. One woman described how her daughter had always been 'walking on eggshells' when the father was at home; but now she is happy and 'dancing around like a pork chop.' Some mothers had arranged for their children to have independent counselling; SHLV was able to assist with information and referral to free and local counselling services.

Given that domestic violence is a child protection issue, Community Services was involved in some cases. Women generally reported the involvement of CS as something which was positive for the family, especially when the focus was on keeping children safe. In one woman's case, the intervention of CS following a long period of domestic violence spanning two relationships was a turning point for the woman to leave the relationship and separate. Talking about how her children came first, '...they made me make the right decisions'.

Children were always affected by the violence, but sometimes they responded in different ways, even within the one family. One woman spoke about how her three older boys (9, 10 and 11 years at the time of separation) were ambivalent about the violence and wanted to stay with their father. They would plead with her to forgive the father, 'mum had to make it better again'. She said that her sons love her, but to this day (many years after the separation) believe that what happened is the mother's fault. Another woman spoke about how her three children responded differently to the domestic violence: '(boy, 13years) is like a frightened little rabbit, (his twin sister) is pretty tough, said she doesn't want to see him, the eldest one (daughter, 16 years) just hates me, it's all my fault'.

Two women described how their adult children were now supporting and helping them to feel safer. For example the CALD woman who was experiencing pressure from her ex-husband's side of the family to drop the AVO and let him back was being supported by her adult daughter. The daughter wasn't telling her what to do, but advised her to make her own

decisions and 'listen to myself, not to the other people.' Another woman's adult son was in the police force, and able to advise on getting the best possible help from the police.

One CALD woman spoke about intergenerational violence and how she had witnessed violence as a child: 'I've seen my dad chase my mum with a machete'. She has a commitment to break the cycle of violence for her children; this was a motivating factor in her decision to leave the domestic violence relationship. She spoke about how she wanted to break free of cultural stereotypes which place women in an unequal position to men.

We were raised to shut-up, woman be quiet, do your housework, do what your husband tells you, if he hits you because you have a big mouth just take it, don't complain, don't nag, be quiet...I'm not going to be quiet, I'm not going to live like that.

SHLV provided information and referrals to counselling and family support services. One woman suggested that SHLV connect with day care services in the area to provide occasional child care. This would allow mothers of young children to reconnect with friends, break the daily routine and feelings of isolation from being house-bound, and help mothers participate in the wider community. She also suggested that SHLV could build up a pool of equipment for children, for example prams.

Women's strengths

The interviews provided a wealth of data on just how strong and capable the 17 women were, despite (or perhaps because of) what they had been through. The women did not present as passive victims who were frightened of their futures. SHLV can use these strengths to help women re-build their lives and those of their children.

Each woman was much more than a victim of domestic violence. Women had a range of experiences and achievements in education and employment which, together with their personal qualities, would help them move forward. For example the South American woman had a degree in linguistics from her home country, has nearly completed a Diploma of Education to gain teaching qualifications, has completed children's development courses at TAFE and currently works at a local school as a teacher's aide.

The majority of women were engaged in some form of employment and/or education, even though many were still caring for young children. Women spoke about how employment had helped them maintain some normality in their lives when they separated from their partner, it provided extra income for the household, and helped to build women's confidence and self-esteem. Sometimes work-mates became friends and supports in their life. Two women spoke about how their employer knew about the domestic violence and had supported them to maintain their employment and offered personal support.

The interviews showed how women's own mothers are big supports in their life and supports for their grandchildren. One woman was living with parents, another's mother was living with her, another had re-located to live closer to her mother, and one CALD woman spoke of her neighbour as being her 'Australian mother'. Some women and children had previously

stayed with their mothers/parents for brief stays to escape violence during periods of crisis. Mothers provided emotional support to the woman and offered practical assistance with bringing up children - collecting them from school, babysitting and generally being loving grandmothers.

Women utilised a number of services to seek support, including: SHLV, counselling services, family support services, police, women's domestic violence court assistance, solicitors and supervised access centres. Many of the services co-operated with each other to form dynamic service networks; when this occurred the client benefited from a more integrated and holistic provision of service.

One of the interesting findings of the research was how the dynamics of domestic violence (where the woman experiences being controlled by her partner and lives in fear of his violence and abuse) can shift when she makes the decision to separate from him and leave the relationship. She can experience a sense of agency and empowerment which she never felt when she was living in(side) the domestic violence. This may help women re-build their lives, and the lives of their children. This shift of power dynamics was also a finding in the original SHLV study, with women saying they were no longer frightened of their partner, they had 'moved beyond fear' and were now making their own decisions and feeling empowered (Edwards, 2004, p22).

Choices for women

As outlined in the aims of the study (Section 3), SHLV is based on promoting choices for women when they leave domestic violence, including the choice to remain in their own home. It has always been recognised that not all women will choose this option and some women will want to re-locate. Some women in the study said they would not have felt safe remaining in their home. Some wanted to re-locate and saw this as part of a fresh start and new beginning, without the memories of violence which remaining in the home may have brought.

One woman who did leave and went to live with her parents reflected that the SHLV service model where women can remain in their home 'is great if that is what the woman wants, it's different for everyone and perhaps it's better financially for her to stay there. It has to be the woman's choice.' However she added that the woman might experience feelings of negativity in the home and would remember violent incidents which occurred there. Dents in the wall and broken furniture may be daily reminders of the violence. She reflects,

If I had the choice I would have stayed until such a time as I was able to re-gather myself, break the lease, claim the bond, take control of the situation and then re-locate.

The passing of time is an important factor; women may change their mind and make different choices down the track. One woman who remained in her home for more than two years has now reached the point where she wants a 'new home, new environment, new memories, new beginning.' This follows the incident described above where her ex-partner gained entry to her home and trashed it while the family was away for the weekend. She has not recovered

emotionally from the incident, and understandably wants to re-locate. When asked what needs to happen for things to improve, she answered in this way,

Time, I need time...money is not going to fix everything...a new home that would be good but it's not going to fix everything. I'm going to feel a bit more at ease after court's over and done with, I'm hoping he gets a very lengthy sentence, and I'll rest at ease knowing that my kids will be grown and they can make their own choice about everything.

For the women whose ex-partners were in jail, timing was everything. They spoke about how they had made the decision to re-locate for their own (and children's safety) prior to the ex-partner's release from prison.

One woman determined to remain in her home explained: 'it's my home and [daughter's] home, it's only his house.' The same woman had a sense of entitlement to the home because,

I worked bloody hard for that house. I'm getting back in their [after brief respite at her mother's place]. That's my home. We've changed the whole house around, making it different, making it ours.

It is important to recognise that 'home' is a deeply personal understanding for both adults and children, related to belonging, identity, sense of family, safety and security. Home is so much more than just a house. The significance of Staying Home Leaving Violence may lay in its underlying philosophy that women need to be able to make choices about home.

5.3 Summary

Seventeen women accessing the SHLV services at Eastern Sydney, Bega Valley and Blacktown participated in the study. A thematic analysis of interviews identified the following key issues: stability of housing, lives free from violence, violence and abuse post-separation, perpetrator characteristics, policing and court responses, women's safety, Staying Home Leaving Violence service provision, children's needs, women's strengths and choices for women.

All women were living in stable accommodation with their children, at the time of interview. The majority had lived in the same house for more than two years. Two thirds of the women had remained in their family home with their children. Most were still there. None had experienced homelessness since leaving domestic violence and separating from their ex-partner. The majority of women reported feeling 'reasonably safe' or 'very safe' in their home.

The majority of women (14 out of 17) affirmed they were now living a life free from violence. This was linked with re-building their lives and the active support provided by SHLV.

Most women had experienced some form/s of post-separation violence and abuse, the most common being threatening text messages and verbal abuse at child change-overs. The

violence and abuse continued regardless of whether the woman remained in her own home or re-located.

All women had received assistance from the police, including officers attending the scene of a domestic violence incident, police taking out AVOs with exclusion conditions on behalf of the victim, responding to breaches of AVOs and providing advice to the victim regarding her safety. The police and SHLV often worked in collaboration, and police were a key referral of domestic violence victims to SHLV. The exception was in the non-metropolitan research site, where there was evidence of an inconsistent policing response and low police referrals to SHLV.

Women gave very positive feedback about SHLV and the support offered by SHLV workers. Workers provided a range of assistance to women and children including: practical and emotional support; safety audit of the home and security upgrades; assistance with taking out AVOs with exclusion conditions and reporting breaches to the police; and referral of women and children to counselling, family support and legal services. Women participating in the study had a range of strengths, abilities and personal qualities which SHLV can work with to help women re-build their lives and the lives of their children.

6 Conclusions

The report concludes with a vision for SHLV as a new narrative for victims of domestic violence. The strengths of SHLV and areas for further development are identified.

6.1 Staying Home Leaving Violence - a new narrative

Staying Home Leaving Violence presents us with a new narrative for women leaving domestic violence. It is a narrative which has justice at its core. It is empowering for women and children. It is a narrative which places accountability with the violent offender, as reflected in the following words from one participant in the study.

It sent a signal to the ex-partner that there were serious repercussions for his actions and a police record for what he did. It sent a message that I would not tolerate domestic violence and would stand up to him. He then had to face the humiliation and public shame of his violent behaviour being made public. It was the first time anyone had ever stood up to him and made him accountable for his actions.

The findings of the study support the conclusion that SHLV is achieving two significant outcomes:

- Firstly, supporting women and children to live lives free from violence; and
- Secondly, supporting women and children to remain in their housing and prevent homelessness on leaving a domestic violence relationship.

6.2 Strengths of Staying Home Leaving Violence

A number of strengths within the service model and program were identified by the study, and indicate areas of focus and development for the new services and program. The strengths include:

- Skills and qualities of the SHLV workers;
- Provision of longer-term rather than crisis-oriented support;
- Provision of emotional as well as practical support;
- Outreach and advocacy where the service goes to where the woman and children are living;
- Flexibility and person-centred approach of the program and service model, which is inclusive of women who remain in the family home as well as women who re-locate and move housing;
- Experience and knowledge of the original SHLV services, which plays an important role assisting and mentoring the more recent round of services;

- SHLV services are part of the local and integrated nongovernment service network, offering opportunities for referral, skills sharing, case management and utilisation of the full range of services for women leaving domestic violence; and
- Local services and the state wide program are guided by active partnerships with government agencies. These partnerships provide the key to addressing some systemic problems identified in this study.

6.3 Partnerships

Partnerships at the state wide level offer the best strategy to address some of the ‘big picture’ problems regarding responses to domestic violence. These systemic problems impact on victims of domestic violence, as well as the operation of local SHLV services. While Community Services funds, manages and implements SHLV, they do this in partnership and collaboration with NSW Police, Housing NSW, Legal Aid Commission and the Women’s Domestic Violence Court Assistance Program, NSW Health and Attorney General’s Department. Some of the issues raised in this study which may be effectively addressed across the Human Services agencies include:

- The high prevalence of post-separation violence and abuse experienced by women in the study, and the consequent need for pro-active police and court responses;
- The need for adequate and consistent policing responses to threats of violence post-separation;
- Improved access to public housing for women leaving domestic violence. For example, women and children’s safety within the context of post-separation violence and abuse could be considered as acceptable criteria for priority public housing and transfers;
- Threats to women and children’s safety posed by the release of an ex-partner from prison. Women’s safety and housing need to be carefully assessed prior to the ex-partner’s release from prison, with consideration given to the use of electronic monitoring for released prisoners;
- Continued improvement and use of an evidence base for victim risk assessments by SHLV services. For example, NSW Health’s cross agency risk assessment tool could be adapted and utilised by services within the context of post-separation violence and abuse; and
- Improved local court responses to applications for exclusion orders, as a condition of an AVO.

These represent six important development areas for the state wide program.

6.4 Further research and evaluation

Further research which could support the SHLV program includes a study of exclusion orders as they are being applied in local courts across NSW. Exclusion orders are an important legal avenue to prohibit the violent offender from returning to the home, and need to be utilised more widely.

While the first priority for the state wide program now is to support and consolidate the full range of the 18 services, a program evaluation will be of value in the future. Such an evaluation could examine more closely the outcomes for women and children with regard their safety and housing; identify strategies to respond to post-separation violence and abuse; and build responses to further develop and consolidate the program.

7 References

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Appendix 1

Research questions

1. What has made it possible for you (and children) to remain in your own home when you left domestic violence?
2. What have been the benefits and disadvantages for you (and children) in remaining in your own home?
3. Has the violent ex-partner returned to the home and caused further violence and abuse, and what were the circumstances of his returning?
4. If there has been further violence and abuse what was the police response and how effective was the response? What was the response from SHLV?
5. What are the most effective safety strategies you have found to help you (and children) remain safely in your home?
6. On a scale of 1 to 10, how safe do you feel in your own home now? (1 = not safe at all; 3 = not very safe; 5 = reasonably safe; 7 = very safe; 10 = completely safe). Why did you decide on this score?
7. What services have you (and children) used and how useful have the services been?
8. Do you consider you are now living a life free from violence? (to what extent and why?)
9. What do you think your future will be in relation to housing, employment and financial security?
10. How could things improve for you? What else could SHLV be doing to help?

Thank you for your participation in the research.

Appendix 2

List of Staying Home Leaving Violence Services in NSW

The program is currently operating in 18 areas in NSW. The auspice organisation and contact number for each scheme is listed below.

Bega	South East Sydney Women and Children's Services 02 6492 6239
Blacktown	WASH House 02 9677 1962
Campbelltown	Benevolent Society 1800 077 760
Dubbo	NSW Police 02 6883 1560
Eastern Sydney	Housing NSW 02 9526 4701 or 0439 414 673
Fairfield	South West Sydney Legal Centre 02 9601 7777
Kempsey	Kempsey Family Support Service 02 6563 1588
Lake Macquarie	Eastlakes Family Support Service 02 4943 9255
Liverpool	South West Sydney Legal Centre 02 9601 7777
Maitland	Carrie's Place Women and Children's Services 02 4934 2585
Moree	Moree Family Support Service 02 6752 4536
Newcastle	Newcastle Family Support Service 02 4926 3577
Penrith	Penrith Women's Health Centre 02 4721 8749
Redfern	The Shop Women and Girls Centre 02 9699 9036

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Shoalhaven	South Coast Women's Health and Welfare Aboriginal Corp 02 4421 7400
Walgett	Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service 02 6828 1611
Wollongong	Family Services Illawarra 02 4255 5333
Wyong	Centacare Broken Bay 02 4350 1730 or 1448 888 972