

South Australian
Commissioner
for Children and
Young People
2024

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Unseen and Unheard

Listening to the voices of
young people with lived
experiences of violence

PROJECT REPORT NO. 46 | OCTOBER 2024

The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*. The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people. This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation. The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes, services and practices that affect their lives.

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Throughout this report we have used unedited responses from the young people who participated, ensuring their ideas and concerns are faithfully communicated to those who have the capacity to consider them and implement positive change.

Thank you to the South Australian young people who shared their experiences and insights. This work would not have been possible without the support provided by:

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- CREATE Foundation
- Infinity Community Solutions

Terminology used in this report

Based on the voices of young people, the term violence refers to:

Any abusive behaviour which is used to control or scare the victim that is perpetrated by a partner, ex-partner, person with whom the victim is in an intimate relationship with, or by a member of their family – including across generations. This can include emotional, financial and physical abuse, sexual assault or violence, or coercive control.

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Background

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, I welcome the opportunity to provide this report to South Australia's Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.

My mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* is to promote and advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. It is also my role to ensure that South Australia meets its obligations in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC sets out the rights of all children and young people, including the right to have their views considered in all decisions that affect them (Article 12) and to live free from violence (Article 19) and discrimination (Article 2).

The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032 recognises children and young people as victims of gender-based violence in their own right. However, children and young people's unique perspectives and experiences continue to be overlooked in policies, systems and services generally, and in the context of domestic, family and sexual violence specifically.

In late 2023, the South Australian government committed to holding a royal commission inquiring into domestic, family and sexual violence with an aim to design a system to 'better meet the needs of those who interact with it'. This means designing a system that effectively and meaningfully recognises and responds to children and young people's rights and experiences.

The Royal Commission provides an opportunity and a responsibility to seek, hear and promote the voices of children and young people with lived experience of domestic, family and sexual violence.

Importantly, the inquiry recognises the rights of children as victims of domestic, family and sexual violence and has shown commitment to seeking their views and experiences.

As the systemic advocate for children and young people in South Australia, I wanted to support the Royal Commission to bring the voices of young people to the table. Specifically, I wanted to hear their ideas about prevention, barriers to attitudinal and systemic change, and ideas to improve system and service responses to domestic, family and sexual violence.

Given the nature of the subject matter, I engaged consultants, Jodie Evans and Belinda Lorek, to support the process and connect with young people with lived experience of domestic, family and sexual violence.

After numerous letters, calls and offers of introductory meetings the challenges of finding participants became evident. The stigma of domestic, family and sexual violence and the profound emotions of shame, guilt, loyalty, fear, grief, sadness, and anger experienced, meant that for many young people it was too hard to talk about.

Service providers identified that many young people they are working with were not emotionally ready to talk about their experience, and some young people were still living in unsafe situations, instability, or crisis, and therefore navigating the continuing impacts of violence on their lives. Other challenges included a lack of awareness from service providers about the backgrounds of the young people accessing their services.

Responses from services included:

- “**Sadly, I think all the young people I know are in the thick of it (family violence).”**
- “**They are unfortunately, still in this environment. I don’t think I could bring this topic up with them.”**
- “**We identified a few additional (young people) who we initially thought would be strong candidates. However, upon further reflection and discussion with them, it became evident that engaging in such a conversation may be premature for their current stage of post FDV experience.”**
- “**Unfortunately, despite our efforts to encourage participation, these young people declined the invitation to be part of the consultation. We respect their decision and acknowledge the emotional and psychological complexities that might have influenced their choice at this time.”**

Initially, services were able to identify eight teenagers in contact with them who expressed interest in participating in a conversation about their experiences. All of them said they wanted to make a difference for other young people through sharing their experiences. For reasons of safety, it was assessed that their emotional and living situations were not conducive to participation and so they were not included in the interviews. Some weren’t ready to make sense of their experiences as a child, or they had parents who did not support them speaking out about family secrets. Others had parents who were fearful of their previous partners finding out about their participation, or who felt that their child talking about their experiences would be further traumatising for their child.

Despite these challenges, there were interviews undertaken with a slightly older cohort of young people who were open and candid in sharing their stories and able to comment on:

- their thoughts on the causes of domestic, family and sexual violence.
- their experience and understanding of the impacts of violence.
- their assessments of how useful current domestic, family and sexual violence prevention strategies and services are.

The approach

A total of thirteen services, individual practitioners and professionals were invited to collaborate.

Each service was provided with a safety checklist to be completed in conjunction with the consultant, and any issues arising were discussed prior to an invitation being extended to a young person. A total of sixteen checklists were completed in July and August 2024. Of these, eight young people were assessed as being not suitable to participate due to safety concerns. A further eight were approached to participate.

Prior to the conversation, each young person received information about the purpose and process of the conversation, the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any stage, the consent and confidentiality process, and their option to choose where they wanted to meet.

The process included:

- Assessment and preparation time with the support agency.
- Safety checklist and initial contact with the young person.
- Pre-conversation preparation by consultant, based on initial discussions.
- A 2-hour time slot and location for the conversation.
- Any follow up or referral post-conversation.

The average length of each 1:1 conversation was 2 hours and 20 minutes during which time participants reflected on their family history or childhood exposure to violence, and/or their experience of violence. This conversation included their observations relating to issues with the service response system and what opportunities they could see for improvement and change.

Conversations were underpinned by the following principles:

- Young people have rights, and their voices must be heard and shared.
- Knowledge is power and young people have a right to be informed of and understand the systems that impact upon them.
- Young people's safety and wellbeing are paramount, and conversations with them must not cause further harm.
- Young people must have choice and control regarding their participation.
- Safe spaces and adequate amounts of time are required to hear young people's experiences and enable them to express their views.
- Conversations must validate and respond to young people's experiences and emotions.

The participants

The eight young people who participated in the process and interview were aged from 19 to 24 and live in metropolitan Adelaide. These participants were asked for their views, ideas and recommendations to create change in the key areas of prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing. Their personal experiences are presented as case studies in the appendix to this report.

The young people who participated came from a diversity of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and life circumstances. Each demonstrated strength, resilience and a determination to break the cycle of violence they themselves had experienced. They expressed their commitment to their own healing and their belief that their experience does not define who they are. However, this in no way minimises the impact that violence has had on their lives.

Participants shared their experiences of growing up in homes that featured violence, as well as their observations

of violence in the relationships of peers and siblings, their experiences of violence in their own intimate relationships and/or their personal experiences of sexual violence.

Whilst their experiences differed, what they each shared in relation to the impact of violence on their identity, self esteem and relationships was similar. They also expressed consistent ideas about what needs to change to better support others who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence.

T

T grew up around violence but as a child she did not know what domestic violence was. It was not until she was 10 years of age she heard about domestic violence. No one knew what she was going through. T is now 21 years old, lives with her partner, working full time in a role supporting children, which she loves. T is passionate, vibrant, genuine and reflective. T wants to share her story and now knows everything that happened has made her who she is today.

“ Don't think people like that do bad things are bad people. This is really important to me. I have always feared when I tell my story people will think my mum is bad or that I am bad. We are not bad.” T, 21yo F

M

M grew up with strong, supportive women, who all had histories of domestic violence. When M entered her first romantic relationship with a man, she didn't know what to expect. It was exciting at first, but it changed quickly into violence. M is now 20 years old. She lives in a share house and continues to pursue a career that makes use of her artistic talents. M is a quiet, thoughtful and somewhat shy young woman with a big heart who cares deeply for others.

“ Most of the women in my life have been abused in some way by a male and in my experience most women are treated horribly by men.” M, 20yo F

J

J grew up in a family he describes as 'pretty normal'. He didn't experience domestic violence as a child, but did see violence and other types of aggression around him as he got older and started 'hanging around' different crowds. J ended up in a relationship with a young woman who was abusive and violent. J is 20, he is polite, personable and very open. He cares about others and believes he is 'too nice'. J is passionate about helping others and would like to one day work with at risk youth. He wanted to share his story to give a voice to young men who are victims of violence from female perpetrators.

“ There is always hope.” J, 20yo M

V

V grew up with her parents fighting. She remembers lots of slamming doors, yelling and things being thrown around. She remembers getting lots of 'hidings' too, for silly things. It was normal to her, but it didn't make it any less distressing. V was always involved in some way, often being brought in by one of her parents to either protect one or the other, or to vouch for one of them in some way.

V is now 23 years old. She studies and works. She has a strong sense of social justice, and is a warm, outgoing and kind young woman with a very protective love for her two younger sisters. She is committed to doing something for others to have a positive impact on the world.

“ It feels quite good talking about it even now and then feels like a therapy session.” V, 23yo F

G

G was removed from the hospital and taken into out-of-home care at birth. She experienced violence and abuse from the people that were meant to care for her. As a teenager she was sexually abused by an adult in a position of power that she should have been able to trust. G is 21 years old. She is open and chatty, friendly and engaging. She presented as hopeful and considerate. G has recently moved into a share house with two other young women, and is about to start her first full time job. She is also enjoying learning how to cook.

“ I'm interested to see where this will go – however long it takes.” G, 21yo F

K

K grew up in a home environment that involved abuse, violence and neglect. K has been exposed to traumatic experiences since birth and witnessed the trauma perpetrated by others, which included sexual violence. K's family was involved with child protection services and K was removed. K wants to tell her story to help change the systems that are 'supposed' to help protect children. K is now 19 years of age. K is determined, energetic and compassionate. She is forgiving and believes that your experiences as a child do not define you. K works full time in a job she enjoys and has her own place.

- “ I just think that anyone who has seen witness or supported someone through abuse should not be ashamed or scared to share their story. You still have a story to tell – it still effects you.” K, 19yo F

E

E grew up in out-of-home care. Her biological parents were unable to care for her due to their misuse of drugs and alcohol. In out-of-home care, E met a young man online when she was just seventeen years of age. The relationship turned violent – verbally, emotionally and then physically and sexually. E is now 24 years of age and a parent. She is strong, independent and creative. She is determined to be a positive and inspiring role model for her daughter. E wants to share her story to give others a sense of hope, to be heard, to be understood 'and because we have all gone through similar things encourage to speak up when their ready'.

- “ Don't be afraid to open up! Young children who see it and don't speak up – just because they are young they still have a voice – always listen!” E, 24yo F

S

S grew up with her mum and twin sister. There has been little contact with her birth father and she does not see him as an influential figure in her life. The story she has chosen to share is about her exposure to domestic violence in the context of her sister's romantic relationship. S is able to now voice 'it wasn't just her that went through it'. S is 20. She is friendly, good-natured and empathetic. S reflected that this experience is recent and, in some ways, continues, because her sister is still having contact with her perpetrator. S wants to share this story to ensure there is an understanding that it is not just the direct victims of domestic, family and sexual violence who are impacted. Often the people closest to them also suffer significantly.

- “ Watching someone you love, go through 'that' when there is nothing you can do to help is terrible, it really took a toll on my mental health.” S, 20yo F

Recommendations

1

Young people with lived experience of violence want their wishes, voice and experience to be central to any efforts to support them. A doing 'with' not 'to' approach.

- Young people need to feel heard and/or understood.
- Young people should not need to retell their stories multiple times.
- Young people must be given opportunities to actively engage in their own right and not be seen as a passive bystander.

2

Young people with lived experience of violence want a system of support that provides:

- More youth focused violence prevention strategies taught at school and in the community.
- More opportunities to consider the young person's needs – not just those of their parents.
- Consistent relationships with helping agencies and the chance to build trust and be known by professionals.
- Clear accountability from services with clear timeframes and regular information and updates.

3

Young people with lived experience of violence need systems and society to coordinate services and support to help them stay safe through:

- Better oversight of all services and how they can work together.
- More training on identification of violence for professionals working in and delivering mainstream support services.
- Better communication and information sharing between services so that they are working together more effectively.
- Youth focused education about available services.
- Specific programs and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.
- Specific programs and supports for young men.

Key messages

- Prevention needs to be about supporting young people to put themselves in the shoes of others and reject violence as behaviour that is normal.
- Education needs to be open and consistent across sectors; not dependent on the school you attend, its ethos or values.
- There must be more education about what sexual harassment looks like, and how it can be addressed at school, in the workplace and within the community.
- Prevention requires education to help children and young people recognise and respond to warning signs sooner, and see the 'red flags' which pop up in relationship dynamics.
- Language used to describe violence must be directly sourced from the voices of young people, so it is more relatable.
- Unhealthy ideas about gender and identity must be challenged and young men must be supported to develop a positive identity without the need to 'be alpha', tough, or having to prove themselves.
- To stop adults using violence, we must engage them in conversations about their own experience of violence as a child.
- We need to ensure the imagery and narrative used in advertising strategies and support services is relatable to young people. For contemporary education approaches to work, they need to be co-designed with young people and contain messages that are being delivered via appropriate pathways.
- There needs to be more information about the steps and processes that will help young people leave violent situations. Information must explain in simple terms what young people must do, who they can talk to and what protections are in place to support them.
- The fear of 'being taken away' needs to be named and navigated. Services need to come in and support the family to prevent removal wherever possible.
- After the initial trauma of violence, young people need ongoing care and support to navigate future relationships, and to reflect on how they can (if they wish) share their experiences within those relationships.
- Service personnel need more training on what to look for, and how to respond to signs of trauma relating to violence.
- Counselling should be accessible and free, with young people able to choose who they see and how, with professional counselling available consistently as part of prevention, early intervention and for recovery and healing.

Young people's insights from experience

Prevention

Education for change

Education was the predominant theme arising in relation to how to prevent domestic, family and sexual violence. There were different aspects of education that participants felt were important, including a focus on boys and young men that teaches them how to recognise feelings and regulate their emotions.

Young people felt this education must be the joint responsibility of schools, support services, families and society. More than one young person shared that prevention should involve broad primary health education about what constitutes a healthy relationship, particularly the need to take things 'slowly' while you truly get to know someone. Young people felt this education must involve how we need to be aware of our own boundaries, the boundaries of others and safety behaviours. Elements of this education must include how and where to get help, as well as support to speak up when things are not okay.

“ Teach boys that it is okay to have emotions and feel things.” T, 21yo F

“ Not rushing into a relationship – give yourself 5 months in between, get to know the person first.” J, 20yo M

Many participants reflected that education around relationships, identity and safety currently starts in high school. To be more effective, however, they felt it must start in primary school when problematic behaviours may start to emerge. Education should include developing help seeking skills, challenging assumptions, and creating spaces for young people to develop the literacy they need to describe their feelings and understand what

may already be happening in their lives. This preventative education involves learning what domestic, family and sexual violence is and looks like, in preference to playing unrelatable “old fashioned” videos. Teachers must actively follow up, check in and make sure young people are okay, building trust and thereby letting their students know they are a safe person; someone they can come to if and when they need someone to guide them or tell them what is happening.

Participants said that education must help children and young people recognise and talk about the signs or ‘red flags’ which pop up in relationship dynamics sooner. Young people also highlighted the importance of recognising green flags – or the things that can reassure them that the person is ‘together’ and that they and the relationship is safe and able to deliver a positive rather than negative influence.

“ That's not how you should be responding to something that make you frustrated and mad, in school teach kids young, how to be responding to emotions, teach kids, how and different ways.” T, 21yo F

There must be more education about what sexual harassment is at school, but also what it can look like in the community as well as at work, when they start their first job.

“ Conversation was about the law not how it made someone feel. Need to focus more on people being a good person. You are not just being a bad person to women, it just makes you a shit person.” V, 23yo F

Challenging dangerous beliefs and stereotypes about gender and societal attitudes in relation to roles and responsibilities must form part of any school curriculum and should also include information about victims of

domestic violence who are male. Importantly, everyone needs to understand that violence has no boundaries. It affects all genders, cultures, ages and social classes, and occurs in all countries and postcodes.

Equally importantly, we must build identity for young men and provide support for more contemporary expressions of masculinity, moving away from unhealthy ideas about gender and identity.

“ Growing up and learning it is okay to talk to people no matter your gender or identity.” J, 20yo M

“ I feel like a lot of men who go through hard times before they even talk about it will abuse substances or engage in activities speeding, gambling all that stuff.” J, 20yo M

Consequences and accountability for behaviours

All participants felt that families and communities normalise and minimise the use of violence, particularly when it is being perpetrated by young men. Prevention needs to be about supporting young people to reject violence as being normal and for some, build their capacity to put themselves in the shoes of others. Homes must be a ‘safe space’ that is free of aggression and violence by anyone.

Participants raised concerns about the use of physical discipline on young children because this teaches children that violence and ‘punishing’ others is ‘normal’ in relationships.

“ That’s not how you should be responding to something that make you frustrated and mad, in school teach kids young, teach them about responding to emotions, how and different ways.” T, 21yo F

“ A child who has always had physical discipline, feels it’s the norm, the right thing. It’s not until talk to others, when you start slowly realising violence isn’t good.” T, 19yo F

Some young people felt that systems could be better at generating consequences for violence earlier, as opposed to what they saw as ‘consequence avoiding’, which may lead young people to believe they can behave in certain ways without issue. Some young people queried the use of ‘shame’ as a deterrent, and whether this brought benefits or instead created barriers to young people who use violence reflecting on its impact on their victims. Others suggested that in preference to ‘threatening’ them with the law or other consequences, that building empathy in young people would be a better strategy.

“ I don’t really know how we can prevent trauma in the first place, not sure anyone does, it’s like making vapes illegal in Australia – how are you preventing that. Laws are there to prevent things but if people have enough motivation people will get around them.” K, 19yo F

Participants talked about the need to hold men and boys accountable for their violence. They talked about the importance of naming the issue, explaining the impact and describing how their behaviour reflects on them as a person. It was thought that this helped educate, but also shifted the responsibility, making it clear that the problem sits with the perpetrator, not the victim.

“ Put the spotlight on the perpetrators behaviour not on the victim.” V, 23yo F

“ Taking the focus away from women being victims. Women being victims perpetuates women being weak, like a little dear. We are incredibly strong. Accountability on the person, remove women from it, you are just a shit person, harming self and society.” V, 23yo F

Support to heal from traumatic experiences

Several participants noted that perpetrators of violence have had their own difficult or abusive childhoods and have not previously or currently had access to the help they need. This ‘unhealed trauma’ impacts and ‘gets in their head’.

“ I think people that take their anger out on other people are insecure, have a lot of generational trauma impact. If I looked at statistics, majority of those who abuse have witnessed or been abused in their childhood. It also contributes to a semi social norm in their mind in their eyes.” T, 19yo F

Participants believed that without support to recover, some people may go on to also use violent and abusive behaviours on others. Prevention must recognise the need for those perpetrators who themselves have had experiences of trauma need support to heal. How can we ask perpetrators to cease using violence, when no one has engaged them in a conversation about their own childhood experience of violence?

“ ... people like him do things like that – people who have gone through things like an abusive relationship with someone and been abused when he was younger – they need to get help.” M, 20yo F

Participants also talked about the importance of providing alternative role models, recognising that you can't behave in non-violent ways, if this behaviour is all you've known. They talked about support being provided by people with lived experience of violence who now have their life 'sorted', so perpetrators can see what is possible. One young person talked about how important it is that there are supports for boys and young men provided by other reformed men.

“ ...need men for men to be more acceptable.” J, 20yo M

“ ...he is still in the picture, he is amazing now, his ability to turn his life around has helped with my view of men.” T, 21yo F

Change the message

Participants said that the current advertising strategies and the imagery and narrative being used by support services in relation to violence is not relatable to young people. They said there needs to be contemporary

education approaches, co-designed with young people for messages to reach target audiences, and delivered through the avenues they use to communicate.

One participant reflected on the need to spotlight violent behaviour and place more community attention on the behaviours that violent people present with, including some messaging about what this means about the perpetrator's own needs and challenges. Another participant talked about not knowing there was an inquiry underway in South Australia, as she doesn't watch the news or television, and suggesting more information needs to be on platforms like Instagram to reach more young people.

“ the language used by DV services, some people don't understand that's what they are going through, they don't think it's for me, more information about what it (DV) is needs to be more easily available.” M, 20y F

Early intervention

Create space for young people to talk without judgement

For early intervention to be successful, participants said that young people must have spaces and people they can turn to when they need support. This can be somewhere they can go to process feelings, make sense of events, reflect on their own behaviour and share their deepest fears without judgement. It may include being given support to recognise and address their urges, or motivations to use violence as a way to resolve issues or conflict. Participants reflected on the need for all children and young people to feel they are important to a significant and caring adult who will be there to help them work through their worries. This is particularly important for children and young people living in family

violence who feel they cannot burden their victim-survivor parent with their feelings and worries.

“ some people like me find it difficult to know where to start, how do I get in contact, what do I say.” M 20yo F

Participants also reflected on young men growing up not talking about ‘feelings’ or believing that they can’t have honest conversations with their peers about their concerns and worries. One participant shared he felt silenced and couldn’t verbalise that he was experiencing violence and abuse by a female, and that this was something he battled with every day.

“ No man wants to sit there and say my woman beats me or abuses me – it can get that bad, it is affecting you and your everyday activities.” J, 20yo M

There was a view among many participants that there needs to be more support for families ‘trying to escape’ violence. This includes having places to go that will see and respond to the concerns they raise and help them to ‘get out of it’.

“ I didn’t know HOW to leave...everyone kept saying leave, but I didn’t know how to do it... I knew had to get out but didn’t know how to get out safely.” E, 24yo F

Views of children and young people should be considered

Participants described wanting their views and wishes to be sought and recognised, particularly when they may differ from those of their parent. One participant who lived in domestic violence reflected that her parent did not want to leave. However that did not mean that she, as a young person, didn’t want to leave. Young people feel vulnerable to their non-offending parent’s decision making, as opposed to having their own rights and opportunity for self-determination.

“ Thought she (mum) was bad but still loved her, felt abandoned, she would do all this bad stuff.. I believed she shouldn’t want or feel the need to, it felt like we had lost her.” T, 21yo F

Participants said the choices of their parents dictated the experiences as children. Children and young people expressed that they have no choice or control, and most support is aimed at the parent as the victim; not their child or children.

“ ...we moved around a lot (because of the violence), it feel like didn’t have a home. At one point we were living in motels. I started to resent her (mum), didn’t want anything to do with her, she ruined my life.” T, 21yo F

One participant explained that as a child you are scared and confused and you don’t know what your options are. Whilst participants shared that they knew what they were living in was scary and distressing, they did not know that something could or should be done. They shared that they were not part of the service response, and their views were never sought. As one young person said, children often know more than adults give them credit for. They might be confused by what is happening, but they know it is wrong, and will often be able to be clear about how things should be different.

“ ...no, I didn’t ask for help, was worried, I didn’t want to get taken away, I didn’t know care was a thing but didn’t want to be taken away ... glad that I wasn’t, so shit to say, my life would be very different.” T, 21yo F

“ Let’s recognise how children make sense of their world but also try and find some way of them having hope and control.” T, 21yo F

Amongst participants there was a strong message that children and young people need to be believed. One participant who tried to reach out for help a couple of times, was not believed, while the adult (her carer) who was perpetrating the violence against her was believed.

“ they always said the carer cared about her, they called it a stable home, she had many social workers, none ever told her why she was in care and she feels like no one ever listened to her or believed her.” G, 21yo F

Others talked about the need for youth support services to work with young people who are at risk, rather than being too tightly tied to narrowly defined criteria. Having flexible options that recognise young people as victims of domestic, family or sexual violence will provide young people with an option to leave, get support, speak up and be heard.

Knowledge is power

Some participants did not know what domestic violence was, or if services existed, highlighting the need for better education through communication channels used by children and young people, not adults.

“ ... there is so much miscommunication.” K, 19yo F

“ Religious schools are doing kids a disservice by not sharing and teaching information that is relevant. It is not encouraging the behaviour it is reduce risk.” T, 21yo F

Others noted that if they knew the ‘process’ for seeking support they may have been more likely to reach out. The fear of the unknown and the lack of clarity around what might happen if they do speak out deters children and young people from seeking help. When young people do reach out, they want information about where reports have gone, who has seen it, what happens next, and to generally be kept informed throughout the process. Being transparent and open is essential, with proactive provision of information to young people – not waiting for young people to ask or drive this.

“ It would be really helpful for a child to know what that (reporting) process looks like, be given information about where the report has gone, who has seen it, what happened, Kept informed.” K, 19yo F

Participants said not knowing ‘how to leave’ keeps people in violent situations longer. People know they need to leave, and they want to, but they do not know ‘how’ to go about it. They have nowhere to go, there are no houses to move to. They may not have friends or family who can take them in. This indicates a need for greater temporary and permanent housing options for victims of violence.

Access to money was identified as being a critical factor in preventing the need to return to violent homes and relationships. How Centrelink assesses, identifies and responds to disclosures of violence is crucial and has the capacity to undermine attempts made by victims to leave violent situations and relationships.

“ ... got back paid a lot, he stole all my money... had to paid for everything... bought him clothes shoes, I financially supported him.” E, 24yo F

Young people also talked about the use of terms and phrases that mean nothing to them. They explained that a lot of the language being used is jargon, aimed at professionals. There needs to be more information that breaks down the steps and processes to help young people leave. Information must explain in simple terms what they must do, who they can talk to, and what protections there are to help.

“ Things are as bad, shifted into different problems, it's just changing, not getting better.” V, 23yo F

“ Still not sure what could have helped me leave – build up the courage, don't know why I couldn't.” J, 20yo M

They also reflected that young people's perceptions of time can differ from the perceptions of adults and services. Several weeks for a service to respond can feel like months for a child living in violence. Services must therefore be timely and capable of intervening early.

Systems must better recognise the signs and respond to the young person

Many participants detailed the failure of services and systems to recognise and respond to the signs of violence in families. On many occasions, participants felt that because of violence at home they showed signs of distress at school. Despite this, from the young person's perspective, there was little to no response from teachers or educators. While there may have been notifications or actions behind the scenes, young people were left feeling unseen and unheard by services, schools and systems, including doctors and police.

“...kids not attending school is a huge sign. Teachers need to know what to look for. Doctors also need to know, me and my sister had bad teeth, they didn't investigate, need training in what to look for.” T, 21yo F

Young people said they felt teachers need more training about what to look for and how to respond, including recognising signs of trauma. Young people believe that schools have a greater capacity to DO the support, not just refer to other services or agencies not known or trusted by the young person. Schools being safe, flexible and responsive was important to young people.

“The principal didn't understand, she would just get angry, try and kick you out. She tried to make be there for full time, she only cared about attendance, would not cut me any slack.” T, 21yo F

Response

Build trust, not fear

Participants were clear that they want their voices to be heard, trusted and valued in caring and empathetic ways that don't further traumatise them. Disclosures must be listened to and taken seriously, every time.

Responses for children and young people need to build trust, not fear.

This may mean something different for each young person – some want to leave, some want support, some just need to talk.

“The counsellor at school changed my life, I would see her every single day, the principal didn't understand, tried to stop her, but she did it anyway, she vouched for me.” T, 21yo F

Conversations must be held in safe places for children and young people, where they can access accurate information about support, processes and resources. The fear of 'being taken away' needs to be named and navigated. While seeking the voices of children and young people to speak out and be heard, services need to come in and support the family wherever possible, to prevent a child or children being removed from their family.

“The fear of being taken away, needs to be removed. We need services that will come in and support before even consider being taken. That's why no one asks for help, mums and kids.” T, 21yo F

Participants talked about some of the issues with the services that are being made available to them. One young person talked about a service needing to contact a parent as part of their consent process, making it challenging for some young people to seek help. In many cases the parent may be the perpetrator. But even the non-offending parent may not want their child seeking help for fear of implications. This predicament for young people is known to be common.

Some young people also talked about support only being available if you have a specific problem that meets the service providers' criteria, particularly counselling and therapy. One young person talked about accessing a mainstream youth mental health service and them not wanting her to talk about the violence she was being subjected to. The service only wanted her to talk about her mental health and feelings. She couldn't get past the

fact that these were interrelated, and so she stopped going. It has also deterred her from seeking further counselling.

“ Need better support, more free services, free counselling with somebody experienced and qualified in that particular field of work.” M, 20yo F

There was consensus among participants that more services are needed for men and boys. Young people felt men who commit violence need a separate service as they are unlikely to walk into somewhere, seeking help themselves. Spaces must be confidential and not a place where you bump into someone in the waiting room. Conversations with young people revealed that meeting places should not make people feel ashamed. A safe environment without judgement is key to creating opportunities for men to stop using violence.

“ there might be services are out there but from a man's perspective we need something separate.” J, 20 yo M

“ Places need to have no waiting rooms so don't see anyone, so you don't feel ashamed, the environment is key.” J, 20yo M

Participants felt that counselling should be available as part of all stages: prevention, early intervention and recovery. Counselling should be accessible and free, with young people able to choose who they see and how.

Participants reflected on the fact that they often perceive the police as unlikeable or a threat. One young person said, 'kids hate the police'; they fear them, and they are not likely to reach out to them for help. Young people suggested that police need more training as they don't seem to know what to do and will sometimes treat everyone in a situation as though they are doing the wrong thing. This includes the children who are innocent victims in the situation. Police need to be taught how to respond to issues of domestic violence with kindness and respect. They need to know how to support children during and after they have attended a house in response to concerns raised about violence or abuse.

“ the police didn't care, there were four of them, an unnecessary amount, it was one of the scariest things.” G, 21yo F

It is concerning that young people do not perceive the police as helpers, or providers of safety. Neither does this perception or experience build their capacity and confidence to reach out for help from police when it is needed.

“ Need to have places to safely go to, for example if you went to police they need to be safe, need more training for them so that they know better how to respond to family violence be supportive and help to get you out of it, they are the first point of call.” E, 24yo F

“Duct tape on the titanic”

Participants noted that services for therapy or counselling are not proportionate to the depth, complexity and long-term impacts of domestic, family and sexual violence. Many participants shared experiences of contacting services, with poor responses. One young person called a help line twice – the first time they didn't get through. The second time they waited three hours. One young person noted that six mental health care plan sessions were insufficient to meet their needs. Another shared an online counsellor they contacted didn't provide the support they needed, describing it as being like 'slapping duct tape on [the]titanic'.

“ Headspace, have tried it. Offered online counselling, it's nothing, not the same, it's like “slapping duct tape on the titanic”. I could talk to chat GPT.” V, 23yo F

All participants talked about issues of accessibility, the cost of accessing therapy, whether it be the gap fee charged by many psychologists even with a mental health care plan, or the cost of using a private provider. Young people talked about barriers with the number of sessions you can have, explaining that by the time you feel

comfortable enough to disclose your experiences your sessions are over. Others talked about issues with waiting lists and how if you don't click with the first counsellor you meet, it can put you off seeking support altogether. The difficulty in even getting in to see a GP was also discussed as a barrier to accessing help, particularly as in many cases it is the first point of call for a referral to counselling in the first place.

“ Six sessions with a mental health care plan, it's nothing.”
“...that's it – extent of the help I am going to get – barely even build rapport with someone, especially someone who has been traumatised.” V, 23yo F

Young people noted that services and professionals must be skilled in working in this area, with appropriate training around violence, sexual health and trauma. Everyone must be treated as unique, with different stories and experiences. Professionals should never assume people's experiences or their impact are the same.

Recovery and healing

These events don't have to define you

Participants described feeling alone, and like they needed to hide their experience. Many participants have taken a long time to find their voice, to speak out and be able to name violence and its impact. Many said that for the future to be different, normalising exposure to violence in the home or relationships needs to stop. By supporting young people to feel seen, heard and accepted, we can change the narrative and show that these events don't need to define them. Instead they can be understood as contributing to who they are, and how they think about and respond to situations.

“ ...normalising this stuff in society is huge, it is okay that you have had this happen, it does not need make you who you are' help young people make sense and reframe it. It is not (and never) about what is wrong with you.” T, 21yo F

“ ...more people will listen to my story and know why I have been a strong independent woman.” E, 24yo F

The nature of violence and trauma means that for young people their experiences and memories of violence can keep coming up for them in different ways throughout their lives. Young people shared that while they have moved on from the initial trauma, they need a life-long approach to their own personal care and support. This includes support to navigate future relationships and to reflect on how they can (if they wish) share their experiences of violence within those relationships.

“ Feel like everything that has happened to me has made me who I am – now I can look at where I am struggling in things – what has happened to you to make you like this not what's wrong with me.”
T, 21 yo F

Young people observed that it takes time to acknowledge that violence has happened to you. It takes time to heal, find yourself and rediscover what brings joy – to feel like you again.

“ I feel like myself again.. 5 years to get here.” E, 24yo F

Many participants spoke about how improving support services for men who use violence as an integral part of the healing/recovery process for victim survivors. For a victim, knowing there are services that help men, gives them hope for the future.

“ Another thing that amplifies the entitlement is toxic masculinity, it is spoken about now but is kind of joked about, it is used too much now.” V, 23yo F

Services that use a lived experience workforce were suggested along with how necessary it is to have the right people. Other ideas for supporting healing and recovery included doing activities that bring joy and build life purpose, such as going out bush, camping, bike riding with a mate or support person. This kind of help seeking needs to be 'more acceptable' and 'accessible'.

Young people and children who have been victims of or witnesses to domestic, family and/or sexual violence need safe adults, friends, services and professionals to keep offering them support that will help them to rebuild connections with family and friends. The timing of this needs to be led by them, when they are ready. Services may not always be offered at the right time, but being consistently present and available over the long term is what's critical.

“ (If you are worried about someone) “check in, ask what's going, ask questions, question to a point where they start questioning it too, if they are just giving excuses they are not thinking about it, the second you get them questioning it they will think about it – once you get them thinking about there is something wrong...” K, 19yo F

According to participants, young people living in or recovering from any kind of violence need reassurance that they are not alone, and that there is support and people who can help. Services need to consider what young people need, from the perspective of the victim.

This includes not making assumptions about how that help needs to happen and what healing looks like. Young people need a voice and choice in their support plans, and for workers to check in to make sure what they are offering and then doing is okay.

“ I feel like someone who is trying to recover or heal from something like that doesn't need someone telling them what they need – need to be asked what they need or want. they need someone to guide them, not tell them what to do...” K, 19yo F

Participants indicated that familiarity, consistency and stability are all important during any healing and recovery period. They described situations where their lives have been chaotic and how constant changes in schooling or connections, along with a lack of stability became 'traumatising'. Creating connections and supports that are there no matter what, allows them to open up when they are ready. The key is to be providing persistent and consistent support that is not necessarily about addressing the violence, but is also just general support that provides young people with hope that their situations will change.

“ Basically, just put the young person's feelings comfort safety and outlook first.” K, 19yo F

Next steps

The breadth and depth of young people’s experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence described in the case studies that follow, provide testament to the need to develop strategies across a range of contexts in which violence takes place.

These individual experiences also speak to the requirement to improve the capacity of all systems to better listen to and understand the dynamics of domestic, family and sexual violence, not just for adult victim survivors and perpetrators, but also for children and young people who are victim survivors.

A critical message delivered by all participants was that prevention relies on schools to help address violence. While South Australia’s state-based curriculum and the national curriculum support educators to deliver core elements of relationships and sexual health education, it is difficult to assess what, when and how this curriculum addresses violence explicitly, or what strategies young people are taught to help them deal with the numerous ways violence may be impacting their lives. In fact, participants identified that the variability in school policies, practices and cultures meant prevention of violence through education is falling short.

In keeping with participants’ insights, this education should be grounded in gender equality and human rights. It should also support children and young people to understand and communicate their feelings, make informed decisions, know their own rights and how to protect the rights of others while reflecting on power dynamics and challenging stereotypes. In turn, this will help to lay the foundations for lifelong wellbeing, as these are the skills that are critical to developing and maintaining healthy relationships with parents and carers, family members, and other adults, as well as with peers, friends and partners.

We must also build the capacity of universal services to understand the dynamics of domestic, family and sexual violence, including the impact it has on children and young people including ways to support those who are both victims and perpetrators of violence. This includes prenatal, maternal, child and adolescent health services, early childhood education and care settings, schools, policing, the courts and justice system in the context of family law and child protection.

Instead of expecting children and their families to approach and comply with the services that are being provided, the system needs to be much more focused on how best to respond to each family, child, or young person being impacted, to ensure they receive the services and supports they need to end the cycle of violence they find themselves in.

In keeping with the key messages from young people, the system requires:

- a coordinated and consistent approach to addressing and preventing domestic, family and sexual violence
- earlier investment in supporting families
- building trust and connections between key systems and services
- implementing strategies that raise awareness of the need to break the cycle of abuse through provision of services aimed at vulnerable families so they are empowered to safely look after themselves and their children.

Families experiencing violence come into contact with many services and organisations, including those related to health, housing and child protection services. They also often come into direct contact with police, courts and the justice system. Each of these services have their unique focus and make decisions that may not support other services families are accessing. This is time consuming, confusing and can lead to ineffective responses and outcomes that do not benefit people using, witnessing or experiencing violence, including children and young people.

For services to work effectively they must review policies and practices to ensure children and young people who disclose domestic, family or sexual violence are kept safe, with their right to privacy respected and the alleged perpetrator not made aware of their disclosure. This means ensuring there are therapeutic, trauma-informed services that children and young people can access without parents and for an extended period.

We must invest in child- and youth-specific recovery and support responses. Not only for those who have experienced violence, or who are at greater risk of experiencing violence, but also for those who are facing additional barriers to support. This includes those children and young people who are escaping violence and seeking support without an adult.

The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032 recognises children and young people as victims of gender-based violence in their own right. However, children and young people's unique perspectives and experiences continue to be overlooked in policies, systems and services generally, and in the context of domestic, family and sexual violence specifically. If we are to succeed in our aim of halting gender-based violence in a single generation, this must end now. The voices and lived experiences of children and young people must be considered. This is the only way the strategies and approaches being developed will have any chance of working where children and young people are concerned.

Appendix: Case studies

Case Study One: T

T grew up around violence but as a child she did not know what domestic violence was. It was not until she was 10 years of age she heard about domestic violence. No one knew what she was going through.

T is now 21 years old, lives with her partner, working full time in a role supporting children, which she loves. T is passionate, vibrant, genuine and reflective. T wants to share her story and now knows everything that happened has made her who she is today.

T shares that she now has a good relationship with her mum – but it wasn't always that way. In the past, it was difficult, and they argued for many years. T was angry with her.

T and her younger sister both grew up around violence. T said that 'from the start' their biological father was 'very violent' towards their mum. T never saw it, not that she can remember, but she heard it and later saw her mum's injuries that were often serious. T remembers a time when her mum's teeth were knocked out. Another time, her mum miscarried after being hit hard in the stomach. T did not know about her mother's loss until later in her life.

T reflected being only 5 years of age when her mum first started 'trying to get away' from her father. He would come to the house and school yelling abuse at them. It was at that point T 'became scared of him.' She had her first moment of realisation about how serious it was because 'the school was so worried.' T hasn't seen her biological father since she was 6 years old.

After leaving her father, T's mum had several boyfriends. The relationships always featured drug use and 'were always violent.' T still never saw the incidents but heard the violence and saw the injuries.

Her family life was chaotic. They moved around a lot, stayed in motels, and at other people's houses. Her mum was using drugs and was a sex worker that meant she would have men at the house. T changed schools a few times too. T shares that she 'felt like we didn't have a home'.

T said things became significantly worse when she was in year 5. Her mum had a new partner and he 'was the first person' she 'ever saw hit mum.' T talked about her mum's drug addiction being 'terrible' during this period, and it was the first time T remembers intervening during a violent incident between them. T explained that at that time she believed 'he would not hurt a child because he never had so far'. T noted that he never did physically hurt her or her sister.

T and her sister spent time living away from their mum. This was mostly with a family friend who took good care of them. They still keep a close relationship with her today. Some places T stayed at during that time were scary. Her sister stayed with their Nanna for a while, but T did not get along with her, so stayed elsewhere. It was around this time, T started resenting her mum.

T said her mum started getting involved in more 'serious stuff' and ended up in prison. T tells how 'the Police just came one night and arrested her in front of us. There were 4 of them, all men, it was one of the scariest things'. T said there was no other adult present at the time, but the Police didn't seem to care. T had to call her mum's friend to come and get them. This was hard. T knew she 'still didn't understand the extent of it all', and 'thought mum was bad but still loved her'. T felt abandoned. She felt like she had lost her mum. T started to hate her mum.

After her mum went to prison, T didn't go to school much. The school didn't understand why she was late, turning up without any recess or lunch. 'It felt weird, embarrassing'. T said she was left out, never friends with the popular girls and her uniform always smelt of cigarettes.

The first positive experience she had at school was when she was introduced to a school counsellor. T is now able to reflect how the counsellor 'changed my life'. While the Principal was not supportive, helpful or encouraging, the counsellor made an effort. T's counsellor 'would sit with me during recess and lunch' and arranged for T to get food from the canteen, which T found 'good' but also 'embarrassing'.

T eventually got kicked out of school, went to Flexible Learning Options (FLO) and had minimal support. During this critical and challenging time, T was 'still trying to make sense of the world'. Things got better and worse in year 10. The good part was T found another great school counsellor who helped her start to think about her future. T started to realise 'I was capable of doing something other than what my mum did'. T wanted something more for her life and decided to finish school. She reflected 'because that would be my thing, the thing I could accomplish, the thing within my control'.

T completed year 11 and year 12 and was accepted into Psychology Honors and Social Work. T has deferred attending university, for now.

T notes around that time, her mum still wasn't doing okay but her mum's partner started to turn his life around. T feels that his 'ability to turn his life around has helped my view of men'. T said he now treats her, her sister and mum well. T's relationship with her mum is now okay, they get along well. T still feels her mum is in denial about the impact all of this has had on her and T has had to remind her mum that 'it didn't just happen to you, it happened to me too' – it happened to T and her sister.

As T sits, reflecting on her experience growing up in domestic violence, T said she 'knew it was wrong, and wasn't normal, it wasn't how other kids lived'. T didn't reach out for help as she was too scared. She 'didn't want to get taken away' and didn't know going into out-of-

home care was 'a thing.' T 'didn't want mum to get in trouble'. Her experience with Police had been negative, not one of help or support.

She shares, 'I can look back at where I am struggling in things and know what's happened to me has made me like this, rather than think what's wrong with me.' T said her 'one goal in life is to change one kid's life like the counsellors did for her.'

Case Study Two: M

M grew up with only women around her. They were strong, supportive women, but all had histories of domestic violence. When M entered into her first romantic relationship with a man, she didn't know what to expect. It was exciting at first, but it changed really quickly into violence.

M is now 20 years old. She lives in a share house and continues to pursue a career that makes use of her artistic talents. M is a quiet, thoughtful and somewhat shy young woman with a big heart who cares deeply for others.

M started her first job as an apprentice. She was excited to be working in her chosen field and thrilled that her employer was 'taking a chance' on her. She worked with two men, and they all became really close friends, quite quickly. M became closer with one of the men, they became intimately involved and started a relationship. He was 12 years older than her.

M started to stay with him a lot at his home and she worked longer and longer hours, often without being paid. M felt she wasn't being treated well at work, but because there were only three employees, there was no one for her to turn to for help or support. M continued her relationship with the older man and explained that 'as we got closer his true colours showed'. M described

how she became his 'personal slave', both at work and in their relationship, doing everything he told her to do. If she didn't do it 'he would get mad and wouldn't speak'. She described being 'wrapped around his finger'. M feels that because she was so much younger, she was easy for him to manipulate.

Things progressed really quickly for M. In her life, there were things going wrong at work, money stress and their living situation was 'bad'. M shares that her partner was 'emotionally abusive' to their third friend and colleague too. Things escalated; M reflected that 'if he didn't get what he wanted he would punish me'. Punishment would include not speaking or calling her names, blaming M for everything that was wrong. M recalls that he would get 'really mad, be harsh, narcissistic and controlling'.

M discloses that he was on lots of medications, and he would give her some to 'help her get through' working long hours at night. This experience has affected her thoughts and coping strategies today. M shares that she will now think, if she needs to 'get through' something, maybe she should just 'take something'.

M talked about being drawn in by his manipulation, 'he had a way of convincing others that he was somehow the greatest person ever'. She explained that this was through things like dressing nicely and his taste in music. However, he was also judgmental about the preferences of others, and she felt she couldn't be herself. As a result, M changed a lot about herself. M felt she looked up to both the men and was exposed to a certain lifestyle - designer clothing, fashion, music, going to concerts and meeting 'cool' people.

This influence, M feels grateful for. The introduction to the music scene, some of the experiences and getting to meet some of the people.

M believes this man likes hurting young women. She described the times he would get physical, hitting her hard, saying it was a joke - but it hurt. On one occasion, he pushed her down the stairs. On another, he choked her until she started to twitch. Both times he made it about her, stating 'it was her fault'. There was also sexual violence and if she didn't do something to please him, he would completely shut off, turn his back on her.

Reflecting back, she still can't explain why she stayed with him, all the time. M felt she couldn't leave. He would emotionally abuse her and make her feel like she had to stay. M didn't like being alone and would cry when she went back home.

M fell into a deep depression. She wanted to leave somehow. Her family tried to help her, and she doesn't know why she didn't let them. M reflected that she didn't listen to what they were saying. M said she enjoyed the lifestyle too much and she didn't know what else to do with her life. She found him interesting and respected his talents, which are in the same passion area of her own. M told her family; it was her journey and 'I will get the help I want, when I want'.

M talked about having a 'trauma bond' with her perpetrator. This centred around him being older and her looking up to him. M said he is really smart, and she enjoys speaking to him. She feels his outlook on life is really intelligent and they have a lot in common.

M shares that she still has occasional contact with this man, the perpetrator of violence against her. She still finds it difficult to prioritise her safety and wellbeing over the 'want' to be with him. M talked about needing to find the strength to move on. He is still manipulating her, he will message, then ghost her, like 'he wants you to think about him'.

M said she does feel lonely a lot of the time, she feels she is younger, smaller, quiet. She doesn't speak her mind or share her opinions. M sits with the reflection about how this experience has made her vulnerable.

It has changed her: 'I am different now to who I was before I met him, mentally not good'. She doesn't get help for it and wants to go back to him. M recognises it's abusive but feels she 'needs' the love and affection.

M didn't reach out for help and didn't know about specific supports: 'they don't advertise so where do you go'. M also reflects that 'people don't talk about it (domestic and sexual violence)'. M attended a youth counselling service but noted the service 'brushed off' her experiences.

The service didn't want to talk about the violence and abuse and what was happening to her, just about how she was feeling, she didn't find this helpful and didn't go back.

M noted he needs to get help. She shares that he himself had gone through things in a previous abusive relationship, as well as being abused when he was a child. He suffered with depression, accessed medication and became addicted to prescription drugs. M noted that this had changed him as he has 'unhealed trauma'. M noted that with time, people can start to think 'these things are normal' but 'it affected everyone around me'. Sadly, M reflected it's scary that 'most of the women in my life have been abused in some way by a male' that in her experience 'most women are treated horribly by men'.

Case Study Three: J

J grew up in a family he describes as 'pretty normal'. He didn't experience domestic violence as a child but did see violence and other types of aggression around him as he got older and started 'hanging around' different crowds. J ended up in a relationship with a young woman that was abusive and violent.

J is 20, he is polite, personable and very open. He cares about others and believes he is 'too nice'. J is passionate about helping others and would like to one day work with at risk youth. He wanted to share his story to give a voice to young men who are victims of violence from female perpetrators.

J was only 18 when he met his ex-girlfriend, who was a year younger than him. They met online and started talking. Eventually he visited her at the house she was staying at. He described it as 'having very crack den vibes'.

J said there were no parents at the house and no adults. This meant, they could do what they wanted there. Mostly young people went there to 'sit and smoke weed'.

J started going to the house more and more, and spending time with a consistent group of people. One night his now ex-girlfriend asked J to drop her home. J was still on a curfew because of his Probationary plates, so she invited him to stay overnight, and he did. J explains that she was living with family at the time including some extended family. J noted that this house also 'felt like another crack house'. J said that her family were 'really familiar' toward him immediately, and there were open offers to supply and use cannabis/weed. In hindsight, J felt there were many red flags around her and her family and around their use of weed, but he did not recognise them at the time.

The beginning of the relationship, J reflected, was 'pretty decent'. She was nice and he liked the freedom. J liked not being alone and the 'feeling of being loved'. It started getting 'bad' when she would argue with her mum. J recalls that she would get angry, it would build up and she started making small comments, nasty put downs to J, being aggressive and swearing.

J talked about his now ex-girlfriend moving out of her mum's house, firstly into a homeless shelter then into supported accommodation. J started to drive her and her friends around. As J was spending more time with her, trying to set up her house, he noticed that she started getting angry and put him down over simple things. At the time, he put it down to her parents arguing all the time and all of what she had put up with at home. J wanted to be there for her, and try and help her, he wanted to start a life together, get a job, earn a living, things like that.

Things got worse for J. Every night he would go out and get her food, he would do everything, do the food shopping and buy her weed. These tasks were always alone, she would never come out. If he asked her to come along, it would turn into an argument. J explains that 'she started to have a go at me, for everything, she would winge and get angry over everything', like 'me not knowing how to do something because I am an idiot'.

J recalls 'I had this built-up anger. I would walk outside and smash things until my knuckles bled, they still go purple and blue when it's cold. No matter what I was not going to hit a woman. I never would have but she made it very hard. I didn't know what to do with my anger'.

J knew he had to get out. About six months in, he knew. However, by this time he was scared to leave. He shares that he was scared of her family and scared for his family. He believed it would get better, 'we would always say that to make me feel better'. The couple broke up a couple of times. However, J then would feel manipulated into going back. J considered, 'I don't know why I went back'.

Amongst this, J had lost his job, his driver's license and become isolated, not seeing friends, and rarely seeing his family. J described that he was smoking weed and doing nothing and 'before I knew it time had gone by, and we had been together way too long'. J said everything got worse after he lost his license. They started to 'jump' public transport for free and steal from OTRs. He wasn't eating properly or sleeping, lost a lot of weight and felt really unsafe in the shower, so would shower less.

J was seeing a counsellor at the time, and he is grateful for this, as he thinks it helped. His main coping mechanism was taking drugs. There were times that he thought if it wasn't for this support, he is not sure how he would have got through it.

In total, J was with her for just under a year and describes it as 'all such a blur'. The final end was a serious incident that occurred at J's parents' home. His parents were not home, but J's brother and his partner were, and they intervened. J's now ex-girlfriend became violent. At that point J said he 'felt I was going to kill her or myself'. J describes feeling 'so guilty' that he brought his family into the situation, that he had brought his problem to their house.

J still has night terrors and struggles to sleep; J feels he has turned his brain into 'mush'. He still hasn't done anything with the anger that built up and he gets easily agitated now. He is worried about the impact this has on his new relationship and feels like he has picked up some

bad behaviours from 'her'. J said this experience has also impacted his appetite, his self-image, and there has been a significant financial impact.

J said it took a long time for him to acknowledge what he was experiencing was domestic violence. His counsellor tried to talk him through the 'cycle of violence' on a number of occasions, but he just thought his ex-girlfriend 'was crazy' and it was 'all she knows'. J states that 'the manipulation sends your brain sideways'.

J wants other young men to grow up and learn it is okay to talk to people, no matter your gender or identity. No man wants to sit there and say, 'my woman beats me or abuses me', but it can get that bad, it is affecting you and your everyday activities.

J talked about how hard it was to reach out because he was a male, 'men don't get abused'. He said you grew up being told not to talk about your feelings. He believes as a man you get up, go to work, there's still that persona, it's why we lose so many men to suicide. He said his brain was wired to believe that story. J said it all starts with learning to talk about stuff, finding the courage to talk to friends and a family therapist or social worker and getting people to understand.

Case Study Four: V

V grew up with her parents fighting. She remembers lots of slamming doors, yelling and things being thrown around. She remembers getting lots of 'hidings' too, for silly things. It was normal to her, but it didn't make it any less distressing. V was always involved in some way, often being brought in by one of her parents to protect one or the other, or to vouch for one of them in some way.

V is now 23 years old. She studies and works. She has a strong sense of social justice, is a warm, outgoing and kind woman with a very protective love for her two younger sisters. She is committed to doing something for others as part of her chosen career, wanting to have a positive impact on the world.

V shares that she has limited contact with her father, is close with her two younger sisters and her relationship with her mum can best be described as 'complicated'. Since being an adult, V has been the victim of a sexual assault and ongoing sexual harassment from men in numerous settings.

V said the violence perpetrated by her father against her mother wasn't necessarily frequent, but there are many serious incidents she remembers clearly. V remembers him pushing her mother so hard, that she fell and hit her head, and she remembers him holding her mother under the shower. V also remembers having four window stoppers broken on her backside because she hadn't taken her lunch box into the kitchen after school.

V describes the day-to-day control that her father had on everything they did, as the most pervasive element of the abuse he perpetrated. He always pushed her hard in her sport, to compete, to train, to work harder, be better. He would say it was for her, but the truth was it was more about him. V's friendships were controlled too. She wasn't allowed to have sleepovers, always the first to leave parties, not allowed to be spontaneous and could never talk about boys. Her father always implied 'he was the gold standard' and every other man was 'horrible'.

V talked about how her father also controlled her mother. He would constantly talk about her mother's eating habits. For example, he would comment on how her eating affected her appearance, calling her fat, commenting on her gaining weight and would do this in front of her and her sisters. V knows that a lot of the issues she has now with body image are because of him. Her father would always comment on how much she ate, even though her appetite was due to participating in competitive sport.

V also experienced a lot of problems with friends. Her dad ruled over everything, and his view was that family was everything and always came first, this dominated his perspective and how she lived her life. He had no friends of his own.

V was an adult when her parents finally separated, he had an affair with another woman, left the family home and moved interstate - but the control manifested in other ways. He started to self-harm, making threats to hurt himself, he tried to have more influence over her younger sisters and did things like make contact with school, coaches and employers.

In 2021, V was sexually assaulted. She prefers not to use the word rape, but that's what it was. She had gone on a date and had only had two drinks, and after they went to dinner and a movie. V acknowledges that the few times she has recounted the events of this night she has felt the need to make it clear that she was not drunk. The man ended up staying at her house even though she had tried to avoid this, offering to call him an Uber, offering for him to charge his phone, setting up the couch for him to sleep on when none of these options were accepted.

She said she 'doesn't like confrontation and was too scared to say no'. He slept in her bed. V recounts that she was fully clothed when she went to bed, wearing a tracksuit and was still wearing that when she woke up. However, when she woke up, she saw him messaging one of his friends and she took a photo of it. It is the only evidence she got of him making lewd comments about taking advantage of her.

When she showered, she found herself covered in bruises on her arms her stomach. There were bite marks and fingerprints all over her body. V has 'no idea what happened' and no recollection of anything but had woken feeling a bit weird and foggy but hadn't thought anything of it. V chose not to report this to police. She doesn't believe they would have done anything, and still feels firm in this view today.

V said the 'weirdest thing to me is that he isn't someone you would look at and think would do this'. He was a physics student, a nerd, not 'a jock' or popular. He was 'in

the middle, not either end', he had his life together and this is 'why I was so confused'. V said she didn't believe it for quite a while, it didn't match with her experience or image of him. They shared mutual friends. She would joke about it for a long time, she 'played it off with humour'. It made her extremely cautious around men, even more than she already was. It was only through seeing a counsellor, that it helped her work it out, because there is no other way she would have. She is in a good spot now, in a good, healthy relationship with a man she trusts.

V also tells a recent incident she had out in the city, where her drink was spiked. Thankfully she was with friends and although she ended up really unwell – hallucinating, unable to move her body, overheating – she was safe and nothing 'bad' happened to her. Her friends arranged for her mum to come and get her and when she woke up her memory was patchy. V said she 'hates having to preface everything I say about these two incidents in particular with it was a chilled night, I was not drunk'.

V explained that these incidents, and how her father was, are indicative of the disrespect and disregard men have for women. She believes 'things are as bad' as they have ever been, society may have shifted but only into different problems. She talked about getting dirty looks from men when she is in her running gear and the 'cat calling is insane'. Platforms like Reddit are filled with misogynistic messaging.

V provided examples of how entitled men are. V expressed that if you 'are polite you open yourself up, if you ignore them, you open yourself up in a different way. No matter what you do, 'their reaction is warranted, they think'. She gave examples of being asked for her number in coffee shops, being asked by strangers if she has a boyfriend, the constant friend requests from customers she serves. It makes you question yourself, thinking the worst but they reaffirm the worst, almost every time. Her male friends don't have the same experiences.

V shares about a time that a boy as young as 10 years old commented on the look of her 'arse'. She was so shocked she said nothing. She knew this boy and they had a good rapport. A male teacher spoke to him about it later, but the focus of the conversation was about the legal

implications around sexual harassment rather than issues of disrespect and how that type of behaviour might make another person feel.

V said there are simply no boundaries, there is a pack mentality amongst boys and men and that those who behave in this way only care about themselves. V concludes that if someone has no respect for women and the focus of the strategy to address violence against women is about making things safe for women, why are they going to care? She feels strongly that the message is getting lost because of this and the only way to get people who perpetrate violence against women to change is to make it more about them, 'put the spotlight on the perpetrators and the behaviour not the victim'.

V believes intervention and support, messaging, programs and counselling all needs to start much earlier for young boys and for men.

Case Study Five: G

G was removed from the hospital and taken into out-of-home care at birth. She experienced violence and abuse from the people that were meant to care for her. As a teenager she was sexually abused by an adult in a position of power that she should have been able to trust.

G is 21 years old. She is open and chatty, friendly and engaging. She presented as hopeful and considered. G has recently moved into a share house with two other young women, is about to start her first full time job and is enjoying learning to cook.

G discloses that she was placed with the same foster carer from 3 months old until she turned 18 years old. There were other foster children in the house, G's biological sister and the carer's biological children.

G said that any time the carer was angry or upset about things it would fall on to her. She recalls that there was lots of fighting, screaming and yelling, between her and the carer and she often asked herself 'why me'.

G said she still isn't sure why she was the target of her carer's anger and frustration. She thinks maybe because two of the other children had disabilities but isn't really sure. When she turned 18, she had to find her own accommodation and was not at all prepared to live independently. G explained that she wasn't given help by 'DCP' to move into independent living and things were tough for quite some time.

G ended up living with her birth mother and her partner for a while. This wasn't a good situation, their tenancy wasn't stable, police would come to the house and in the end, she was just 'left' there. It was scary. She also lived in share houses and at one point was taken in by her church pastor and his family, which she is grateful for, and still has a good relationship with them today.

G talked about her time in foster care, describing it as a time with 'lots of challenges and trials, but some good things as well'. She said there were a lot of things that weren't okay. There were many incidents of what she knows now to be abuse. G described one example when her carer hit her in face with a hairbrush, leaving bruises on her face. G said she reported it to the department, but nothing was ever done.

G said while living with the carer, the carer dated men. The carer's most recent partner was a perpetrator of domestic violence. She described him as a 'hypocrite', explaining that he had no tolerance for arguing or fighting but would do nothing when the carer hurt G. G said she would run away from the placement. She doesn't believe the carer cared about her, and felt DCP didn't care either.

G talked about the carer calling her names, things like 'whore and slut', body shaming her and 'telling me I am asking for it' (to be sexually assaulted) by the way she would dress. G said she was 'forced to have an eating disorder'. G tells a story about how the carer forced her to be on a diet that was dangerous, she became very

unwell and would pass out. G made the carer take her to the doctors. G passed out while she was there. It was reported to DCP but again nothing was done. G also talked about the carer's strict rules at mealtimes, and she would get 'smacked' if she didn't follow them properly.

G said DCP always said the carer truly cared about her and they called it a stable home. G had many social workers, but no one ever told G why she was living in care. G feels like no one ever listened to her or believed her. G feels like she has lived much longer than she actually has, making her feel older than she actually is.

G shares that she was 'sexually abused whilst in care'. She was 15 years old and was abused by one of her teachers. G states that he is serving time for it now, that 'she made sure of that'. She got pregnant from 'it' but miscarried at five months. No one knew, she was too scared to tell anyone and didn't trust anyone. G said she had no idea what to do, she could not go to anyone. G said DCP would have taken her child or forced her to get an abortion. She had previously been forced by DCP to see a psychologist, but she couldn't trust them either. The carer always found out what she talked about. She thinks her sister knew at the time, but she has never spoken to G about it.

G said even now she finds it difficult to trust others, to seek help. She has been diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety and depression but she is doing well. She has a supportive boyfriend who knows her story, and a number of good, supportive people around her.

G said she has learnt to stand up for herself now but feels that a 'lack of being heard and understood' and 'not having a safe place to go and talk about' had a huge impact. She didn't ask anyone for help, she didn't know where to go and didn't trust police. She believes one of the biggest barriers for kids is the 'fear of not being believed'.

G was often told she was too young to understand the whole situation. G said things get 'sugar coated' for children, things like 'mummy and daddy are having a bad day', but they know it's more than that, children aren't stupid.

G explains that at school 'some kids figured it out' (what she was going through), but she wasn't well liked. The only kids that she got close to were going through similar things. She believes that 'one kid going through it, can pick up on another kid going through it, it's like a mutual understanding'. But the school itself did little to help her. She was always sent to the school counsellor's office because she 'didn't seem herself' and her sister did too. They would get into fights at school, but nothing was ever said, they never told what was happening at home.

G reflects on how she was bullied a lot at school for being in care. She remembers one time being held down by a group of boys. G said she has experienced violence throughout her life. It's only recently that she has been free from it, perhaps the last two years.

G said that even though schools now teach a little about issues like domestic violence and child abuse and sexual abuse, it is minimal. Children are expected to understand all of this but still get the message that they don't know anything, it's contradictory and confusing.

G believes the causes of violence in our society is a 'cultural thing' here in Australia. She believes that there are many things that can impact a person and cause them to behave in these ways, including drinking and who we communicate or spend time with. She also thinks that because there isn't a lot of acknowledgment of the actual situations that happen, the things that are going on, it makes people too scared to speak up, there is nowhere safe to go, or they worry about the people they care about.

G said she has a good relationship with her biological mum now. She has had some support along the way, after turning 18 including her boyfriend and church. She is getting better at talking about things and trying to trust people more, she even goes to the doctors now. G wanted this to be one of her strongest messages, she is interested to see 'where this will go' (the royal commission) and feels giving someone like her a chance to be a part of 'this' is really important but doing something with it, is also really important. She said that 'being heard by someone who has been through it, is the only way to proceed to make a change'.

Case Study Six: K

K grew up in a home environment that involved abuse, violence and neglect. K has been exposed to traumatic experiences since birth and witnessed the trauma perpetrated by others which included sexual violence. K's family was involved with child protection services and K was removed. K wants to tell her story to help change the systems that are 'supposed' to help protect children.

K is now 19 years of age. K is determined, energetic and compassionate. She is forgiving and believes that your experiences as a child do not define you. T works full time in a job she enjoys and has her own place.

K reflects that growing up, up to a certain age, most children don't know right from wrong. K notes that these learnings must be taught by your family and connections. K knows that your family, home life, and society have a strong influence on your understandings, opinions and beliefs. K tells us that growing up in an abusive household seems normal when you don't know that what is going on is wrong.

K shares that she was exposed to family violence from birth. She states 'I don't remember much of it, not sure if what I have heard is all true, there's lots of bits and pieces'. K said she does recall having things thrown at her by parents or other adults, the house being unclean with broken glass, dirty nappies and dog poo. She remembers hearing crying and witnessing harm being perpetrated. Every now and then, K has dreams of being back in the home environment. She struggles to comprehend some of the confusing thoughts, if they are direct memories or things she has been told over time that her brain is still trying to process.

K recalls the time that she started saying things to others about her home life and started realising something was different for her. Around the time of kindergarten,

K started to see other children be collected by their parents. K was meanwhile getting on a bus, to return to her residential care house. K started to know that how she was living was different.

K remembers her foster family telling her to not share information with others about her biological family and upbringing. K recalls that her foster parent said to K 'I know you're proud of your family but not everyone needs to know about your family'. K states that as she got older and attended events for children living in out-of-home care, she felt the difference even more.

K is able to share her experiences of trauma living in out-of-home care. K is determined, based on her experiences, she would never force a child to eat, never keep the remaining food in the fridge for later. She recalls that in respite care, food was used as punishment. She said if two pieces of bread were prepared, but she only wanted to eat one, she was forced to eat the two. T would become upset, screaming and mad – saying she could not eat it. K remembers being forced to remain seated until she ate the bread, gagging. K urinated herself. K apologised for wetting herself and the carer apologised for not believing her.

K lived with her brother in out-of-home care and felt he was really, the only family she had. He was subject to bullying and despite reporting it to the school, nothing happened. In response K would go and watch her brother play. She made sure no one would do anything to him and she would punch anyone that bullied him.

K has had challenges with her physical and mental health as a result of the trauma and violence. She didn't feel respected by medical staff who were meant to support her. She was told by doctors that she 'might want to do some exercise' at a time when she was suffering with severe anxiety and depression.

As she grew up, K also used violence and thought this was normal. K said her strong sense of justice would cause struggles for her. For example, when someone did something at school that K didn't think was the right thing to do, if the teachers did not respond, K would respond.

K recalls that she would become overwhelmed and frustrated if those in power did not 'punish' those 'who deserve it' and instead 'punished the victim'. K wanted the 'victims' to have someone to stand up for them. However, because of K's own experiences of trauma and abuse, her 'standing up' involved physical violence, which had been her experience of punishment growing up. K reflects 'I know that was not right'. K said upon talking to others in her life, she knew more and more that violence was not good.

As a strong Aboriginal young woman, K now reflects on the societal attitudes, negative stereotypes and racism toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. K tells of the racist ideas she's been exposed to and the incorrect assumptions that refer to her community as 'druggies or bums', 'petrol sniffers', on low incomes who use violence. K shares that violence towards Aboriginal people is minimised and not noticed in the same way if it was 'a white person' who was hurt. K shares her frustration that the media go for stories that will get more interest – a person of colour is involved, then it gets reported on.

K reflected over her life, she has supported family and friends who are victims of sexual violence. K has been a strong support person for them.

K feels that violence erupts because people take their anger out on other people. She notes that these people are insecure and have suffered a lot of generational trauma impacts. K believes a contributing factor to violence and abuse is insecurity. K shares – 'all hatred stems from within, if you can't love yourself, you can't love someone else' and 'if you are mad at yourself you are going to express it the wrong way will hurt you and everyone around you and yourself.'

K noted that if she looked at the statistics of violence, she is confident that the majority of those who abuse others, have witnessed or been abused in their childhood. K said these experiences also contribute to a semi-acceptable social norm in their mind, and in their eyes about using violence. K shares from her perspective, a lot of people who abuse others don't necessarily want to hurt others but that's the way their brain tells them to act or behave.

K feels child protection services should do thorough background checks and screening when people have had histories of violence against others before allowing them to care for children.

K shares from her perspective, if parents have been hit as children, it's likely they will go on to hit their own children. If they are hit in a relationship, they will hit others. K said she knows there are some exceptions to this rule, but this has been her experience.

K feels that with healthy outlets, people can find better ways to process what's happened, than through abuse. K reflects on what she has seen go on, in her family. This has included some of her family going to prison for violence and abuse. K recognises that their apologies for violence and abuse have been insincere, not good enough. They need to make actual change.

K shares that her experiences of trauma and violence have impacted the way her memory works. She can't remember things at the right times, often forgets things, including who she has told what. She can feel confused and muddled. K discloses she has both trauma, ADHD and suspects she is also on the autism spectrum, although was denied a diagnosis for this when she was living in out-of-home care.

K considers the things in her life that helped. She shares that an outdoor adventure program helped her build self-esteem, conflict resolution skills, stretched her comfort zone (but didn't push her) and created a safe and supportive experience around males. Post care services has been positive for K and allowed some extra support when she has needed it. K encourages anyone who thinks there might be abuse in someone's life to tune into others and pick up on the signs.

In ending, K stated – 'I just think that anyone who has seen witness or supported someone through abuse should not be ashamed or scared to share their story'.

Case Study Seven: E

E grew up in out-of-home care. Her biological parents were unable to care for her due to their misuse of drugs and alcohol. In out-of-home care, E met a young man online when she was just seventeen years of age. The relationship turned violent – verbally, emotionally and then physically and sexually.

E is now 24 years of age and a parent. She is strong, independent and creative. She is determined to be a positive and inspiring role model for her daughter. E wants to share her story to give others a sense of hope, to be heard, to be understood 'and because we have all gone through similar things, encourage to speak up when their ready'.

She had siblings – some older, some younger. For 12 months she moved back and forward between her two separated parents.

E reflects that her early childhood experiences involved issues with her parent's drug and alcohol use, as well as emotional abuse and domestic violence. E notes that she did not know what she was observing in her home was verbal and emotional abuse. She just knew she would hide a lot and build cubby houses around herself to keep safe.

E grew up with a foster family. When E was just sixteen years of age, she moved into independent living. She was not really ready and did not want to go. E described herself as 'vulnerable' and 'stripped from the only family' she knew to move into accommodation. E said this move was a 'big change', she does not remember the move, other than it was traumatic. This move was a result of another foster child who moved in and 'made up a bunch of lies' about E.

At just 17 years of age, E had several boyfriends before she met her now ex-boyfriend. E met him online and he seemed nice and had a family. E suspects this is why she 'latched' on to him and the relationship. About eight

months into the relationship, it started to get intense. He was calling E constantly, became 'annoying' to E and 'controlling.' E thought he was just perhaps lonely. E's support workers said he appeared controlling. His phone calls persisted, during school hours. E would leave class to tell him she could not talk. He would abuse her. E ended up not attending school anymore.

As time went on, he started making threats to kill himself and E responded, feeling triggered and wanting to help him. Even though she was young, E noticed the pattern of his behaviour. She noticed he would be nice and say sorry but if no one was around, behind closed doors he would change. E described that in a sense she was 'mothering' him, making excuses for him and his upbringing.

He put pressure on E for 'everything to be me and him,' including on social media profiles. He blocked all other young men off social media, even her brothers and cousins. He opposed her wearing certain clothes, and she could never look at another man. He became jealous if E spent time with family.

A year into the relationship, E had recognised she needed to leave, but did not know how to do so safely. He became physically violent, punching and bruising E. He played 'punch buggy' as an excuse, but would do it so hard, he left bruises. He also stole money from E, and he pressured her to pay for everything; clothes, shoes, and for a time she financially supported him.

E's contact with him started to put her independent living placement at risk. He would pressure her not to return home, not letting her leave and acting in controlling ways. E noted he had her passwords, and she was no longer allowed to answer her own phone. He would also take her phone away. When E went on a holiday without him, his abusive phone calls increased, accusing her of cheating on him.

E's support workers tried to help her. They would call her, and she would use a safe word, that would prompt them to report her as a missing person and send the police around to pick her up.

E reflects that there were times during the relationship that she thought she would die.

E fell pregnant. It was twelve weeks before she realised, through a positive test. E had an abortion. He abused her afterwards, saying she had murdered his child. Following this, E decided to have an Implanon contraceptive device placed in her arm. During a Christmas event, E shares that he spiked her drink and while she was drowsy, he cut the Implanon out of her arm, she fell asleep, then he had sex with her, without her consent. She went for a health check and was supported by workers to do this. They did a rape kit and test, and confirmed she was pregnant.

It was around this same time that she moved into a supported accommodation house. Initially he didn't know where she was, but found her, forced his way in and stayed. When E found out she was pregnant he said he would support her, but he didn't. It was soon after that her support workers and one of her sisters helped her get him out. They changed the locks, increased visits and told him he could not visit. She knew then that she needed to be strong, she was having a baby and this pushed her.

E is now living with her daughter in a safe location. She reflects on the impact this has had on her own life. She also feels sad that it has meant she finds it hard to be there for her siblings sometimes, she has not been able to be there for her sister who also had challenging and traumatic time growing up. She feels she has also been unfairly judged a lot from 'the system' for being an Aboriginal young mum. E shares that she is stronger, because of what she has lived through and now feels she can finally be 'herself' again, but it has taken five years for her to move forward in this way.

Case Study Eight: S

S grew up with her mum and twin sister. There has been little contact with her birth father and she does not see him as an influential figure in her life. The story she has chosen to share is about her exposure to domestic violence in

the context of her sister's romantic relationship. S is able to now voice 'it wasn't just her that went through it'.

S is 20. She is friendly, good-natured and empathetic. S reflected that this experience is recent and in some ways continues because her sister is still having contact with her perpetrator. S wants to share this story to ensure there is an understanding that it is not just the direct victims of domestic, family and sexual violence who are impacted. Often the people closest to them also suffer significantly.

S and her sister are really close, have lived together their entire lives and before this happened, they were inseparable. She said that watching someone you love go through 'that' when there is nothing you can do to help is terrible, it 'really took a toll on my mental health'.

S felt she couldn't do anything to help her sister. She was concerned if she interfered, she would make things worse. S also feared her sister would push her away and the intervention may drive her sister to stay with 'him' even more. S explains he was 'nasty'.

S felt hurt and mad about what was happening for her sister. S felt she was grieving - she had lost her sister, and she was 'leaving me for something not even good'. It was hard to resist, and she tried to reach out to her sister a few times, to ask her to come home, to leave him, but it never ended well. Her sister would just get 'super angry' so she started to stay silent.

Their mum was very involved, she spoke up and tried hard to get her sister out of the situation. There were lots of arguments. It created an unpleasant environment at home. It impacted on S's relationship with her mum.

S felt that she couldn't really bring the topic up with her mum. S felt silenced, she couldn't talk about it, how she was feeling or about how it was affecting her. This topic of conversation would make her mum get emotional and mad at her sister. S talked about being in a 'bad way' mentally last year and her sister's situation being the main cause.

S has worried that because her sister is a really nice person, she is easy to manipulate. Her sister's partner would guilt trip her, say he misses her, he's lonely, depressed and needs someone to be with. S knew that through this manipulation her sister would feel bad for him.

S reflected her view that men have more power over women. S shares that men think they do have the power, and they act like they do. S believes that the age difference between her sister and her perpetrator (who was older) made him think he could get away with anything. Her sister was young and nice, and S feels strongly that he took that for granted and used it against her.


S shares her reflections about societal attitudes being a part of the problem of men's violence against women. She believes domestic violence isn't really talked about much, but she doesn't know why. It appears to S, that a lot of people are scared to speak up about it. She thinks that people being subject to violence are probably scared about how people will react if they talk about it, and fear not being believed.

S points out that the language around violence is a problem. Sometimes people have opened up on social media and got a lot of hate for it. People say it's only one side of the story, that it's not true, and they get shut down. This kind of response definitely stops people speaking up a lot.

S is still impacted by her exposure to violence today. Her relationship with her sister is back to normal but he is still around. He randomly messages her sister, who goes back to him. S doesn't know how she feels about it now. She's not sure if it is as bad as it was but it confuses her. She doesn't understand what her sister sees in him.

S is able to reflect that she thinks it would be hard to be in 'that kind of relationship' but also thinks 'it's hard to leave'. S believes that her sister had never been in a serious or deep relationship with a man before, and never had somebody really love her. Her sister has told S her partner has his lovely moments and can be nice. S still gets scared and she doesn't want her sister to go through the same pattern again. She never felt fear for herself but she was really scared for her sister.

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