

The Choice

Violence or Poverty

A presentation on the findings of a report on domestic violence and its consequences in Australia today

By

Professor Anne Summers
School of Business, UTS

16 days of activism against gender-based violence

Unions NSW

Gilbert+Tobin offices
L35, 200 Barangaroo Avenue

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Slide 1: Title: The Choice

Thank you so much for the invitation to deliver the keynote address at this important event.

Today I'm going to share the findings of my recent report *The Choice: Violence or Poverty* (released on 7 July this year) that is based on never-before-published data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The data has been extracted from the 2016 Personal Safety Survey (PSS), the study conducted every four years by the ABS into violence in Australia, including 'partner violence', the term used by the ABS to designate domestic violence inflicted by a cohabiting partner.

The PSS collects literally millions of data cells, only a tiny fraction of which ever find their way into the public domain. The data that I will present today has been customized by the ABS in response to my request for information about single mothers and their experience of violence. It is both new and disturbing for what it tells us about the extent and consequences of domestic violence in Australia today.

I had been surprised to discover that the ABS do not identify single mothers as a specific dataset within the Personal Safety Survey. However, in response to my request, they were able to extract from the PSS 2016 a dataset that comprised women in single parent families with all children in the household aged under 18. These women could reliably be assumed to be single mothers.

This dataset is amazingly comprehensive, providing a massive amount of data on the experiences of violence of these women, and its consequences, and which is able to be compared with women in

other household formations who did, or did not, experience partner violence.

I would like to begin with the proposition that frames my report.

The proposition is this: Australian women who are experiencing violence have two choices. One is to stay and live with the violence. The other is to leave. This might sound like a statement of the bleeding obvious, but it has in fact never before been measured with authoritative data as to its prevalence – and the consequences of each of those choices.

To begin, there are two numbers that I would like you to remember: 275,000 and 185,700.

In 2016, an estimated 275,000 Australian women suffered physical and/or sexual violence from their current partner. These women were currently living with violence. (And we can assume that many, if not most of them, still are).

Of these women, 81,000 made at least one effort to leave the relationship but subsequently returned.

They returned for various reasons: they loved their partner; he promised to stop the violence; they missed their home and did not want their children's lives disrupted - all those sorts of reasons. But around 20 per cent of them – that's around 16,200 women - returned to their violent partner because they had no money.

In addition, there's another 90,000 of these 275,000 women who wanted to leave but didn't. The reasons they did not leave are set out in detail in the report, and they include wanting to work things out, wanting the violence to end. But for 22,000 of them it was because they had no money and no financial support.

We also need to note that almost 110,000 of those 275,000 women are not in employment.

They are either unemployed or not in the labor force, meaning they have no financial resources of their own, making them even more dependent on the violent partner. The rest of them are in the workforce, with a slightly lower overall participation rate than Australian women in general but 85,800 are employed full-time which, at 31.2%, is a somewhat higher rate than the 26% rate for all Australian women.

So, in support of the first part of my proposition, the numbers show there were 275,000 women in Australia in 2016 living in violent relationships, and that as many as 38,200 of them would have liked to leave but had no money or nowhere to go.

As a result, these women are 'choosing' to remain with the violence. We could help them leave if we wanted to.

Now let's look at the other figure: the 185,700.

These are the women who left, and they are the focus of my report. You will note that it is a smaller number than those who stayed.

The ABS customized data showed that in 2016 there were 311,000 women with children under 18 who were living as single parents.

Of those 311,000 women, 185,700 had experienced partner violence.

That translates to a shocking 60% of single mothers who have experienced violence from a previous partner.

Slide 2: Rates of Partner Violence

This is the headline finding of my report, and to understand just how shocking it is, I need to provide some context.

Whenever you read about domestic violence in Australia, be it in newspaper articles, government documents or even academic papers, the rate that is usually cited is the major finding of the ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016: that 1 in 6, or 17.3 per cent, of Australian women aged over 18 have experienced partner violence since the age of 15.

The trouble with that figure is that it includes all women in Australia aged over 18, including those who've never had a partner – and let's not forget that the ABS definition of partner violence is violence perpetrated by a cohabiting partner, i.e. someone you have lived with. So it's not really very useful to include in our prevalence figures women who by definition could not have experienced partner violence

It makes more sense if we look at women who have ever had a partner, and when we do that, the figure changes to 22 per cent.

That is a terrible figure – 22 per cent or almost one quarter of Australian women who have ever had a partner - have experienced violence. I don't think that most of us knew this.

There is another group that we know very little about and that is women who were once partnered and who now live alone. There are around 800,000 of them and 40 per cent experienced violence from a previous partner.

This is also a truly shocking figure and this group deserves urgent investigation: why is such a huge number of women living alone following violence?

But my focus is on single mothers.

And an astounding 60 per cent of the single mothers in my study have experienced partner violence. This seems almost unbelievable and if it were not a figure supplied by the ABS we might have trouble believing it.

The key thing for us to know about these women, however, is that they were not single mothers at the time they experienced the violence. They were married or in de facto relationships because, as we have already seen, the ABS definition of partner violence is sexual or physical violence or emotional abuse which is inflicted by a cohabiting partner.

So what we have to understand is that these 185,700 women are single mothers because they left violent relationships.

In fact, as the ABS customized data shows, a full 75 per cent of them say that the main reason they separated permanently from their partner was because of his threats or actual abuse or his emotional control - what in many instances is a pattern of behaviour we now call coercive control.

My report contains an enormous amount of detail about the physical and emotional abuse endured by these women. Most of it has never before been published, and much of it is very hard to read. We learn a lot about these women and what they suffered, how the violence so often begins when the woman is pregnant, how it impacted on their daily lives, and on their children.

Let me show you some examples:

Slide 3: Most recent experience of physical assault

Of the 112,900 women who experienced physical partner violence within the past 10 years:

- 33,000 were beaten
- 26,200 were choked (and of course we know that choking, or strangulation, can be a precursor to femicide)
- 43,900 were kicked, bitten or hit with a fist
- 32,000 suffered 'other physical assault'

The data shows us how these physical attacks impacted on the daily routines of these women:

- 25,000 women had difficulty sleeping
- Around 15,000 changed their contact details
- Some 18,000 moved elsewhere within their state or territory

Slide 4: Anxiety and fear due to partner violence

Imagine the fear and apprehension of living with partner violence. The data shows that 67.4 per cent – or 76,100 women – experienced anxiety or fear for their personal safety.

Slide 5: Experience of emotional abuse – 1

I don't think we have ever before had such a comprehensive – and quantified - description of the kinds of emotional abuse that the 220,200 women identified in the data have endured:

- 120,800 were kept from contacting family, friends or community
- 115,400 were controlled as to where they went and with whom
- 85,800 had their children lied to in an attempt to turn them against their mother
- 19,000 perpetrators threatened pets
- And 12,500 actually harmed pets

We also know that 134,900 of these women were physically assaulted or threatened with physical assault. So much for the notion that emotionally abusive men are not also physically violent.

This slide shows in heartbreaking detail how the violence began, and progressed:

- We know that violence often begins when a woman is pregnant and this was the case with 69,700 of the women in my study, with 35,300 of them experiencing violence for the first time while they were pregnant
- 113,300 women had children in their care at the time of the violence
- 88,600 of these women said their children saw or heard the violence

One of the things that's very troubling about this is that we know that there is a high risk of intergenerational transmission of violence.

Without intervention, at least some of these children who have either witnessed violence themselves against a parent, particularly against a mother, may grow up to be either perpetrators or victims of violence themselves. So this is a very important finding, in itself, and for what it tells us about the likelihood of violence being transmitted into the future unless we take immediate and drastic action.

This is an area that deserves a lot of further investigation but that's not my purpose today.

What I want to concentrate on are the consequences for these women of having endured this violence. These are the facts that we didn't know until the ABS provided this customized data.

There are two sets of consequences that I want to look at in some detail.

First: the financial consequences of having left violent relationships.

Perhaps the most dramatic, and consequential, changes are to their employment.

The ABS figures show the employment status of women in the 12 months after their most recent physical assault by a previous partner. Perhaps tellingly, 51 per cent were not working at the time, 15 per cent took time off work and 33 per cent did not. In other words, as we saw with the 275,000 women who remained with violent partners, there appears to be a lower rate of employment among women who experience violence. We need to know a lot more about the workforce experiences of women living with violence. I intend to do work on this in the future.

I have been very fortunate to have Professor Bruce Chapman and his colleague Matt Taylor contribute to this report via some truly

ground-breaking work they have done, using HILDA data, on the income consequences of leaving a violent relationship.

As we know, the PSS is a cross-sectional study, giving us a snapshot of a situation but unable to track what happens to the women we are concerned about. HILDA is a longitudinal study, meaning that experiences can be tracked over time. You can read Bruce and Matt's findings in my report (as well as links to the two working papers he and Matt produced from their research).

Their key finding is that women who separated because of domestic violence suffer far greater drops in income than women who separated for other reasons.

For many if not most women, leaving a violent relationship is very bad for one's financial health

A full 60 per cent of the 185,700 women who left violent relationships are in employment, but most of them are in such marginal employment that they do not have sufficient earnings to support themselves and their families. As a result, 50 per cent of them rely on government benefits for their main source of income.

And this is where the poverty comes in.

This is because payments for single parents are very low and have been made much worse by policy decisions by governments since 2006. I have adopted the term 'policy-induced poverty' (an extremely apt expression coined by Dr Susan Maury of Good Shepherd) to describe the financial situation in which single mothers find themselves.

Slide 6 Household income

What we know from the ABS are some really confronting figures about household income. Perhaps the most shocking shows that in 2016 48.1 per cent of these single mothers are in the lowest quintile for equivalised weekly household earnings, meaning their weekly income is \$460 or less.

The consequences are that these women are experiencing incredible financial stress. This is documented in various ways in the report, but I would just like to draw your attention to the cash flow problems that these women experienced over the previous twelve months.

Slide 7 Cash Flow Problems in the last 12 months

60 per cent of these single mothers have had one or more cash flow problems. For example, 78,000 couldn't pay a utility bill on time; 24,000 couldn't pay the rent or their mortgage on time; 20,500 were unable to heat or cool their houses; 16,000 couldn't pay their credit card minimum and 17,400 went without meals.

But to me, the most heartbreaking number is the 36,300 women who could not pay their car registration or insurance. We all know that it's almost impossible, particularly if you're a single parent, to have employment if you don't have a car.

If you can't drive to work, if you can't drive your kids to childcare, if you can't do all of the normal things associated with most suburban

lives, which in this country does require a car, you are excluded from society in ways that make it very hard to get back in. So that is a particularly poignant finding and one that we had not been able to quantify until now.

We've seen that the income is low. We've seen that women are having great trouble getting by. Some 27,000 sought assistance from welfare organisations, while others were able to seek help from their families.

These women, so many of whom left violent relationships and who are now single mothers, are living in poverty, in some cases extreme poverty.

What we must look at is why this is and what we can do about it.

Most of you will be familiar with the system of government payments to various categories of people. I include in my report a lengthy history of the payments (including the non-payments prior to 1973) to single mothers that might prove a useful refresher course to remind us of how the system has changed over the past 50 or so years.

We know that single parents were treated with dignity from the 1970s, paid at the pension rate and not required to seek employment as it was recognised that their single parenting was in itself a job.

There were various changes over the decades but none so drastic – or so cruel – as the 2006 Welfare to Work so-called reforms. The Howard government decreed that once their youngest child turned

8, women on the Parenting Payment would have go onto the dole, then known as NewStart, which paid considerably less. From now on, these women were no longer to be seen or treated as single mothers; they were now decreed to be economic units who happened to be unemployed. Current recipients were grandfathered but all new applicants fell under the new system.

Two things happened after Labor came to power in 2007 which made things even worse.

First, in 2009, Kevin Rudd changed the indexation arrangements decoupling the link to male weekly earnings and instead tied the dole indexation to the CPI which was lower. The result was that the gap between the parenting payment and the unemployment benefit widened even further every six months.

And then in 2013 the Gillard government removed the grandfathering, which resulted in some 80,000 women immediately being forced onto NewStart – what is now called Job Seeker. This catastrophic move radically changed the system that previously had acknowledged these women were parents, not unemployed workers, and it drastically decreased their fortnightly incomes immediately and, because of the new indexation arrangements, by increasing amounts each six months.

Single mothers were now embedded in the OECD's most punitive and counter-productive government payments system.

Today there are around 304,000 single parents with young children who depend on these government

Two thirds of them, or 217,045 single mothers, receive the Parenting Payment Single. They receive a base payment (as of September 2022) of \$927.40 a fortnight. For the 87,279¹ single mothers on JobSeeker the base rate is \$718.60, a difference of \$208.80 a fortnight.

Compare that with the Age Pensioner couple who are on \$1547 a fortnight. Now the age pensioner couple does not have kids who grow out of their clothes every six months, who, especially if they are boys, eat massive amounts, who demand the latest sneakers, want mobile phones and all the rest of it. But they receive over \$800 a fortnight more than the woman on JobSeeker trying to meet the expenses of growing children.

And while these women are trying to raise kids and get by on very low payments, at the same time they are subjected to the humiliations and, I would say, cruelty, of Mutual Obligations

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On top of this – or perhaps the source of it - we all know the stigma that too often still attaches to single mothers, how they are so often presumed to be sluts or welfare cheats.

These attitudes are totally anachronistic given the demographic changes over the past 40 years. We now have easier divorce, changing attitudes towards having babies outside marriage, a decline in the marriage rate and a greater willingness for couples to cohabit prior to – or even instead of – marriage. And, as my data shows, 58 per cent of these single mothers are divorced or separated, and a

¹ I am grateful to the Department of Social Services for providing these numbers of recipients of each of the two payments.

further 40 per cent have not been in a registered marriage but have lived with a partner in the past. These figures match those of the general population.

But what we didn't know - and now cannot unknow - is the connection between the poverty endured by these women and the fact that a very large number of them are single mothers entirely because they have left violent relationships.

We say to women who are in violent relationships, Why doesn't she leave?

This is one reason she doesn't leave.

A lot of those 275,000 women that we talked about in the beginning, they know.

They know what will happen if they leave. And so they have to make this terrible choice about enduring the violence, knowing that it could escalate in intensity and frequency. It could put their very lives at risk.

We know from the ANROWS study of social attitudes to violence that some 32 per cent of Australians think that a woman who stays in a violent relationship is partly responsible for what happens to her. So as well as experiencing actual violence, these women also have to deal with the stigma of being a victim.

And we also know that with so few of these women working full-time or working at all, they are likely to have very few financial options, and so are therefore pretty much stuck in that situation.

On the other hand, of those women who have left, 75 per cent of them leave without taking any property or assets. That means clothes and household goods like washing machines, but it also means kids school reports, family photos, the stuff that tells our story and which in an ideal world we would pass onto our kids and their kids.

Those women who have chosen to leave often for fear of their lives; they simply pick up the kids and run. They've gone to a refuge (if they can get in – we know that women's shelters currently turn away 50 per cent of the women who seek emergency assistance); they've gone to family or to friends.

We also have figures that show a lot of these women and their kids have slept rough. They've slept in caravan parks or in abandoned buildings, in their cars.

This is what we are saying to Australian women who experience violence: Stay and put up with it - with the violence and the stigma of being an abused woman - or leave and you have a 50 per cent chance of living in poverty.

The thing that's particularly galling, and the thing that really shocked me with these findings, is the way in which the situation is just getting worse and worse and worse.

Slide 8 and 9 Parenting payment v. Newstart/Jobseeker + rates for different groups

Let's look at the graph which was prepared by ACOSS back in 2016 – and which we have updated - which shows the growing gap between the Parenting Payment Single and what used to be NewStart and is now called Job Seeker. In 2006 when John Howard introduced these 'reforms', there was a \$28 a week difference between the two payments. But because of changes to the indexation system introduced by the Rudd government that decoupled unemployment benefit indexation from male weekly earnings to the lower CPI, that figure has grown and grown and in 2021, it was \$93 a week.

Every six months the gap continues to widen. Last month, when the September indexation increases were announced, people on the Parenting Payment received an increase of \$17.60 a week, while people on JobSeeker got just \$13.80.

The consequences of leaving a violent relationship have been demonstrated by the ABS data to put many women and their children into a very precarious financial situation.

Slide10: The Choice

They may have escaped the violence (although in fact 36 per cent continue to experience violence from their previous partner for the first year after they leave) but around 50 per cent of them are burdened with this 'policy-induced poverty'.

It doesn't have to be this way. We could very easily overnight with the stroke of a treasurer's or a minister of finance's pen, restore the single mothers currently on Job Seeker to the Parenting Payment where they'd receive \$208.80 a fortnight extra.

This is still an inadequate solution in my opinion. I think these women should be restored to the same rate as the single age pension which is currently \$1026.50 a fortnight [compared with \$927.40 for the parenting payment single] and which was what single mothers received for around 30 years after the Whitlam government introduced the Supporting Mothers Benefit in 1973.

Slide 11: website url

Whatever policy reform solutions we arrive at, we still must look at the overall situation and ask ourselves whether we are happy as a society to be trading off violence for poverty.

That is the proposition, and it is not one we can any longer ignore.

Slide 12: The Choice with URL

Thank you.