

Safe at Home? Where Women Live When Leaving a Violent Relationship and the Role of Civil Protection Orders

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Background

Internationally, domestic violence policy has shifted towards supporting women to stay at home with the perpetrator of violence excluded (Murray & Powell, 2011). However, it is a direction which is not without controversy. Second wave feminism in the seventies heralded the arrival of the first refuges for women escaping domestic violence as a cause célèbre (Hague & Malos, 1993). The establishment of these safe houses has been part of a wider movement drawing attention to the profound prevalence of domestic violence including the levels of emotional, physical and sexual violence, and the risk of homicide (Lehrner & Allen, 2009). The need for many women and their children to flee violence by staying in high security refuges highlights the importance of safety and security when separating from violent men.

Much of the research into decision making for women separating from abusive partners focuses on their decision to leave the relationship (Barnett, 2000, 2001; Kim & Gray, 2008). The barriers to leaving are well documented and include: financial insecurity; homelessness; problematic child contact arrangements; fear of losing the residency of the children; continued ambivalence about the relationship, and fear of reprisals (Robyn Edwards, 2004; Murray, 2008; Southwell, 2002). Less research attention has been given to the decisions women make about where they will live in the aftermath of separating from a violent relationship. Refuges provide not only emergency housing but also safety, security and social support (Abrahams, 2007), and while they are the most well-known option they are also the least used (Spinney & Blandy, 2011).

The practical realities of a 'stay at home' policy indicate that this is a complex arena in which the rhetoric of rights for 'women and children to stay in their own home' needs to be underpinned by complex support systems to provide safety and protection for those choosing this option.

The Safe@Home study

This research examined the role of the civil protection orders in supporting women and children to remain safely in the family home by exploring the following questions of women who experienced recent violence:

1. How effective are civil intervention orders in supporting safety for both women and children?
2. Are there differences in the experiences of the women who are able to stay in their home and those who chose to relocate?

Data was collected on the experience and decision-making around accommodation options and the role of civil protection orders among 138 women accessing domestic violence support services in the state of Victoria (Australia).

Findings

Our findings reveal that women staying in their own home were likely to be further abused and harassed as their protective orders were more often breached compared with women choosing to relocate. In spite of the frequency of breaching, a majority of women believed that they were safer with the protective order in place. We conclude that supporting women to ‘stay at home’ with the perpetrator removed is a complex process and only a minority of women are able to choose this path without strong systems both protecting women and holding men to account for breaching protection orders.

Research theme

1. Service responses and interventions

Key Words

2. Research informing practice
3. Lived experience
4. Perpetrator Interventions

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Learning Objectives

1. Inform the policy discussion promoting ‘safe at home’ programs with the real life experience of women who have tried to stay at home with the violent perpetrator removed.

2. Understand the strength of protection orders among perpetrators of violence.
3. To understand the system gaps of protection orders preventing women and children from living safe and free from violence.

Research Themes

Experience and impacts

Service responses and interventions

Key Words

- Lived experience
- Research informing practice
- Implementation
- Service systems, programs
- Service delivery
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