

29th April, 2011.

To those contributing to and to those managing this Family Law-related Enquiry ... my acknowledgement, greetings and respect!

I have minutes remaining in which to contribute to the Enquiry, before close of submissions. This small submission is principally a plea for honest, non-politically correct, re-consideration of voices of many men who will be unjustly impacted (and even abused) by the direction pre-set by the Federal Attorney General and the many coalitions who have the political advocacy supremacy behind the proposed changes to the Family Law Act. Family violence is a significant factor in changes being considered to family law and ensuing policies and services. I will just focus on abuse/family violence for now.

My position is that no abuse¹ by anyone to anyone is ever justified at any time for any reason^{2, 3}. I passionately hold to the need for the systemic and inclusive collaboration of all participants linked to family violence being committed to a whole-of-family (and community) approach, especially with the well-being of children and their ensuing long-term contributions to civil society in mind. Each domain (be that women's domestic violence support services, police, government child-protection services, men/fathers' support services and the like) each have particular experiences, 'window's on their world', capacities, community constituencies, and mandates. Each represents a part and only a part of the wider community realities of experiences, voices, statistics and 'truths'. Family violence needs to be seen as very complex in its causes and exacerbating factors and in its amelioration and modes of service provision. Police domestic violence work is very difficult and complex. Women's victims support is very distressing. Working with the diversity of men's experiences and needs is also often complex and distressing. I plead for genuine, respectful, systemic, collaborative dialogue, laws, policies, funding, services and resources for 'whole of family' well-being ... and at this enquiry time, especially inclusive of the voices of family men and mindful of overly-simplistic assumptions and generalisations about abuse that is intrinsically, generically, negatively solely linked to men. Such pre-agenda based research and statistics, such single sector and paradigm orientation, such exclusion of large numbers of voices, research and interpretative frameworks with the tendency towards the position that 'women are light, men are dark' has led to much injustice and abuse for many men. I and other 'workers with men' have seen that in the hundreds in our work in Western Sydney. The laws and structures rightfully and supposedly created to confront abuse in the first place end up wrongly disenfranchising and abusing many men. I hold to the importance of the 'windows', expertise and roles of **all** family-linked law and policy-makers and service providers increasingly working collaboratively. Where is the will for genuine collaboration? Where is the integrity in research and statistics, rather than their disingenuous use as commonly promulgated? I hear and accept and will collaborate with women and their support workers who experience abuse – I expect the same from other services, though I don't get that when I share the experiences of abused men with certain departments and many family services. Abuse and co-abuse to men are many and are often very serious. The vast majority

¹ I use the term 'abuse', rather than 'violence', in the embracive sense of the 1984 Domestic Abuse Intervention Project's Power and Control Wheels i.e. diverse physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, economic and relational expressions of harm.

² This statement is not a utopian ideal. It is a 'position' towards which I work, while realising all people have the capacity for abuse and at times abuse and experience abuse even in small expressions in day to day relationships.

³ I am a man, partner, father, grandfather. I take responsibility for my own behaviour and commit myself to engaging men who use abusive behaviour and also in supporting men abused and men in co-abusive relationships. I profoundly regret that women for too long had to too often take up the intervention of men who use abusive behaviour, when other men had responsibility, capacity and imperative to intervene, themselves.

are not formally reported – reasons are diverse: for some there is shame; for some fear from partners; some are turned away at police stations or refused event numbers or filing IAVOs. This should be less about an argument of statistics and more about commitment to integrity and collaboration to confront ‘any abuse by anyone to anyone at any time for any reason’. The Enquiry as it stands, seems to be pre-planned (perhaps by some unconsciously, some ignorantly and some intentionally) to achieve some well-intentioned ends for women and children experiencing abuse, but often become the opposite (as it will continue to be in practice) for men and children who are abused.

I felt a fair degree of hopelessness and pointlessness in writing to the enquiry because I constantly experience the my own and the voices of many men widely and unjustly marginalised in the family domain – of men in general being generically caught in the web created to prevent and/or catch and/or punish men who use or are accused of using violent behaviour. That has occurred in Western Sydney structurally by all three levels of government, by non-government services and consciously avoided by most other non-government agencies afraid to include positions complementary to the prevailing paradigm that (often exclusively) focuses on ‘violence as (only) something men do to women’. My submission and its position are **personal**, though I mention the context in which I have worked since 2002. I work with men and their families in Outer Western Sydney through the ‘Fathers & their Children Program’ at Anglicare’s Mt Druitt Community Care Centre. In 2004 I started the 130-strong Western Sydney Men & Family Relationships Network (equal numbers of men and women from eight local government areas). I am also a member of the Working with Men Practitioners Group.

I am a male in my sixties. Women have been the most profound beneficial shapers of my life and approach to life. My background prior to family services has been as a tenured university lecturer for some years and prior ‘again’ in diverse developing countries and rural Australia in rural community development, staff development and training, program evaluation and strategic planning, etc since the early 1970’s. Matters of gender-related abuse and disenfranchisement have been important to me for most of that period and I have been a voice (particularly for women and children and also for positively exploring ‘masculinities’) that has often been abused, discounted or shunned because of my awareness-raising and challenges at community level, church, personal and service providers. I have now found myself become a frequent voice and challenge to others during the last decade on behalf of men also experiencing abuse in families. I have contributed to and challenged diverse forums and reviews on DV/FV/IPV, including recent NSW State Government reviews by the Attorney General’s Dept and the Ombudsman - each with agendas and boundaries that refused to allow other than stated gender-based research interpretations of domestic and family violence (as very important a factor as gender is but not other factors and interpretations) – each with sole voices of women, to the stated exclusion of men’s experiences of abuse and my advocacy for their complementary (not contradictory) experiences. There are many factors that influence the way people ‘see’ family violence and therefore the laws that we enact and services we provide on the basis of the way we each see our world. We particularly have a skewed picture and prevailing paradigm in Australia of abuse in families. We need much more interactive smart dialogue of integrity by all sectors linked by family violence ... and I hope and plead for the Enquiry to spend sufficient time exploring voices of men and men’s services as it explores family law change. I am emphatically not on the ‘men are the victims’ focus. I reiterate that no abuse is ever justified – and I work uncompromisingly, as a bloke, with blokes to that end. Please, for the sake of kids, their parents and us as a society ... can we not be so simplistic? Can we talk together more and collaborate better across all participants in the sector before throwing more ‘hidden’ fathers and their kids back into the injustices of the past? Thankyou.

Dale Williams

