

In their words: A service that meets my needs

Stakeholder kit for practitioners

PAGE 2

What did victims and survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual violence say about their help-seeking journey?

PAGE 4

What did people who use intimate partner violence and sexual violence say about their help-seeking journey?

PAGE 6

What do victims and survivors want from services?

PAGE 7

What do people who use violence want from services?

PAGE 8

What do victims and survivors and people who use violence value in services?

PAGE 9

What do victims and survivors think will help stop the violence?

This suite of fact sheets has been developed to support enhanced practice and is for:

- frontline practitioners of domestic and family violence services and perpetrator programs
- frontline practitioners in the broader social services sector (for example, health services)
- peak organisations in the social services sector, including organisations specifically working to address violence
- policymakers funding social services and those designing practice guidelines.

There are a variety of ways the fact sheets can be used, such as discussion for enhancing service delivery, trainings, as reflective practice tools, or for context when developing practice guidelines.

The fact sheets present data both from victims and survivors and from people who use intimate partner violence (IPV) and/or sexual violence (SV). Many participants who use violence framed their behaviour in a way that distanced themselves from responsibility (for example, as a “loss of control”). While it is valuable for practitioners to understand their perspectives, it is important to be aware that a key part of an effective response is supporting people to take responsibility for their behaviour and to understand how problematic beliefs and thinking patterns may influence their actions.

Suggested citation: Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety. (2024). *In their words: A service that meets my needs* [Fact sheet]. ANROWS.

What did victims and survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual violence say about their help-seeking journey?

The figure below maps the help-seeking journey of victims and survivors. Crucially, while the journey appears linear, many participants experienced the opposite. They moved through stages in cycles, or not at all, depending on their personal understanding and experience of violence.



Maintaining hope and fixing problems

Women aimed to continue the relationship and attempt to “fix” what they perceived as causing the violence, such as their own behaviour or the perpetrator’s drug and alcohol use. For many women, particularly women who were experiencing sexual violence or coercive control, recognising the violent behaviour as unacceptable was challenging.

The research found that pivotal moments were women being told “it’s not you” and realising that “someone cares”. However, responses by health professionals to initial disclosures did sometimes reinforce that women were responsible for the use of violence in the relationship, as they often diagnosed women with a mental health disorder rather than exploring the underlying trauma.

Assessing options and seeking solutions

Once they recognised the abuse, women began to seek advice and assistance from various service providers such as health professionals, domestic and family violence services, and the police during incidents of aggression and physical violence.

The research found that seeking advice and assistance was particularly challenging for women with children, who often feared their children would be removed if they disclosed. This fear was compounded for First Nations women, who also contended with racism and histories of child removal. What women found particularly important at this stage was having service providers who listened, helped to identify safety risks, and explored options without pressure.

Getting out

Women who decided to end the relationship worked through a process of figuring out how to safely get away from their abusive partner, how to keep their children with them and safe, where they could stay, and how they could survive financially.

The research found that women had to rely on their friends and family for practical help with accommodation, child care and financial assistance. Participants reported that domestic violence hotlines and services that could help them access resources were particularly valuable during this time, as they found it difficult to think clearly, especially while the abuse was continuing. Many women found, however, that unless they were in imminent danger of physical harm, services were unable to offer any tangible help.

Re-establishing independence and safety

The post-separation stage sees a dramatic increase in engagement with professional services, in particular legal services, as women navigated establishing somewhere safe to live, a consistent income, and parenting and property arrangements.

The research found that continually having to retell their stories of violence only compounded their stress and exhaustion, while they also often continued to experience violence from ex-partners. Struggling to afford basic items that they and their children needed to survive, such as food, clothing, housing and transport, was a common underlying factor heightening stress and exhaustion. Advocacy and support to navigate the service system and legal system was particularly valuable at this stage.

Addressing impacts and making sense

Once women gained greater safety and security, they often sought counselling and support, as well as connection with other victims and survivors, to make sense of what had happened.

The research found that building trust with counsellors took time, and women valued those who could work with them over extended periods. For many women it was challenging to find a counsellor who could connect with their cultural background as many services lacked diversity. Joining peer-support groups and connecting with others who shared both experiences of intimate partner and/or sexual violence, as well as a similar cultural background, was found to be a valuable opportunity for enabling deep engagement.

What did people who use intimate partner violence and sexual violence say about their help-seeking journey?

The figure below maps the journey of people who use violence. Similar to the journey of victims and survivors, while this journey appears linear, many participants moved through stages in cycles or not at all.

Many participants who use violence framed their behaviour in a way that distanced themselves from responsibility (for example, as a “loss of control”). While it is valuable for practitioners to understand their perspectives, it is important to be aware that a key part of an effective response is supporting people to take accountability for their behaviour and to understand how problematic beliefs and thinking patterns may influence their actions.



Bottling things up

Initially, those who use violence did not seek help for their use of abusive behaviour.

This was found to be because they didn't recognise their behaviour as a problem, did not know where to seek help, or felt too embarrassed to talk to others. Many participants described "being a man" as one of the barriers to help seeking, as the expectation to be "hard" and not express vulnerability overrode any desire to seek help.

Participants spoke of a build-up of stress, resurfacing of trauma, or conflict in their lives as linked to their use of violence. Some expressed that they believed they ought to be able to rely on their partner for emotional support or sexual comfort, and if this wasn't forthcoming, it exacerbated their feelings of resentment towards their partner.

Breaking down and letting things out

While not usually self-initiated, those who use violence were receptive to receiving help at this stage and were commonly engaged with services.

The research found that rather than recognising their behaviour as violent, the catalyst for engaging with services was that they reached a crisis point, which often corresponded with a relationship separation, separation from their children, or a breakdown in mental health.

Regaining and maintaining emotional stability

Continuous self-management and a focus on "stabilising" mental health and emotions was required.

The research found that, for some, service providers played a crucial and ongoing role, as participants described voluntarily returning to seek help for self-management and to maintain stability. For others, keeping up with exercise, eating healthily and getting sleep was perceived to be valuable.

What do victims and survivors want from services?

Women who participated in the “Voices” project identified five aspects of what they most wanted from service providers: to take me seriously; to help at the time when I need it; to follow up and follow through; to recognise me as an individual person; and to make them stop.

To take me seriously

Overwhelmingly, women wanted services and practitioners to listen, hear, acknowledge and believe. Responses from services need to affirm that women experiencing violence are not irrational, exaggerating or imagining things.

“I need reassurance that the events were unsafe and inappropriate and that the emotional damage is warranted. Remind me that I’m not weak or dramatic.”

[Participant]

To help at the time when I need it

Consistently women expressed that their service needs are not met, and they want this to change. The long wait times to access services and lack of time afforded to each person contributed to women’s trauma and led them to feel that their needs were not being met.

“I wish service providers were more accessible and were able to have longer sessions, as it is very hard for me to open up. It takes a long time for me to be able to get the words out.”

[Participant]

To follow up and follow through

Women described wanting support that extends beyond the end of their relationship with the abusive partner.

“[I need] ongoing specialist counselling to help manage both the trauma from past events and living with the continued risk.”

[Participant]

To recognise me as an individual person

Violence affects everyone differently, and women wanted practitioners to understand how their individual backgrounds, characteristics or circumstances shaped their experiences. Women also wanted the complexity of their experiences to be better understood, including that not every woman is able to, or wants to, leave a violent relationship.

“I wish service providers realised more the hell of coercive control — that even in separation from the ex you are still wholly entrapped.”

[Participant]

To make them stop

Women wanted their voices prioritised and to see increased action to address the perpetrator’s behaviour, rather than placing the onus of stopping the violence on women.

“I need the legal system to stop protecting abusers, giving them another platform to continue their abuse and drag out the legal process adding costs and stressors to the victim ... He continues to gaslight, stalk, lie, abuse — all in a way that is acceptable to the courts.”

[Participant]

There was an overarching acknowledgement that services must be adequately resourced to match what women wanted and needed.

What do people who use violence want from services?

Participant responses from people who use violence revealed that many did not see themselves as needing support for their use of violence. However, there were a number of participants who acknowledged needing to address their use of violence. These participants identified three aspects of what they most wanted from service providers: to help me see things from a different perspective; to hear me and talk to me, not at me; and to help me regain emotional control.

To help me see things from a different perspective

Alongside a desire to learn what a healthy relationship looks like, those who use violence wanted support to understand their partners' perspective. A small number of participants indicated that they needed help to better understand how their behaviour was connected to harmful gendered beliefs and attitudes.

"My greatest need from a professional right now is for that person to listen to me and help me reshape the way I look, think and approach my wife and partner."

[Participant]

To hear me and talk to me, not at me

Professionals who created a safe space by being non-judgemental and empathetic, but still challenged participants, were considered to be the most helpful. Many participants felt that openly sharing their experiences and feelings with a practitioner could help to explore the root cause of their behaviours.

"[My greatest need from services is for] understanding and compassion as well as strategies to find the root of the issues."

[Participant]

To help me regain emotional control

Many people who use violence felt they could better address their use of violence with support to manage feelings of a loss of control of their anger or other emotions.

This included help with communication and de-escalation strategies. Some also identified reducing drug or alcohol consumption as helpful to maintaining stability.

"I know my unhealthy behaviours, and it is when I feel compelled to react to deep feeling[s] of shame, insecurity, fear or pain that I would like support to process those deep feelings."

[Participant]

What do victims and survivors and people who use violence value in services?

The “Voices” project found that victims and survivors and people who use violence value the same thing from services when help seeking, but often for different reasons.

Feeling listened to

Women greatly valued service providers giving them the time to talk, asking questions and showing concern for their wellbeing.

“[She] just listened, and she believed me... she didn’t question it happening, she just asked more questions to find out more. I think that was probably the biggest thing, is feeling heard.”

[Participant]

People who use violence valued feeling listened to as an opportunity to explore drivers for their behaviour.

“[It] would help me process my experiences and actions, understand the factors that led to them, and ensure that they never happened in the future.”

[Participant]

Learning about options

For women, along with material assistance, the most valued practical support provided was learning about options and strategies to help them stay safe.

“[I needed] just somebody sitting down and practically talking through, here are the steps that you need to take to move, because you’re so exhausted so overwhelmed.”

[Participant]

In contrast, for people who use violence, it was learning new ways of addressing what they referred to as “relationship problems”.

“[My greatest need is help to] learn how to regulate my own emotions, be responsible for my own actions and have better empathy/do a better job of perspective taking for my partner.”

[Participant]

Accessing expertise

A major turning point for many women seeking help was having their experience of abuse validated by a professional with expertise in intimate partner and sexual violence.

“[Having my experience] justified by a professional [meant] I felt like I wasn’t crazy, like I [hadn’t made] all of this stuff up in my head.”

[Participant]

Women also valued the expertise of professionals who they could trust to challenge the abusive behaviours of their partner or ex-partner.

“[My partner needs] to be heard just like anyone else ... [but] also given the consequences of their actions if that behaviour continues.”

[Participant]

However, for people who use violence, professional expertise was often seen as valuable for obtaining a medical or mental health diagnosis, as well as for access to medication.

“[My greatest need is] regular sessions with my shrink to help me deal with my PTSD. My negative behaviours towards partners are, generally, unintentional and reactionary to PTSD.”

[Participant]

What do victims and survivors think will help stop the violence?

Women were asked what they thought would stop their partner/ex-partner's violence. Here is what they shared.

A fear of the consequences

For some, legal responses such as police intervention or protection orders were partially effective in reducing the violence, although the violence often continued in less overt ways such as an increase in controlling behaviour. The biggest deterrent for perpetrators was the threat of negative consequences beyond those of police intervention or protection orders, such as the loss of freedom or reputational damage.

"The threat he will go to jail next time he steps over that line ... He cannot allow others to think he's a monster."

[Participant]

Holding them to account

Many women in the study commented that they were not in a position to be able to make their partner/ex-partner change their behaviour. Women called for external interventions to make their partner/ex-partner recognise that their behaviour was unacceptable – someone external who had greater power or influence, such as male friends or professionals, who could call out the problematic behaviour.

"[What might help is] having people who he trusted or looked up to talk about his behaviour and its consequences."

[Participant]

Removing myself

While women who were able to leave the relationship affirmed that this did not necessarily stop the violence or change the mindset of their partner/ex-partner, it did reduce some of the opportunities to target them.

"The only thing keeping me safe is that he lives in another state."

[Participant]

Nothing was helpful

However, overall, most of the women described a deep pessimism at the possibility that their partner/ex-partner would ever change, as there was nothing that had helped in the past. This was attributed mostly to a refusal of the partner/ex-partner to accept that their behaviour was abusive. Even when there had been intervention by services, women explained that this had only changed the type of violence their partner/ex-partner used against them.

"The abuse and violence has not stopped, it has simply changed into systems and legal abuse, and it continues today."

[Participant]

The research clearly shows that for victims and survivors, there is no single solution for every person and situation. Therefore, we need to continue to improve our capacity to work with people as individuals, meeting their needs when they present to services.