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Safe at home? Housing decisions for women leaving family violence

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Abstract

Internationally domestic violence policy has shifted towards supporting women to stay at home with the perpetrator of violence excluded. However, the practical realities 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 additional support to provide safety and protection for those choosing this option. The current study examines decision-making about accommodation options and the role of civil protection orders among 138 women accessing domestic violence support services in Victoria Australia. It shines a light on the intersection between justice responses and the housing needs of women and their children leaving a violent relationship. Our findings reveal that for this sample of women, staying in their own home left them more open to breaches of intervention orders than those

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who re-located. 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 may be a pathway to safety for only a minority of women particularly if support from police and courts is not proactive and reliable.

Key words: domestic violence, homelessness, protection orders, social policy, exclusion orders

Introduction

Internationally, there is an emerging trend to increase the choices for women separating from abusive partners by removing the perpetrator of violence so that women and their children have the option to stay safely in their homes (Murray and 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 and Malos 1993). The establishment of these safe houses has been part of a wider movement drawing attention to the prevalence of domestic violence including the levels of emotional, physical and sexual violence, and the risk of homicide (Lehrner and 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 (Abrahams 2007).

Forty years after the establishment of the first women's refuges in Australia it is recognised that while domestic violence is widespread, places in refuges are limited and they are only used by a minority of women (Tually *et al.* 2008b, Bartels 2010). An unintended consequence of the drive for refuge has been that safety is secured by fleeing rather than perpetrators of violence being excluded (Breckenridge *et al.* 2015). Although refuge accommodation remains an important choice for many women and their children, a policy shift has occurred, both nationally and internationally, to demand a broader range of interventions accessible to a diverse cross-section of women (Chung *et al.* 2000, Tually *et al.* 2008b, Baker *et al.* 2010, Spinney 2012).

Background

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 and 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 (Edwards 2004); (Murray 2008). Despite these barriers, women leaving violent partners make up approximately one third of the recorded homelessness population (Thompson 2007; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2014).

To date, there has been little research attention given to the decisions women make about *where* they will live in the aftermath of separating from a violent relationship. While women's refuges are the most well-known option they are also the least used (Spinney and Blandy 2011). Security requirements, limited disability access, the shared environment and age limitations on accompanying male children, as well as shame and embarrassment prevent many women from using them (Tually *et al.* 2008a, Baker *et al.* 2010). There are many women who prefer to stay with family and friends, obtain different housing, and increasingly seek the right to stay in their homes with the abusive partner removed (Spinney 2012).

Shifting the policy and practice focus to the removal of the abusive partner from the home is potentially providing a 'sea change' in the domestic violence and homelessness sector. Spinney (2012) suggest that the same energy (and resources) used to establish refuges and other supported accommodation now needs to pivot to prevent homelessness through 'safe at home' options. A recent meta-evaluation of 'safe at home' programs identified four key pillars of the approach: maximising safety through a combination of legal, judicial, policy and home security to exclude the perpetrator and protect the victim; co-ordination of local intervention services; a homelessness prevention response which ensures women are informed of their options prior to a crisis and supported to maintain their housing afterwards; and recognition of enhancing women's economic security (Breckenridge *et al.* 2015, p.9). Programs vary and provide a range of services usually (though not always) with a protection order that has conditions to exclude the violent partner (Nichols 2013, Johnson 2014). However, little attention has been given to the fourth pillar, women's pathways to employment and economic security thereby limiting housing options during a crisis (McLaren 2013).

The 'safe at home' principle is well founded within human rights discourse (Chung *et al.* 2000, Tually *et al.* 2008b). It supports the entitlement of women and children to live free from violence and due diligence of governments to protect and uphold this right, as per the

Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Violence Against Women (United Nations 1979, Fraser 1992); and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Doek and Svevo-Cianci 2014). The strategy argues that it is the victim, not the abuser, who should be entitled to stay in their home should they choose to do so, and is an effective way of avoiding the social and economic consequences of escaping domestic violence, such as homelessness, disconnection from community, unemployment, and disruption to children's schooling (Murray 2002, Edwards 2004, Tually *et al.* 2008b). 'Safe at home' may also be a more appropriate choice for Aboriginal women wanting to stay connected to family and land; women with disabilities with house adaptations and care packages; and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds seeking to stay in their community networks (Edwards 2004, Murray 2008).

The 'safe at home' strategy is not without its problems and critics. It is clearly not an option for all women and their children. Separating is the point of increased danger (Bennett Cattaneo and Goodman 2005) and ousting the man from 'his' home may provide an excuse for escalation of his violence (McFerran 2007). It is also clear that not all women would choose to stay in the home given that this has been the site of abuse and potentially, isolation (Netto *et al.* 2009, Spinney and Blandy 2011). To date, there is little empirical evidence to support whether a woman staying in her own home provides a safer option than relocation (Spinney 2012). There is however emerging evidence from evaluations that where there is a tightly co-ordinated 'safe at home' program which brings together police, the judiciary, housing services and the specialist women's sector that women report a greatly increased sense of safety in their homes (McFerran 2007, Jones 2010, Taylor and Mackay 2011).

Effective implementation of a 'safe at home' strategy hinges on the successful exclusion of the abuser from the home. Although the research is sparse on the effectiveness of protection orders, there is discussion about the need for more rigorous and enforced legal sanctions supporting women to stay in their homes (Chung *et al.* 2000, Laing 2013, Nichols 2013). It is also suggested that the barriers to women's access to justice contribute to continued marginalisation and social exclusion with ramifications for the effectiveness of 'safe at home' programs underpinned by protective orders (Hunter and de Simone 2009).

The more general research on protective orders shows a mixed picture. Women generally report that they feel safer, validated and more protected with an order in place (Authors 2,

2003, Logan and Walker 2009) and particularly if it has been customised to their needs (Nichols 2013). However, there is also a group who perceive that the violence became worse, possibly in retaliation for taking their case to court (Spitzberg 2002, Hannawa *et al.* 2006, Nichols 2013). In fact, meta studies of protection order violations show that the level of breaching of protection orders is high, ranging from 23% to 70% depending on the sample and whether woman are self-reporting or official court and police data on breaches is used (Spitzberg 2002, Hotaling and Buzawa 2003, Logan and Walker 2009, Benitez *et al.* 2010, Logan and Walker 2010). It appears that there is a group of offenders for whom protection orders provide little deterrence from abuse (Spitzberg 2002, Frantzen *et al.* 2011). This includes offenders: involved in stalking (Spitzberg 2002, Logan and Walker 2010); with a previous criminal record (Kethineni and Beichner 2009); who are unemployed (Ko 2002); and have previously seriously injured their victims (Frantzen *et al.* 2011). Those with something to lose from being arrested appear to be the most responsive to an order (Ko 2002, Nichols 2013).

The issue of enforcement is also significant in determining the effectiveness of protection orders. Gondolf (2002) argues that if legal interventions are to be effective, consequences for abuse must be timely, graduated, and consistent. Logan and Walker (2009) also argue that enforcement is critical, though an area where follow through from police and courts have not always been evident (Hirschel *et al.* 2007).

Policy Context

Since 2005, the state government of Victoria Australia has supported reform initiatives embedding a practice of assisting women to stay in their own homes as a part of an "Integrated Family Violence System" [i] (Office of Women's Policy 2002, Murray and Powell 2011, S. Murray and A. Powell 2011) rather than developing specific 'safe at home' programs. Critical to an integrated system were: changes to the *Family Violence Protection Act, 200*8 (Vic) strengthening of the civil protective order legislation; increase in police powers (eg Safety Notices); and amending the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* to require landlords to modify tenancy agreements, allow for name changes on a lease, and/or reduce the term of fixed term tenancy agreement if women with a protection order and exclusion condition wanted to remove themselves or a violent partner from a lease. More recently, the

Family Violence Royal Commission (Victoria 2016) has made specific recommendations to increase the viability of women and children staying safely in their own homes.

Safety Notices are considered a particularly helpful aspect of the reform by providing police with powers immediately to remove the perpetrator from the home and institute a temporary protection order prior to a formal court order (Thomson Goodall Associates 2010). In addition, a new code of practice for the police investigation of domestic violence was developed and provided clear support for "affected family members (AFMs) to stay safely in their own homes where it is their wish to do so" (Victoria Police 2004, p.1), active referral options for both perpetrators and victims; as well as reinforcing a pro-charging agenda where criminal evidence is available (Victoria Police 2010). Services for violent men (including a crisis line, accommodation, and men's behaviour change programs) are also part of the reform strategy.

In addition, layered legislation has been developed to support civil protection orders. These enhancements include: the ability of a third party (namely police) to bring a protection order to court on behalf of a woman, thereby saving her legal expenses as well as lifting the burden of being the applicant for the order against her partner (Author 2, 1997); and allowing simultaneous charging for criminal offences while filing for a civil protection order, a provision also available in some states in the US (Kethineni and Beichner 2009). Driven by both legislative change and domestic violence sector reform Victoria has experienced a dramatic increase in criminal charging and the issuing of protective orders (Author 1, 2012). These trends are recognised as markers of domestic violence reform (Javdani *et al.* 2011).

Research Design

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 choose to relocate?

While not a true participatory action research (PAR) project, we took a participatory, collaborative and iterative approach to project design and development. PAR is increasingly recognised as a viable approach to address complex issues by working within and across communities affected (Minkler 2000, Sullivan *et al.* 2005). Initial stages were developed in conjunction with representatives from government organisations partially funding the research, namely The Department of Human Services, Department of Justice, and Victoria Police; as well as community sector domestic violence organisations.

Informed by international best practice, the development of the questions was informed directly by workers in the field and women who have experienced domestic violence (Fisher 2011). A focus group of ten female domestic violence clients assisted with question development and eight remained involved in reviewing and redrafting the final research tool. This approach to question development ensured familiar language was used (McKosker *et al.* 2003, Bowden and Green 2005, Harding and Norberg 2005).

Using PAR methodology was critical in defining two primary concepts for the project; first, defining 'home' within the notion of 'Safe at Home' and second, the terminology for abuse or violence. Initially the project sought to explore the impact of civil intervention orders upon women who remained in the home previously shared with the abusive partner, however consultation with domestic violence workers and women who have experienced violence led to an expanded definition of 'home' including women who actively chose to relocate for either financial or psychological reasons.

Methodology

Twenty-six of the state government funded domestic violence refuges and service outreach organisations agreed to participate. All services operated within the Victorian integrated family violence policy context and hence supported the principle that women and children should be able to stay in their own homes where it was safe to do so. The research staff visited each of the agencies and conducted a briefing session with staff members, including the informed consent procedures for a self-completed or worker supported questionnaire. Agency workers were asked to identify clients whom they believed would be willing to be involved (i.e. not in immediate crisis). The inclusion criteria encompassed: women aged 18 years or older, living with and/or leaving domestic violence, using the specialist women's service; and women able to complete a questionnaire in English. Three ethics committees

reviewed and approved the project including the Department of Justice and the Universities of Melbourne and Monash. Safety protocols, similar to those outlined by (Langford 2000), included an invitation to the research by a worker with whom the client already had a relationship and where safe contact protocols had been established.

Involving domestic violence workers with sample selection and conduct of the research was an extension of the PAR methodology which ensured the design continued to be appropriate, sensitive and safe for participants (Whyte *et al.* 1991, Sullivan *et al.* 2005). While being inclusive and collaborative, the sample selection process raised methodological dilemmas such which included: case workers self-selected clients which resulted in a natural sample bias; only a small number of agency workers were able to prioritise the time required to support a client in the research task, which also influenced which clients were approached; refusal rates could not be calculated because not all service clients were invited; and clients may have participated in the research out of loyalty to their caseworker regardless of the informed consent process. We believe workers took a conservative approach when screening clients for 'suitability' to participate and the study will under-represent particular groups of vulnerable women. However, as will be discussed in the results, the sample appears to be comparative with other research among the same population.

A 40% response rate was achieved from 354 distributed questionnaires: 141 returns and 138 of these were valid. Responses included one same-sex couple and 13 women continuing to live in the same house with their abusive partner. SPSS software was used to analyse the quantitative data and where possible, tests of significance were employed. Raw, unstandardized residuals were used to identify less obvious relationship patterns. The open-ended question qualitative data was coded and analysed manually.

Results

The sample was initially compared with larger surveys of women's domestic violence services in Victoria to gain a sense of representativeness (Table 1).

[**insert Table 1**]

Overall comparison suggests that the current sample is not markedly skewed and is similar to those in larger audits conducted by KPMG (2008, 2009). Similar proportions spoke

predominantly English (9 out of 10), while a slightly larger proportion of women were aged between 35-44 years in this Safe at Home sample or identified as either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (6% compared with 4%) (KPMG 2008, KPMG 2009).

Living situation

The data was initially divided according to the locations where women were living, including: a) refuge or transitional housing; b) at 'home' - defined as a place previously shared with their abusive partner; c) in another home different from the one they previously shared with their abusive partner; or d) currently living with their abusive partner. On the surface, these living situations are clear, however, the explanatory stories drawn from the open-ended questions revealed a fluid transition through a number of different living situations and classification was not straight forward. The questionnaire had clearly caught women at 'a point in time' and revealed three groups of women in transition. One group included women for whom the police had removed their partner multiple times while they tried to stay at home. This group of women eventually left their home because their partner would not stay away. A second group of women included those for whom the police removed their abusive partner for 24-48 hours allowing time for her to move to another location. These women did not intend returning to that home, either by preference or because they did not trust their partner to stay away. A third group of women reported they were moving into temporary accommodation for a period of time (eg. six weeks) while the protective order was processed and served, and police removed the abusive partner from the home. Some of these women would eventually return to the home and others would relocate.

At the time of completing the survey approximately one quarter (26%) of women were attempting to live in the home where they had previously lived with their abusive partner, while two thirds (67%) had relocated (see Table 2). A small group remained living with their abusive partner (10%). Extrapolating from the stories told by the women, it is likely that some who were living away from home may one day try to return; while others currently living at home may decide, in future, to leave. For example, one woman stated that she would not feel safe to stay in her home once her partner was released from prison.

For the remainder of this paper, three categories of living situation are examined: *Living in my original home again* (n=32), *In a new place of my own, different from the home I shared with my abusive partner* (n=28) and *Temporary housing* (n=64) including refuge, shelter or

state provided transitional housing, caravan, motel, staying with family or friends. Women living with their abusive partner at the time of completing the questionnaire and one same-sex couple are excluded for the purpose of this analysis focussing on heterosexual relationships where women are actively trying to live separately from their abusive partners. Thus, 124 women remain in the sample frame.

[**insert Table 2**]

Comparison between different groups of women

Having established the living situation of women, and acknowledging that there was fluidity between groups, one of the primary questions was whether there were differences in pathways to living arrangements depending on background, stage of life and type or length of abuse experienced. Differences between the groups of women were not statistically significant in relation to demographic background, types of abuse or risk factors, however there were some apparent patterns based on raw unstandardized residual values that are worthy of comment, and which may benefit from future exploration with larger samples.

Women attempting to stay in their own home were more likely to be older (above 44 years), born in Australia and not self-reporting a disability (including depression and other mental health issues). In addition, while most of the women in the total sample had children, women staying at home were only marginally over-represented in having children living with them. Examination of the number of types of abuse experienced and the number of risk factors did not reveal any notable differences across living situations. On average, women experienced 14 different types of abuse and six risk factors regardless of where they were currently living.

However the *types of abuse* experienced did vary by living situation. While not statistically significant, distribution patterns indicate that fewer women attempting to stay in their original home reported threats to the safety of their children and other family members. They were also more likely to report being stalked, partner jealousy or a partner threatening suicide. More women who had relocated to temporary accommodation (eg. refuges) reported severe physical abuse including sexual assault, attempted strangulation and being harmed with a weapon.

Protective orders and safety

Of the 124 women separated from their partner at the time they filled in the questionnaire, 83 (69%) had a current protective order. Of those with an order, three-quarters (77%, n=64) contained an exclusion order (ie. conditions excluding the ex/partner from the place where the woman currently lives). In comparison, only 39% of domestic violence service clients reported an active protective order in the Victorian Benchmark Data Project (KPMG 2009, p.92), but similar rates of those protective orders included an exclusion condition (71%). In the current sample, women attempting to remain in their original home had the highest rates of protection orders with exclusion conditions (Table 3).

[**insert Table 3**]

Experience of safety

Women with a current protection order were asked whether it assisted them to be and/or feel safer. Here, women living in their own home may be particularly disadvantaged; their abusive ex-partner knows where they live, the physical layout of the house, and their regular routine. Among the women surveyed, nearly all who were attempting to remain living at home self-reported that the intervention order had been breached (96%). While breaching rates were high for all women in each of the three living situations, it was significantly higher for women staying at home (chi square $p <= .05$). These were also the women more likely to report abuse experiences of stalking. Most breaches were not formally reported to the police: a finding similar to research by (Logan and Walker 2009) who identified that between 40%-70% of breaches were ever reported to police. The current sample members were at the lower end of this reporting scale, however higher than the breach rate of comparable Victorian data. The current research asked whether the protection order had *ever* been breached while comparable research by KPMG (2009) measured breach rates during a two week period. During that period domestic violence workers reported breach rates of 28%, and for a further 17% of cases, this information was unknown (KPMG 2009, p.93). The official police recorded rate of breaching during this same period in 2009 was 4% of all domestic violence incidents (KPMG 2009, p.25).

[**insert Table 4**]

Women were asked about formally reported breaches to the police and just under half indicated that they had reported a breach to the police on at least one occasion (47%, n=27).

Additionally, nearly all of the women (n= 21) reported breaches to the police more than once. While there were some positive reports of police follow-up on breaches, there were more statements of frustration from women who felt powerless against breaches of the protective order.

> *This time it has helped as I have reported every incident and they [the police] ring him. [id 88]*

> *Husband is still finding [a] way to contact with no intervention from police. [id 47]*

> *It [the protective order] is not enough though, because when he breaches, he is not held accountable for his actions. [id 39]*

> *If someone wants to kill you, a piece of paper doesn't do a lot to protect you. You still have to be able to get to a phone to be able to enforce it. [id 121]*

Overall, 18 women reported that a breach of protection order had been taken to court, and a further four women were waiting for a court date to be set. Most women who had been to court for a protection order breach commented negatively on the magistrate's sentencing, which they considered too light and ineffective. In three cases there was reportedly insufficient evidence and in seven cases the man was not convicted. In eight cases the man was convicted and sentenced, but only two of these women felt satisfied with the sentence and court outcome.

In addition to whether or not the protection order was breached, women were asked about their perceptions on how helpful[ii] the order had been. Interestingly, in spite of the reports of breaching, many women were positive that a protective order helped them to some extent.

> *I have not seen or heard from him since the order was served. [id 73]*

> *It is helpful because it stops him and early on it stopped me from changing my mind. Gave me what I needed which was time and space away from him. [id 66]*

> *Whenever he started getting abusive, reminding him about the intervention order may help. [id 62]*

The order was not helpful in the beginning as he lied about his behaviour to police and was not removed. He has since been removed and has not breached. [id 33]

Women who had moved to a different location, a place of their own without the history of their abusive ex/partner, were significantly more likely to indicate that the intervention order was *very helpful* (71%, n=12, p <.05, Table 5). The rates reported for 'helpfulness' were similar for women living at home, with the abuser excluded or in temporary accommodation (Table 5). These comments need to be balanced against the finding that one in five women in this sample believed it was not helpful or had made the situation worse (22%, n=18).

[**insert Table 5**]

The protection order stopped the abuse for only 28% (n=21) of those who obtained one (Table 6), while a further 64% (n=47) reported that the abuse had decreased or changed. There is notable difference in the experiences of the impact of the protection order according to the living location and while not statistically significant; women living in their own home were over-represented in experiencing marked changes in the type of abuse experienced. Examples of how the abuse changed often reflected a shift from direct physical abuse to abuse via texting, stalking, and harassment.

Verbal and emotional abuse continues. [id 14]

He damages my car when he finds it. He follows me, he still threatens me constantly by text from a pay phone. Stalked me and let me know by msg. [id 69]

He has been contacting my family and abusing them to pass the message to me. [id 60]

[**insert Table 6**]

In spite of the level of breaching and the continued abuse, most women felt safer after gaining a protection order. Before the protection order, on a scale of 1-5, more than half scored '1' feeling *very unsafe and feared for their lives* (56%; n=44) and only 3% (n=2)

scored '3' or above to say that they felt *safe or very safe*. After taking out a protection order more than half (58%; n=42) scored '3' or above in terms of their feelings of safety. All women, regardless of where they were living, reported increases in feelings of safety after the protection order was in place.

However, examination of the qualitative responses reveals that while women provided an overall increased rating of safety, they did not believe the protection order was the key to their long-term safety.

> *This man has a long criminal history I will always fear for my safety and that of all my family. I will continue to fight for my home, which I know will aggravate the situation but I need closure and a roof over my head. [id 59]*

> *He still comes close to me, watches and follows me. He ignores the law, or doesn't care. [id 71]*

Of the 80 women who answered the question of whether they would apply for an intervention order again, 74% (n=59) said that they would, 19% (n=15) were unsure and 7% (n=6) would not apply again.

Discussion

The data highlights the complexity of women's lives when attempting to separate from a violent partner. The decision to separate represents a major challenge to the abuser's control. It is clearly a step fraught with risk and danger. Within a wider policy context which supports women staying in their own homes following violence, this paper explored where women decide to live when separating from their abusive partners and the role protection orders play in providing safety.

It was striking that the three groups of women appeared to be more similar than different in their demographic, abuse experience and risk profiles. However patterns emerged from descriptive analysis suggesting that women in this sample, who stayed in their own homes with the abuser excluded, were more likely to be born in Australia, older and as a total group to have suffered less extreme physical and sexual violence. At the same time, there were still individual women staying at home who had very high risk profiles.

While it may be that larger samples could reveal data trends at a level of statistical significance, the lack of differentiation of risk between women staying in their home with the abuser excluded and those leaving to live elsewhere is supported by other Australian studies (Edwards 2003, Nicholson 2012). It is also the case that women were 'on the move' regardless of which living situation they were in at the time of participating in the research. That is, women who stayed at home had often passed through periods living in temporary accommodation before they felt safe enough or supported enough to return to their home and conversely, all categories included women who had tried *un*successfully to stay at home. Given this fluidity, it is less surprising that the different clusters of women were more similar than different.

State government policy changes actively supporting women and children to stay at home are framed around the belief that it is less disruptive if abusive men relocate and women and children are provided with the option to stay at home and retain links to school, friends and community (McFerran 2007). The actions of women in this sample somewhat support this proposition. However, it is also apparent that women who are more vulnerable (eg. younger, lower English proficiency, living in unstable rental environments, limited community and family support, living with a disability and women in a rural area) or, who face more severe threats may have no option other than relocation.

While women had a range of safety strategies to support them in the post-separation period, the role of the formal protection order particularly was explored in this article. Initial reading of the data on protection orders suggests some contradictions. Overall, only a minority of women (26%) reported that the abuse stopped after obtaining the order. In addition, the level of breaching of the order was high (both formal and informally reported), especially among women attempting to stay in their own homes. Only a minority of breaches resulted in court action, and overall women felt dissatisfied with court outcomes recognising a breach.

In spite of these dismal findings, most women (74% who had a protective order) said that they would apply for one again. The orders seem to be more helpful among women who have moved away to establish a life elsewhere, and overall women's self-reported 'sense of safety' did increase substantially for more than half the sample once a protective order was in place – regardless of their living situation. The abuse also seemed to reduce or change in ways which appeared to be more manageable for the women involved. These findings reflect

patterns in other studies indicating that women generally feel safer with a protection order and would apply for one again (Author 2, 2003, Logan and Walker 2009) even though breaching is frequent.

The high level of breaching and the fact that there were women in the sample who had reported trying to stay at home but had felt forced to leave due to continued harassment and violence suggests that much stronger measures are required to hold violent men accountable for their breaching. This confirms earlier studies highlighting the importance of taking seriously the breaching of protection orders if they are to be effective (Gondolf 2002, Logan and Walker 2009). While the penalties for breaching have recently increased in Victoria, the responses in the data suggest that a stronger range of measures are required. This includes responses immediately at the house (eg safety alarms), a tighter system of law enforcement to follow-up and gather evidence of breaches and greater judicial recognition of breach evidence, are required to assist a larger proportion of women and children to stay at home safely.

In short, the vulnerabilities of women staying in their own home may be such that more targeted, tightly integrated and specific 'safe at home' programs may be required. The four pillars which delineate 'safe at home' programs (Breckenridge *et al.* 2015) point to the need for a complex combination of safety, justice, housing and economic strategies to be in place for women and children to remain safely in their own home with the perpetrator excluded. Greater access to safety alarms (Nicholson 2012) and stronger, police led interagency intervention exemplified in UK Sanctuary Schemes (Jones 2010) may be particularly important elements within these programs.

Conclusion

The strategy to support more women experiencing domestic violence to be able to stay safely in their own homes with the violent perpetrator removed has been an important development in the field of domestic violence intervention. It is a policy recognising that women have a right to a range of options when attempting to separate from violent partners and that one of these options should be to stay in their own homes.

However, this research suggests that this is not a straightforward option. In this sample, only a minority of women believed that remaining in their home was possible at the point of

separation, and for those who did, they were 'sitting targets' for continued harassment and violence. It was found in this study that protection orders provide a brake on the level of abuse that some women had been subjected to, but only a minority of women found that the orders fully protected them. Stronger safety measures and a tighter enforcement system are needed if staying 'safe at home' is to be a genuine option for more women and their children who want to separate from a violent and abusive partner.

Notes

[i] In Victoria Australia the policy language refers to 'family violence' in order to be inclusive of Aboriginal understanding of family relationship dynamics and this is the phrase used when sourcing titles of local initiatives.

[ii] The term 'helpful' was used separately from 'safe', meaning that women could report the protection order was helpful in many ways such as validating their experience of the violence, giving the police power to act, enabling them to change the lease etc, but it may not make them any safer. Women were asked about their perceptions of safety separately.

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Tables

Table 1: Age of women in the sample and comparison to the Victorian Benchmark Data Project (KPMG 2008, 2009)

	Safe at home total		Victoria Benchmark September 2008		Victoria Benchmark March 2009	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
20-34 years	50	37%	754	43 %	737	42 %
35-44 years	58	43%	596	34 %	633	36 %
45 years and older	28	21%	389	22 %	381	22 %
Total	136*	100%	1739	100 %	1751	100 %

Note: The two Benchmark samples each included women aged 20 years and younger. This age group was excluded from our sample and subsequently is not reported on in this table.

* Excluding one woman who did not disclose her age.

Table 2: Place of residence at time of completing the questionnaire

Place of residence	n	%
Living in my original home again	32	26 %
In a new place of my own, different from the home I shared with my abusive partner	28	23 %
Temporary (refuge, w/friends, transitional, caravan)	64	52 %
Sub-Total	124	90%
Living with partner	13	9%
Same-sex couple	1	1%
Total	138	100 %

Table 3: Protective orders and women's living situation

	Living in original home		New place of my own, different from shared home		Temporary (refuge, w/friends, caravan)		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes: Intervention order with exclusion condition	22	71%	14	50%	28	46%	64	53%
Yes: Intervention order but no exclusion condition	3	10%	4	14%	12	20%	19	16%
No intervention order	6	19%	10	36%	21	34%	37	31%
Total	31	100%	28	100%	61	100%	120*	100%

* Excluding four non-respondents / don't know.

Table 4: Breaching* of intervention order by Living arrangement

	Living in original home (*expected count*)		New place of my own, different from shared home (*expected count*)		Temporary (refuge, w/friends, caravan) (*expected count*)		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes (breached intervention order)	21 (*16.6*)	96%	12 (*12.8*)	71%	25 (*28.6*)	66%	58	75%
No (never breached intervention order)	1 (*5.4*)	5%	5 (*4.2*)	29%	13 (*9.4*)	24%	19	25%
Total	22	100%	17	100%	38	100%	77**	100%

Pearsons Chi Square = 6.860(a) df=2 p=<.05 (0.32) (a) 1 cell (16.7%) has an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.19.

* Breaching of intervention order here is self-defined by the women and not necessarily reported to police.

** Excluding six non-respondents / don't know.

Table 5: How helpful has the intervention order been? by Living arrangement

	Living in original home (*expected count*)		New place of my own, different from shared home (*expected count*)		Temporary (refuge, w/friends, caravan) (*expected count*)		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Not helpful / or made things worse	6 (*5.6*)	24%	0 (*3.8*)	0%	12 (*8.7*)	31%	18	22%
A little helpful	9 (*9*)	36%	5 (*6.1*)	29%	15 (*14.0*)	39%	29	36%
Very helpful	10 (*10.5*)	40%	12 (*7.1*)	71%	12 (*16.4*)	31%	34	42%
Total	25	100%	17	100%	39	100%	81*	100%

Pearsons Chi Square = 9.872(a) df=4 p=<.05 (0.43) (a) 1 cell (11.1%) has expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.78.

* Excluding two non-respondents / don't know.

Table 6: Has the abuse changed since having the intervention order? by Living arrangement

	Living in original home		New place of my own, different from shared home		Temporary (refuge, w/friends, caravan)		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The abuse is worse	0	0%	1	6%	5	16%	6	8%
The abuse has reduced but not stopped, or has changed	20	80%	8	47%	19	59%	47	64%
The abuse has stopped	5	20%	8	47%	8	25%	21	28%
Total	25	100%	17	100%	32	100%	74*	100%

* Excluding nine non-respondents / don't know.