



Single Mother Families Australia submission to the National Action Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children, 31 July 2026

Recommendations for the National Action Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children

These recommendations will all improve victim-survivors' safety, wellbeing, healing and recovery.

Acknowledgement: Single Mother Families Australia (SMFA) gratefully acknowledges the women whose lived and living experience of family, domestic and sexual violence has shaped this submission. Their courage, generosity and willingness to share their experiences have been fundamental to the development of these recommendations.

The recommendations are informed by:

- **More than 2,600 single mothers** who participated in Swinburne University's 2025 national research, *Respect, Reform and Recovery: Alleviating the Unrelenting Demands Placed on Single Mothers*
- **Interviews undertaken for SMFA's 2026 submission** to the current [Parliamentary Inquiry into the relationship between domestic, family and sexual violence and suicide](#).
- **More than 430 contributions** gathered in preparation for the **Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Symposium** (Family Court and Family Circuit Court of Australia, March 2026.).
- **More than 220 responses** to the draft recommendations, which were further refined through consultation with women who provide informal peer support within their communities.¹ A selection of these testimonies can be found in the Appendix and excerpts from them can be found in the body of this submission.
- SMFA also engaged with grassroots organisations and the online communities where women seek support and connection. These organisations have insights into the matters that are top of mind for women harmed by men's violence but are unknown to the service systems and therefore do not attend roundtables such as Women in Poverty.

These recommendations have been shaped by the voices of women with lived and living experience. They reflect not only what has gone wrong, but what must change to prevent violence, enable recovery and build government systems that consistently promote safety, dignity and justice.

A National Shift

1. Seize the Moment: Establish a National Accord to End Violence Against Women and Children

A National Summit, culminating in a National Accord to End Violence Against Women and Children, would mark a new chapter in Australia's response to domestic, family and sexual violence.

While the National Plan provides the strategic framework for governments, the Accord would mobilise the nation by bringing together governments, business, unions, education, sporting organisations, legal entities, media, philanthropy, community organisations and, most critically, victim-survivors in a shared commitment to ending violence.

Safety and Family Law

2. Recognise the Long Tail of Domestic and Family Violence Within All Aspects of the Second Action Plan

Recognise that coercive control and abuse often continue through legal, financial and government systems long after separation.

Advance gender equality and invest in recovery, recognising that recovery and financial security are fundamental to safety and the prevention of future harm.

3. Relocation Orders – Protecting Women's and Children's Right to Safety and Recovery

Enable women and children to relocate to safety, family, employment and support networks without perpetrators continuing to control where they live.

4. Ensure Parenting Orders Never Override Family Violence Protections

Strengthen the interaction between family law and State and Territory family violence orders so that safety is always paramount.

5. Protect Children from Ongoing Exposure to Family Violence

Amend relevant frameworks to ensure children are not required to spend time with a parent where there is substantiated family violence, coercive control, or ongoing abuse against the child or their primary caregiver.

Recognise that harm to the protective parent directly impacts children's safety and wellbeing.

6. Recognise and Respond to Litigation Abuse

Recognise litigation abuse as a form of coercive control and establish mechanisms to identify, prevent and respond to perpetrators weaponising legal systems.

7. Demystify the Family Court System

Improve access to justice through plain-English communication, trauma-informed processes, and co-designed online navigation tools for self-represented litigants.

Economic Safety

8. Introduce a Family Violence Safety Supplement

Provide a 12-month Safety Supplement to support women recovering from domestic and family violence and reduce the risk of returning to abuse.

9. Recognise Poverty as a Barrier to Safety and Recovery

Recognise poverty as a key omission from the National Plan and ensure social security settings support women to leave violence and recover.

10. End the Weaponisation of Child Support

Separate Child Support from Family Tax Benefit Part A and reform policies that enable financial abuse through government systems.

11. Abolish Mutual Obligations for Victim-Survivors and Single Mothers

Recognise unpaid care as productive work.

Until mutual obligations are abolished:

- Extend family violence exemptions to 12 months.
 - Pause obligations during school holidays.
 - Count study, placements and volunteering as approved activities.
 - Recognise volunteering as a legitimate pathway to employment by removing the threshold that restricts volunteering for women under 55 years.
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12. Recognise Unpaid Care as Violence Prevention

Value unpaid caregiving within policy settings and recognise the critical role mothers play in supporting children's recovery from violence.

13. Strengthen Housing Affordability and Security

Increase housing supports so women are never forced to choose between homelessness and violence.

Systems Reform

14. Recognise Mothers as Partners in Safety

Build on the Family Law Bill 2023 by recognising mothers as partners in children's safety and recovery through a national awareness initiative.

Legislative reform alone cannot undo nearly two decades of entrenched practices that discouraged women from safely disclosing family violence and seeking protection.

15. Improve Access to Specialist Police Responses

Improve public visibility of specialist domestic and family violence responses by publishing clear, accessible information about police stations, specialist units and services with expertise in responding to family violence.

This will enable women to make informed decisions about where to seek help and support.

16. Establish a National Family Violence Recovery Plan

Recognise recovery as an essential phase of Australia's response to domestic and family violence by establishing a National Family Violence Recovery Plan.

Ensure every woman and child affected by violence can access coordinated, trauma-informed counselling, therapeutic support and recovery services that promote long-term safety, healing and wellbeing.

17. Embed Lived Experience in Decision-Making

Review and strengthen lived experience governance arrangements under the National Plan to ensure victim-survivors are not merely consulted, but have an ongoing, independent role in monitoring implementation, identifying systemic failures and driving reform.

18. Expand the National Audit of Government Systems

Expand the Audit of Government Systems across Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to identify and remove systemic barriers, systems abuse and systems blind spots that undermine safety, justice and recovery.

19. Inquiry into the Criminalisation of Victim-Survivors

Establish an independent inquiry into women who have been misidentified, charged or imprisoned as perpetrators of violence within the context of domestic and family violence.

20. Strengthen Legislative Processes and Outcomes

Embed a mandatory Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Safety by Design lens within Commonwealth Gender Impact Assessments.

21. Embed Professional Excellence and Accountability Across the Family Law System

Establish an independent professional standards and peer review framework for professionals working within the family law system.

The framework should include evidence-informed practice standards, ongoing professional development, independent review mechanisms and transparent pricing guidelines for expert services to strengthen consistency, accountability and public confidence.

About Single Mother Families Australia

Single Mother Families Australia was conceived in 1973 as a lead national voice with policy insight and expertise. We commenced life as the National Council of Single Mothers & their Children Inc and changed our name to Single Mother Families Australia in 2023 as part of our 50 year celebration. We are recognised by the Australian Government as the peak body for single mother families. Our work is driven by our deep experience of listening to and developing solutions with single mothers. We have an unrelenting quest and commitment to seek safer lives with agency, control and economic certainty for single mother families.

The relevance of single mother families to the National Plan

Single mother families comprise a significant number (perhaps the majority) of women and children who are affected by family and domestic violence. Research by Dr Anne Summers found that violence is the cause of as much as 60% of separation (and therefore the creation of single mother families). As she states, “*These now single mothers were not single at the time of the violence.*”²

Respect, Reform and Recovery, Swinburne University’s survey of 2,600 separated single mothers found:

- Nearly 7 in 10 respondents had experienced intimate partner violence and nearly 1 in 5 were currently experiencing intimate partner violence. Current violence included emotional/ psychological abuse (37%) with around 1 in 3 experiencing financial abuse or coercive control. Women continued to endure unacceptable rates of physical harm (18%), sexual abuse (15%) and stalking (14%).

In June 2025 there were three quarters of a million single parents caring for 1.3 million dependent children aged 0–24 years. 600,000 of these families (80%) were headed by mothers.³ More than 9 in 10 (94%) of the 335,000 poorest single parents (those who rely on Parenting Payment Single) are mothers (314,000). They care for nearly 600,000 children aged under 14 years.⁴

A National Shift

Recommendation 1: Seize the Moment: Establish a National Accord to End Violence Against Women and Children.

A National Summit, culminating in a **National Accord to End Violence Against Women and Children**, would mark a new chapter in Australia’s response to domestic, family and sexual violence. While the National Plan provides the strategic framework for governments, the Accord would mobilise the nation, bringing together governments, business, education, sporting organisations, the media, philanthropy, community organisations and victim-survivors in a shared commitment to ending violence.

The Accord would move Australia beyond a government-led plan to a whole-of-society movement, recognising that lasting change requires collective leadership, shared responsibility and sustained cultural transformation. It would establish a common purpose, strengthen partnerships across sectors, and create an enduring framework for collaboration and accountability that extends beyond electoral cycles and successive Action Plans.

Australia has demonstrated, through initiatives such as the Jobs and Skills Summit, that when we unite around complex national challenges, we can accelerate reform and achieve transformational change. Ending violence against women and children demands the same level of national ambition.

At a time when community awareness has never been greater, and there is an unmistakable appetite for stronger action, Australia has an opportunity to seize this moment. A National Summit and National Accord would not simply strengthen the implementation of the National Plan; but shape our national identity, embed a culture of safety, respect and equality, and leave a lasting legacy for future generations. The National Plan sets the destination; a National Accord would commit the nation to travelling there together.

Recognise the Long Tail of Domestic and Family Violence within all aspects of the Second Action Plan

Recommendation 2: Recognise the long tail of domestic and family violence by acknowledging that coercive control and abuse often continue through legal, financial and government systems long after separation.

Advance gender equality and invest in recovery, recognising that recovery and financial security are fundamental to safety and the prevention of future harm.

Family violence has a long-term impact that interferes with and inhibits every aspect of women's lives. For some, the abuse ceases when they leave; for too many, it continues long after they leave. A Swinburne University study published in 2025 found mothers felt that the additional time, resources and energy that those recovering from violence had to undertake was largely invisible to government policy.⁵

*"Fleeing DV can leave you financially crippled, and systems can make it worse. It takes over a decade to build back up from nothing. Parents who care for children deserve a living wage and superannuation top ups. Plus we want homes, our own homes! Not just social or affordable housing (there's none anyway) but we want rent to buy homes, we want a home we can raise our family in that's truly ours."*⁶

*"My beautiful adult daughter is expecting her first baby—the first grandchild in our family. It should be one of the happiest times of our lives...Instead, she is having nightmares... The violence ended many years ago, but its impacts did not."*⁷

The evidence shows incremental progress in Victoria ahead of other jurisdictions, suggesting focused attention can lead to improvement. Victoria has led Australia in investing in gender equality, demonstrating how legislative reform, gender-responsive budgeting and sustained investment can drive systemic change; we point to the [Gender Equality Act 2020](#). Importantly, the [Consultation Paper in support of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032](#) also explains why this may be the case: "Victoria has been undergoing state-wide family, domestic and sexual violence system reform since 2008 with sustained investment including primary prevention investment since 2018 (Free from Violence, Respect Victoria and related infrastructure)."

Safety and Family Law

SMFA emphatically asserts that the presence of violence negates the perpetrator's rights concerning relocation and that parenting orders should be amended swiftly and unilaterally to reflect this reality. It is widely acknowledged that children and young people who are exposed to or witness domestic violence are subjected to a form of child abuse, and this exposure must be adequately addressed in any relocation orders.

Those who perpetrate gender-based violence can seek to challenge relocation orders to maintain their influence, thereby creating a potential pathway for initiating or escalating post-separation violence. Such challenges can arise throughout the legal process, including during emergency, interim, and final orders, as well as after the establishment of parenting orders. At every stage, parenting orders must incorporate and accommodate all relevant state and territorial protective measures to ensure the safety and well-being of affected individuals.

"It is troubling that someone with a history of violence maintains such control over our lives, dictating where we can live and the environment we are forced to navigate. It raises the question: why is it that, despite his violent behaviour, he is allowed to dictate our circumstances? The system seems to fail to protect us, leaving us vulnerable and fearful".⁸

Recommendation 3: Relocation Orders – Protecting Women's and Children's Right to Safety and Recovery

- Enable women and children to relocate to safety, family, employment and support networks without perpetrators continuing to control where they live.

The ability to relocate is often fundamental to the safety, recovery and long-term wellbeing of women and children escaping family violence. Relocation enables women to access family support, secure employment, obtain stable housing, enroll children in school, reconnect with community and establish a life free from ongoing coercion and control.

Australian research⁹ found that relocation disputes typically involve a mother seeking to relocate with her children while the father opposes the move. Their research also observed that, unlike the United Kingdom, where restrictions on relocation are comparatively uncommon, Australian courts have historically restrained relocation far more frequently. Women commonly seek relocation to access safety, family support, employment opportunities and the practical supports needed to rebuild their lives after separation.

Restricting relocation can unintentionally extend a perpetrator's control by limiting where a woman can live, work, access childcare, receive support or establish financial independence. The ability to relocate should therefore be recognised as a safety and recovery measure, with the best interests of children, including their right to live free from violence, remaining the paramount consideration. Single Mother Families Australia recommends that the National Plan recognise relocation as an important component of safety and recovery and support reforms that enable women and children to relocate where this is necessary to escape violence, rebuild their lives and establish long-term stability.

Women and children should not be required to remain geographically tethered to violence in order to preserve contact arrangements.

*"I find myself in a deeply troubling situation, as I have been enduring continuous domestic and family violence, compounded by financial abuse. After escaping from my marriage in 2023, I believed I was taking a step toward safety and healing. However, I was unexpectedly served with a relocation order that compelled me to return to a small, isolated community. This community is tightly controlled by my ex-husband's family, creating an environment in which I feel trapped and vulnerable."*¹⁰

*"Recovery from domestic and family violence is impossible when you are required to remain close to the person who abused you. Relocation is not about preventing a child from having a relationship with a parent. It is about creating enough physical and emotional distance to recover, reconnect with family and support networks, secure housing and employment, and give children the opportunity to heal."*¹¹

Recommendation 4: Ensure Parenting Orders Never Override Family Violence Protections

- Strengthen the interaction between Family Law and State and Territory family violence orders so that safety is always paramount.

Where a family violence order (FVO) is made following the establishment of parenting orders, the State or Territory jurisdiction has capacity, under 68R of the Family Law Act (1975) to revive, vary, discharge or suspend a parenting order, to the extent to which it provides for a child to spend time with a person, or expressly requires or authorises a person to spend time with the child. Although this power exists, State and Territory courts are extremely reluctant to resort to it, and applicants will typically be referred by police or other officials to the Family Court.

"Our AVOS (Apprehended Violence Order) ultimately disappeared due to the final parenting arrangements mandated by the court. This decision forced me back into the presence of my abuser, along with his family and friends, which has been incredibly distressing. While I have made efforts to repair the damage to our property, I find myself unable to mend the deep-seated fear that now impacts my children. Their daily commute to school has turned into an anxiety-filled exercise of alertness and vigilance."

"Family law orders should strengthen existing safety arrangements, not undermine them. Government systems must work together so that Parenting Orders do not inadvertently increase risk or compromise the safety of victim-survivors and their children."

The National Action Plan should recognise that family violence is not an exceptional feature of post-separation parenting disputes; it is a defining characteristic of the family law system. The Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia reports that approximately 91% of parenting proceedings involve allegations of one or more major risk factors, including family violence, child abuse, mental ill-health or substance misuse, while 69% involve four or more major risk factors. These figures demonstrate that safety must remain the central organising principle of family law policy and practice.¹²

Recommendation 5: Protect Children from Ongoing Exposure to Family Violence

Amend relevant frameworks to ensure children are not required to spend time with a parent where there is substantiated family violence, coercive control, or ongoing abuse against the child or their primary caregiver, recognising that harm to the protective parent directly impacts children's safety and wellbeing.

"My pre-school child has been repeatedly exposed to arrangements that have caused significant distress and developmental regression. Despite consistently raising concerns about his wellbeing, the focus remained on maintaining contact rather than assessing whether those arrangements were safe or in his best interests...No child should experience further harm because systems designed to protect them fail to recognise the impacts of trauma or the long tail of domestic and family violence."

"The greatest loss has been my son's childhood. Instead of being free to heal after domestic and family violence, he has grown up in the shadow of ongoing legal conflict. This is not because of genuine parenting concerns, but because current systems allow perpetrators to continue exercising control long after separation...The abuse did not end when the relationship ended—it continued through the legal system. Government has the power to change this. Stronger safeguards against systems and litigation abuse are essential to prevent court processes from becoming another tool of coercive control. Women and children should be able to recover from violence, not spend years defending themselves against it."¹³

Single Mother Families Australia is unequivocal that children should never be expected to meet the emotional, psychological or therapeutic needs of a parent. Where separated fathers require support for their mental health or wellbeing, appropriate professional assessment, treatment and support should be available.¹⁴ Children's contact with a parent should be determined by their safety, wellbeing and best interests. Meaningful relationships can only be supported where a parent is able to provide safe, consistent, physically and emotionally attuned care.

Recommendation 6: Recognise and Respond to Litigation Abuse

Identify litigation abuse as a recognised form of coercive control and establish mechanisms to prevent perpetrators from weaponising the legal system.

"Beyond the direct abuse experienced within relationships, what has been most damaging is the perception that legal systems, officials, and experts unintentionally enable or legitimise continued control. When court processes are used strategically, and those strategies are accepted as ordinary litigation behaviour, victim-survivors are left feeling unprotected and unheard. The long-term impact of this extends beyond the proceedings themselves — it affects trust in institutions and willingness to seek help in the future."¹⁵

"Repeated applications, strategic responses to initiating documents, reframing of violence as "relationship bitterness," and the use of parallel proceedings (property disputes, procedural matters) are processed as legal disagreement rather than assessed as potential patterns of coercive control."

"The greatest loss has been my son's childhood. Instead of being free to heal after domestic and family violence, he has grown up in the shadow of ongoing legal conflict."

This is not because of genuine parenting concerns, but because current systems allow perpetrators to continue exercising control long after separation...The abuse did not end when the relationship ended—it continued through the legal system. Government has the power to change this. Stronger safeguards against systems and litigation abuse are essential to prevent court processes from becoming another tool of coercive control. Women and children should be able to recover from violence, not spend years defending themselves against it.”¹⁶

Recommendation 7: Demystify the Family Court System

Access to justice remains a significant challenge in the family law system. The Australian Law Reform Commission reported that around one-third of parenting matters (33–37%) involve one or more self-represented litigants, with the proportion increasing to around half of parenting matters that proceed to trial.¹⁷ Earlier Parliamentary evidence also found that 52% of family law trials in the former Federal Circuit Court involved at least one unrepresented party.¹⁸ Information and support should not be limited to self-represented litigants. Everyone entering the family law system should have access to clear, accessible and trauma-informed information that prepares them for the significance of the process and the profound, often life-changing decisions they may face.

Economic Safety

Recommendation 8: Introduce a Family Violence Safety Supplement

- Provide a 12-month Safety Supplement to support women recovering from domestic and family violence and reduce the risk of returning to abuse.

The Federal Government should introduce a Safety Supplement of \$23,000 (payable in instalments over 12 months) to all women eligible for income support who have experienced domestic and family violence. The Supplement would reduce the need to return to abusive situations.

A 12-month Supplement would assist woman after the one-off [Leaving Violence Program](#) has ended. That program, designed to assist at the time of separation, provides up to \$1,500 in cash and \$3,500 in goods and services.¹⁹

It is confounding that our safety net fails to provide a regular and ongoing payment to support women who have experienced family and domestic violence. A twelve-month payment could serve as a pathway to safety and help alleviate poverty and the long term impacts of domestic violence.

[Respect, Reform and Recovery](#), Swinburne University’s survey of 2,600 single parents found:

- Nearly 7 in 10 (69%) of respondents had experienced intimate partner violence and nearly 1 in 5 (17%) were currently experiencing intimate partner violence. Current violence included emotional/ psychological abuse (37%) with around 1 in 3 experiencing financial abuse or coercive control. Women continued to endure unacceptable rates of physical harm (18%), sexual abuse (15%) and stalking (14%).
- Almost four out of five single mothers (78%) spent ‘a lot’ or ‘almost all’ of their time worrying about, planning for, or ensuring their family’s financial wellbeing.

*"What I want government to understand is that a small increase in income support can make an enormous difference. It creates options. It gives you enough breathing room to plan, to act, to secure housing and to keep your children safe. Financial security is safety. Women should not have to choose between escaping violence and homelessness. Safety should not be a lonely job, and it should not depend on extraordinary resilience alone."*²⁰

Recommendation 9: Recognise Poverty as a Barrier to Safety and Recovery

- Recognise that reducing poverty as a key omission within the current National Plan and ensure social security systems support women to leave violence and recover.

Single parent families are the most impoverished families in Australia. The [2024 HILDA Report](#) found single parent families have the highest rates of housing stress of all family types including single people and couple families (22% compared to ~7% for couples with dependent children). It also found single parent families face the *highest rates* of poverty, material deprivation and financial stress. The [Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee 2026 Report](#) provides further evidence of the financial hardship and poverty faced by single mother families. Their analysis finds that total income support for single parents with 2 children is \$200 a week less than what is required to cover their basic costs of living.

The rate of poverty for children in single parent households (37%) is more than three times that for children in couple family households (12%), where poverty is defined as living below 50% of median household income.²¹ Children growing up in poverty are more likely to experience ill-health during childhood and poorer health in adulthood. Educational attainment is also severely compromised.²² Children from poor households are 3.3 times more likely to suffer adult poverty than those who grew up in households that were never poor.²³

Parenting Payment Single (335,000 recipients) is by far the most important income support payment for women and children leaving violence. The payment is particularly important for many First Nations families who face higher rates of violence and make up over 17% of Parenting Payment Single recipients. Single Mother Families Australia worked hard for, and strongly welcomed, the 2023-24 Federal Budget decision to increase the eligibility for Parenting Payment Single (PPS) from the youngest child turning 8 to 14. The expanded eligibility has now protected over 110,000 women and children from the extreme hardship of being transferred to Jobseeker when their youngest child turned eight years old. Since this welcome change, the number of single JobSeeker recipients with children has reduced to ~26,000 (supporting parents with children aged 14 to 16).²⁴

While the benefit of this reform cannot be underestimated, real rates of Parenting Payment Single have not increased since April 2021 (\$50 per fortnight when the Coronavirus Supplement ended). The \$40 per fortnight increase provided to all other working age income support recipients in the 2023-24 Budget was not extended to Parenting Payment Single.

Respondents to the DSS initiated survey of mothers in the child support scheme were asked what were the most important improvements that could be made and they consistently reported more financial assistance (in the form of increased family payments, vouchers, housing security).²⁵

One respondent to the [Respect, Reform and Recovery](#) survey said:

“The stress is in every direction. Even once having ended the relationship. I’m not at threat of violence but am constantly behind financially; trying to meet all my children’s needs alone; and I also need to keep myself going every day.”

In developing this proposal, women who direct family, domestic sexual violence, intuitively and practically understood the magnitude of a safety payment.

“I can only imagine what this kind of safety net might have meant for my family. Perhaps we’d be in recovery now instead of still carrying the weight of survival. Perhaps we could have afforded counselling. Perhaps our health would be better. Perhaps our children would have grown up with more stability. Perhaps our dreams wouldn’t have faded into distant memories.”

Recommendation 10: End the Weaponisation of Child Support

- Separate Child Support from Family Tax Benefit Part A and reform policies that enable financial abuse through government systems.

The child support scheme affects over 940,000 children, with 600,000 or nearly two in three in families relying on income support as their main source of income.²⁶

SMFA very much welcomes that child support is being prioritised in the current Federal Government’s audit into systems abuse. In addition to multiple reports published by Swinburne University based on surveys of single mothers, three independent and significant reports have acknowledged that the scheme is being weaponised and that major reform is required.²⁷

We continue to advocate to remove the link between Family Tax Benefit A and child support (the Maintenance Income Test) as the most important reform required to end the ongoing abuse women experience from their former partners.²⁸ Swinburne University research published in 2026 found that for 1 in 4 women who had either received a Family Tax Benefit A debt or were worried they would receive a FTB debt, their ex-partner told them they were going to *cause* this outcome. It also found nearly 1 in 5 gave up either child support or FTB payments to avoid incurring FTB debts.²⁹

Additional examples of weaponisation by former partners are coercion into Private Collect (to reduce government scrutiny); intimidation to not apply for child support (with the mother losing 70% of her family payment entitlements); failure to lodge a tax return; deliberate minimisation of income and underpayment or non-payment of child support obligations.³⁰ At December 2025, \$1.95B³¹ was owed to 50% of children in the Agency Collect half of the scheme – the amount owed to the children in Private Collect is unknown.

Government policies can also punish single mothers and their children who have left violence. For example, all separated parents who wish to claim family payments must take reasonable action to apply for child support within 13 weeks of separating. Parents (mainly mothers) can apply for an exemption from this rule (domestic violence being the main reason). If this is granted, their family payments are not affected. If it is not, or the mother does not apply for the exemption within 13 weeks (there may be multiple reasons), she and her children lose 70% of their family payments (and possibly Commonwealth Rent Assistance).

Over the year September 2024-25 nearly one in five children covered by the Scheme (>170,000) failed the test.³² The recently released DSS initiated survey of single mothers found that more than 1 in 2 (53%) parents who had failed this test (known as the Maintenance Action

Test) reported they had not received any information about it at the time of being asked to apply for child support.³³ The report states that many parents experience family and domestic violence. It acknowledges women often experience “*high cognitive load and stress*”³⁴ after separation which can contribute to a failure to apply for child support or an exemption within the 13 weeks. Swinburne University research published in 2024 found that nearly 4 in 5 single mothers who responded to their survey were experiencing some form of violence at the time of separation. Despite this, only 1 in 10 women applied for an exemption from seeking child support.³⁵

“Yep, I entered into a child support agreement. I had no idea it would end up wrecking my life. Seven years later, I had finally paid off a \$20,000 debt. I stopped studying, gave up my university degree, and took a low-paid job just to survive. My credit rating was destroyed. He knew how to use the system — I didn’t...For me, child support became my downfall.”³⁶

Recommendation 11: Abolish Mutual Obligations for Victim-Survivors and Sole Mothers

- Recognise unpaid care as productive work. Until abolished:
- Extend family violence exemptions to 12 months.
- Pause obligations during school holidays.
- Count study, placements and volunteering as approved activities.
- Lift the volunteer restrictions for women under 55 years

Single parents with a youngest child as young as six are subject to Mutual Obligations (15 hours per week of “approved” activity) which force women to navigate a maze of complex requirements to receive income support. In [December 2025](#) nearly 155,000 (46% of all Parenting Payment Single recipients) were subject to the activity test.

Such regulations are incompatible with their parenting responsibilities and career aspirations, especially for those experiencing the long tail of domestic violence.

Mothers responding to the [Respect, Reform and Recovery](#) survey wanted the government to know that, in addition to managing their own recovery, they were supporting their children (who were also victim/survivors) to recover. The additional time, resources and energy are currently largely invisible to government policy and available family violence services.

Single Mother Families Australia advocates for women's nonmarket work, specifically single mothering, to be recognised as meeting the reciprocal obligations. Mothers are dedicated to creating nurturing and secure environments and are fully conscious of the economic, social, and personal benefits of participating in and securing gainful employment. Dr Summers report³⁷ stated:

The Australian Government should abolish the Mutual Obligations requirements for recipients of the Parenting Payment Single (currently imposed once the youngest child turns 6) and provide optional job training and job-seeking opportunities to those parents who want them.

The policy operates on misconceptions, and it is out of step with the [Working for Women Strategy](#) in failing to recognise the value of unpaid caregiving and the demands of intensive parenting. Eliminating mutual obligations could significantly alleviate the financial and emotional stress faced by women already fulfilling essential roles and the hard work of solo mothering.

While this policy change may necessitate legislative adjustments, it could be implemented without incurring any costs.

In responding to the [Respect](#) survey, mothers wanted the government to know that, in addition to managing their own recovery, they were supporting their children (who were also victim/survivors) to recover. The additional time, resources and energy are currently largely invisible to government policy and available family violence services.

“I volunteered with a not-for-profit organisation where I knew the people, I was building my confidence, my networks, and experience in the very place where I hoped I would find work. Then my daughter turned six...I was told I had mutual obligations, and that volunteering where I wanted to work was not in the guidelines. I needed to do more. I lost my friends. I lost my confidence. I lost an opportunity that could have helped me move into employment. The system took away something that was helping me recover.”³⁸

Recommendation 12: Recognise Unpaid Care as Violence Prevention

- Value unpaid caregiving within policy settings and recognise the critical role mothers play in supporting children’s recovery from violence.

The 2025 Swinburne University survey³⁹ supports previous research that mothers provide the bulk of unpaid care work. This is especially the case for single mothers, and even more so for single mothers who have left a violent partner. The mothers reported spending 44% of each day on unpaid care. Six in 10 had sole care (100% of overnight care) of their children; a further 25% had between 65 and 99% and only 8% had shared care with the other parent.

The research found significant numbers of dependent children were in fact adults. This confirms ABS data that in June 2025, nearly 3 in 4 were children aged under 15 years – (926,000), the single parents also cared for more than 350,00 dependent students aged 15-24 years.⁴⁰

In responding to the survey, one woman said

“We need more recognition of the incredibly hard job many women do in single parent families.”

Valuing and recognising unpaid care has been elevated through both the [Status of Women Report Card](#) and the [priority status](#) within the Working for Women Strategy. Building on these important advances, Australia should explicitly recognise unpaid care as essential social and economic infrastructure, and as a critical violence prevention measure.

Such recognition would help address long-standing policy gaps that disproportionately disadvantage single mothers and victim-survivors. This includes, but is not limited to, income support settings that fail to reflect the realities of unpaid care, such as mutual obligation requirements and the age limits attached to Parenting Payment Single. These policy settings often overlook the intensity and duration of caring responsibilities, particularly where children have disability, complex needs, trauma, or continue to experience the impacts of domestic, family and sexual violence. A more accurate recognition of unpaid care would ensure social security settings better reflect the lived realities of families and support recovery, safety, and economic security.

Recommendation 13: Strengthen Housing Affordability and Security

- Increase housing supports so women are never forced to choose between homelessness and violence.

Numerous studies, including *The Choice: Violence or Poverty*⁴¹, have found that leaving violence too often leads to homelessness (which in turn drives the return to perpetrators).

The 2024-25 Specialist Homelessness Services report found of those receiving services:

- Nearly 2 in 5 (116,5000 had experienced family and domestic violence - the largest cohort of all clients. (This has been the case for many years).
- Six in 10 clients of were females (either adults or children).
- Nearly 1 in 3 (29% or 83,700) clients were living as a single parent with one or more children when they sought support.
- More than 1 in 4 (28%) of all seeking services were children under the age of 18, nearly 1 in 6 of them were aged under 10 years.⁴²

As has been well documented, Australia has a housing affordability crisis. Single parents are at the forefront of this crisis, and the long tail of domestic violence follows many into their older years.

The proportion of single parents (not just those reliant on Parenting Payment Single) living in social housing has declined from just under 1 in 4 in 1993/4 to 1 in 10 in 2017-18.⁴³

In December 2025, 51% of single parents reliant on Parenting Payment Single rented in the private market. Despite increases in Commonwealth Rent Assistance, the gap between rent paid and help received remains significant. In December 2025, a single parent with two children paid \$400 per week in rent and received \$108 in rent assistance – leaving a gap of around \$290 per week.⁴⁴

The percentage who owned outright or were buying their own home has nearly halved from 21% in 2002 to 13% in 2025.⁴⁵ Only 4,000 single women with dependent children have been able to purchase a home assisted by the 5% Deposit Scheme since it commenced in May 2022. This is 3.2% of all women who have accessed this scheme.⁴⁶ As these women age, home ownership becomes increasingly out of reach, making them highly vulnerable to homelessness and poverty in their older years. For those reliant on the Age Pension, renters are more than five times likely to live in poverty (50%) than those who own their home (10%).⁴⁷

In responding to the [Respect](#) survey, one woman said:

*“We desperately need affordable housing. As an autistic parent, I also have an autistic child with severe anxiety. The housing department suggested I rent a room in a share house. This is incredibly unsuitable for us. Rentals are nearly DOUBLE my “affordability” and I cannot move [to a more affordable location] due to family court orders”.*⁴⁸

“The hardest part wasn’t just the homelessness—it was carrying the responsibility of keeping us safe while knowing I had exhausted every option. Every decision became about survival. Housing is more than a roof over your head. It is the foundation for

*safety, recovery and hope. Without secure housing, it is almost impossible to rebuild your life – and for us it was our set pension not keeping up with the rental market.*¹⁴⁹

Systems Reform

Recommendation 14: Recognise Mothers as Partners in Safety

- Build on the Family Law Bill 2023 by recognising mothers as partners in children's safety and recovery through a national awareness initiative. Legislative reform alone cannot undo nearly two decades of entrenched practices that discouraged women from safely disclosing family violence and seeking protection.

Negative stereotypes and undervaluing of unpaid care and single parenting deplete women at the time they, and their children, most need support. They also deter women from seeking help and enable government policies which harm, undermining the likelihood that policies will be evidence-based and improve the lives of single mothers and their children.

In response to these concerns, in 2025, Single Mother Families Australia initiated the [GIFTS of Single Motherhood](#) digital platform and the [Respect](#) survey and report to give single mothers the opportunity to speak positively and proudly about their contribution to Australian society. SMFA brought five single mothers to Canberra in August 2025 to discuss the research with the Governor General, Ministers and their advisers. Subsequent [media coverage](#), while outlining the challenges, also shone a light on the broader picture of who single mothers are.

“Single mothers are essentially the unofficial reserve army of prevention agents in this country and around the world.” –[Jess Hill](#)

Recommendation 15: Improve Access to Specialist Police Responses

- Ensure all women can easily access trauma-informed police responses and specialist domestic and family violence expertise.

Women often seek assistance from police at the point of greatest crisis, when they fear for their own safety or the safety of their children. The quality of that first response can shape immediate safety, future help-seeking and confidence in the justice system. Every woman should be able to readily identify and access specialist, trauma-informed domestic and family violence expertise when she needs it most.

Single Mother Families Australia recommends that jurisdictions make specialist domestic and family violence capability more visible and accessible by clearly identifying police stations with specialist family violence officers, dedicated investigation units or trauma-informed responses. This information should be publicly available through police websites and service directories so women can make informed decisions about where to seek assistance. Victoria established specialist Family Violence Investigation Units (FVIUs) and Family Violence Liaison Officers (FVLOs) following the Royal Commission into Family Violence. FVLOs are located at 24-hour police stations, while FVIUs provide specialist investigative responses for high-risk cases. The model also includes specialist training, intelligence analysts, court liaison officers and clinicians, supported by performance measures and continuous improvement⁵⁰.

Women should not have to navigate a postcode lottery or guess where specialist support is available when seeking safety for themselves and their children.

Recommendation 16: Establish a National Family Violence Recovery Plan

Recognise recovery as an essential phase of Australia's response to domestic and family violence by establishing a National Family Violence Recovery Plan. Ensure every woman and child affected by violence can access coordinated, trauma-informed counselling, therapeutic support and recovery services that promote long-term safety, healing and wellbeing.

Evidence provided to the Commission highlighted the importance of therapeutic interventions in victims' recovery. Therapeutic interventions that are sensitive to the trauma victims had experienced... Services that provide trauma-informed support, and which are informed by the victim's experience, are essential to responding effectively to family violence and that children recover in their own time⁵¹.

SMFA identifies the [Supporting Recovery pilot program](#) as offering evidence and the [Using a trauma- and violence-informed framework in practice](#) as emerging evidence and tools of practice.

"We need laws that clearly protect women and children from violence. The term family violence can be twisted to make the victim look like the perpetrator. We know this violence is overwhelmingly gendered, and the law should acknowledge that.

Those protections need to apply everywhere a woman seeks help or justice — in the courts, Child Protection, police, schools, hospitals and medical services. Too often, women have to tell their story over and over, only to find the system doesn't recognise the abuse or keeps treating both parents as though they are equally responsible".

Recommendation 17: Embed Lived Experience in Decision-Making

- Establish an independent national advisory group of victim-survivors to guide, monitor and strengthen implementation of the National Plan.

Women and children with lived and living experience of family, domestic and sexual violence possess unique expertise that cannot be replicated through research or professional practice alone. Their insights are essential to understanding how policies operate in practice, identifying unintended consequences, strengthening service design and ensuring government systems respond to the realities of women's and children's lives.

This recommendation is consistent with the findings of [Financial Abuse Visible: Embedding Women's and Children's Voices in Policymaking and Research](#), which recognises lived experience as a form of expertise and demonstrates that meaningful participation leads to more effective, responsive and accountable policy. Embedding lived and living experience throughout governance and implementation moves beyond consultation to genuine partnership, ensuring that those most affected by violence play an enduring role in shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

Recognising lived experience as expertise is fundamental to achieving the objectives of the National Plan and ensuring reforms are informed, effective and centered on the safety, dignity and recovery of women and children.

Recommendation 18: Expand the National Audit of Government Systems

- Audit Commonwealth, State and Territory systems to identify and remove policies and practices that unintentionally perpetuate coercive control or systems abuse.

Too often, perpetrators of family and domestic violence exploit and manipulate government systems to control, threaten or harass victim-survivors. This “systems abuse” is often part of a pattern of coercive control and financial abuse that perpetrators use to threaten, control or punish their victims. Women shoulder most unpaid care work and are most likely to be the victims of gender-based violence. These two factors alone mean women need to engage more frequently with government systems.

Single Mother Families Australia has strongly welcomed the commitment to a national audit of all Federal Government Departments and Agencies which commenced in late 2024. We have been particularly pleased that the priority has been placed on auditing the child support scheme. We believe it is imperative to extend the audit to all State and Territory Departments and Agencies.

South Australian Experience - Mutual Obligations in South Australia’s Emergency Assistance Program

People experiencing homelessness who are placed in emergency accommodation are often required to apply for a minimum number of private rental properties each week, with the required number determined by the Emergency Accommodation Program (EAP). Many women report that they are expected to apply for up to ten properties each week, despite there being very few properties within their affordable price range. For women escaping domestic and family violence, these requirements can be unrealistic, unaffordable, and disconnected from the realities of their circumstances.

Women report that these obligations are communicated verbally by caseworkers employed by the organisation managing their emergency accommodation, often with the understanding that failure to comply may result in eviction. However, clients are not provided with a written policy outlining these requirements, nor are they informed of any right to an independent review or appeal of decisions affecting their accommodation.

SMFA was contacted by a woman who questioned whether she was required to provide her bank account details to the charity managing her emergency accommodation. Shortly afterwards, in July 2026, she and her three primary school-aged children were evicted from her emergency accommodation in Adelaide. The eviction decision was made by the contracted charity and conveyed to the South Australian Housing Trust. The mother’s vehicle had previously been damaged during the domestic violence incident, further limiting her ability protect her family from the winter weather.

Recommendation 19: Commence an Inquiry into the Criminalisation of Victim-Survivors

- Establish an independent inquiry into women who have been misidentified, charged or imprisoned as perpetrators of violence within the context of domestic and family violence.

SMFA identifies the recent [Prevention Review](#) acknowledges misidentification as a national issue, and notes that improved police responses and co-responder models reduce the likelihood that the person needing protection is identified as the predominant aggressor. Any inquiry or review should be undertaken in genuine partnership with those who have long advocated for justice for incarcerated women and girls. Their expertise, together with the lived and living experience of women directly affected, is essential to understanding the systemic drivers of criminalisation and developing reforms that are effective, informed and just.

Recommendation 20. Strengthen Legislation Process and Outcomes

Embed a mandatory Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Safety by Design lens within Commonwealth Gender Impact Assessments.

If Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Safety by Design and gender impact assessments were consistently applied to legislation, policy and program design, government decision-making would be better equipped to identify unintended harm before implementation, resulting in safer and more effective outcomes.

For example, the [third-party verification](#) that forced thousands of welfare recipients – the majority of whom were single mothers – to get a witness to verify their relationship status, which gave surveillance over their lives. Or the tens of thousands of women with babies and very young children may not have experienced the harm caused by the ParentsNext program had its impacts been properly assessed through a family violence and gender lens, a program that the Minister for Women [identified](#) as one that was ‘akin to coercive control’

Similarly, current employment services continue to create barriers for many women recovering from family and domestic violence. Women transitioning back into paid employment through volunteering, study or gradual workforce participation—particularly those under 55 who rely on income support—remain at risk of payment suspension due to short-term, complex and administratively burdensome family violence exemptions. Likewise, pausing mutual obligations during school holidays should not simply be viewed as an administrative adjustment. School holidays often coincide with increased parenting demands, reduced support networks and heightened conflict with former partners. Recognising these periods as times of increased vulnerability would better support women's safety, recovery and long-term workforce participation.

Embedding Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Safety by Design and gender impact assessments across government would help ensure that future policies promote safety, support recovery and avoid creating unintended barriers for women and children.

Recommendation 21: Embed Professional Excellence and Accountability Across the Family Law System

Establish an independent professional standards and peer review framework for professionals working within the family law system, recognising that decisions made by judges, Independent

Children's Lawyers, family report writers and other court-appointed experts have profound and enduring impacts on the safety, well-being and futures of women and children. SMFA would also welcome transparent pricing standards for court-appointed and expert services to ensure consistency, quality and public confidence in the family law system.

Family law professionals, including judges, Independent Children's Lawyers, family report writers and court-appointed experts, exercise significant authority over decisions that profoundly affect the lives of women and children. These decisions influence safety, recovery, child development and family relationships, often with lifelong consequences.

Other professions exercising comparable levels of responsibility, including medicine, psychology and social work, operate within established professional excellence frameworks that include standards, continuing professional development, reflective supervision, peer review and quality assurance. These mechanisms are designed not only to maintain public confidence, but to promote learning, consistency and continuous improvement.

While important reforms are underway to strengthen the competency and accountability of family report writers⁵², there remains an opportunity to establish a broader professional excellence framework across the family law system. Such a framework should support evidence-informed practice, trauma-informed decision-making, reflective practice, peer review, continuing professional development and appropriate accountability mechanisms. The objective is not to undermine professional independence, but to strengthen public confidence and ensure that decisions with profound consequences for children and families are informed by the highest professional standards.

Recommendation 22.1: Trial a Child Support Guarantee for Victim-Survivors of Family Violence

Implement the recommendation of the From Conflict to Cooperation – Inquiry into the Child Support Program by undertaking a dedicated trial of a Child Support Guarantee for women and children who are entitled to child support but are unable to safely pursue or receive payments under the current system. Consistent with the Inquiry's recommendation, the Australian Government should:

- examine the social and economic impacts of limited child support guarantee systems operating in other jurisdictions;
- undertake modelling to assess the feasibility of introducing a limited guarantee within the Australian context; and
- conduct a targeted trial for a defined cohort of vulnerable families.

SMFA recommends that the trial focus on women and children experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence. The trial should be co-designed with women with lived experience and provide a genuine alternative pathway for receiving child support where direct collection from the liable parent creates safety risks.

Currently, women face an impossible choice: pursue child support and potentially expose themselves and their children to ongoing coercion, abuse and systems abuse, or forgo child support altogether to protect their safety. This binary approach fails to recognise the long tail of domestic and family violence and places the financial burden of safety on victim-survivors.

A Child Support Guarantee trial would test whether the government can safely assume an intermediary role, providing the financial payment children are entitled to while reducing opportunities for perpetrators to use child support as a mechanism of coercive control. Without such an alternative, the current system perversely rewards the parent who chooses to use violence by enabling them to avoid their financial responsibilities while the victim-survivor bears the economic consequences.

The trial would provide an evidence base for future reform and assess whether a Child Support Guarantee improves safety, financial security, child wellbeing and compliance, while reducing opportunities for post-separation abuse through the child support system.

Recommendation 22.2: Improve Transparency and Consistency of Evidence Requirements Across Government Systems

Establish a nationally consistent approach to evidence requirements for women accessing Commonwealth-funded services, government systems and income support following domestic, family and sexual violence.

Women seeking safety are often required to repeatedly prove their experiences to multiple agencies, each with different evidentiary requirements and assessment processes. This duplication creates unnecessary administrative burdens, delays access to support, increases the risk of re-traumatisation, and fails to recognise the realities of crisis, coercive control and post-separation abuse. Many women flee violence without access to personal documents or the capacity to repeatedly gather evidence.

The Australian Government should develop a common evidence framework across Commonwealth agencies and Commonwealth-funded programs, including contracted services such as the Leaving Violence Program. The framework should provide clear, transparent and consistent evidence requirements that recognise the circumstances of victim-survivors and minimise unnecessary duplication.

Where a woman has already provided evidence to one government agency or Commonwealth-funded service, that evidence should, with her informed consent, be able to be securely shared or accepted for other eligible Commonwealth programs. Women should not be required to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences or obtain multiple versions of the same documentation to access support.

A consistent, trauma-informed evidence framework would:

- reduce administrative burden and delays;
- minimise re-traumatisation;
- improve timely access to financial and practical support;
- reduce barriers for women who have limited access to personal documentation; and
- promote greater transparency, consistency and fairness across government systems.

This reform would support a more coordinated, victim-centred service system that recognises the cumulative impact of domestic, family and sexual violence and ensures government processes contribute to recovery rather than becoming another source of harm.

Appendix: Lived Experience Testimonies provided to SMFA for this submission and grouped by Recommendations

Recognise the Long Tail of Domestic and Family Violence

"My beautiful adult daughter is expecting her first baby—the first grandchild in our family. It should be one of the happiest times of our lives.

Instead, she is having nightmares. She keeps asking, 'What if something happens and the system harms my baby the way it harmed me?'

As a family, we knew she had been physically abused. We reported it. We tried to protect her. Yet she was still required to spend time with the person who had hurt her. The system saw contact; we saw fear.

The violence ended many years ago, but its impacts did not."

Protect Women's and Children's Right to Relocate

"I left my relationship because I believed it was the only way to keep myself and my son safe. I didn't leave with a legal strategy or a relocation plan—I left to survive.

During my relationship, the violence escalated from verbal abuse and threats to physical violence, sexual assault, escalating alcohol abuse and threats to kill me. There was also an unregistered rifle in the home. By the time I left, I genuinely feared for my life.

I had no local support. I was living in a small rural community, isolated from my family, who lived more than two hours away. Like many women escaping domestic violence, I needed to relocate to access safety, family support, housing and the opportunity to rebuild our lives.

Instead, I was ordered to return to the area where the violence had occurred because I had not formally sought permission to relocate before fleeing. The Court focused on restoring the status quo rather than recognising the reality that women escaping violence are thinking about survival—not legal procedures.

Returning has allowed the abuse to continue through the family law system. My former partner has used ongoing court proceedings and financial abuse to maintain control. Although I am employed, I cannot afford the significant legal costs required to pursue a final relocation application. My safety has become dependent on how long I can endure the legal process rather than the level of risk I face.

Since separation, my former partner has been arrested and charged on multiple occasions, with numerous criminal matters before the Court. There have also been breaches of protection orders. Despite these developments, I continue to live close to the person I believe may eventually take my life.

Our son has also been exposed to violence. I was assaulted while holding him as a baby, and he has since suffered injuries while in his father's care. I remain deeply concerned about his ongoing safety and wellbeing.

Recovery from domestic and family violence is impossible when you are required to remain close to the person who abused you. Relocation is not about preventing a child from having a relationship with a parent. It is about creating enough physical and emotional distance to recover, reconnect with family and support networks, secure housing and employment, and give children the opportunity to heal.

The family law system should not require women and children to choose between complying with Parenting Orders and achieving safety. It should recognise that separation is often the beginning of the most dangerous period, and that relocation can be a critical part of recovery from the long tail of domestic and family violence."

Protect Children from Ongoing Exposure to Family Violence

"Before Parenting Orders were made, my child's primary school and the local police worked together to help keep us safe. They understood the risks, communicated well, and were clear about the steps needed to protect us. For the first time in years, we were beginning to feel safe.

I believed that obtaining Parenting Orders would strengthen those protections. Instead, it had the opposite effect.

The Parenting Orders gave my former partner access to school events and required him to be included in school records and decision-making. Almost overnight, the certainty that the school and police had about how to respond disappeared. Staff were no longer clear where his legal rights ended and our safety began.

The result was that the sense of safety we had slowly rebuilt over two and a half years was lost. We returned to living in a constant state of hypervigilance, worrying every time a familiar car drove past or he appeared unexpectedly.

I live with profound regret that seeking Parenting Orders—believing they would protect us—ultimately reduced the practical protections that had been keeping us safe. My experience demonstrates how Parenting Orders can unintentionally override established safety measures, creating uncertainty for schools, police and other professionals who are trying to protect women and children.

Family law orders should strengthen existing safety arrangements, not undermine them. Government systems must work together so that Parenting Orders do not inadvertently increase risk or compromise the safety of victim-survivors and their children."

Parenting matters should not be dealt with in the Family Court. They should be handled through state-based courts or a specialist tribunal, with stronger powers under state family violence legislation, including Intervention Orders and section 68R orders. Women shouldn't have to choose between protecting their children and navigating a system that fails to understand
Additional Testimony

"My pre-school child has been repeatedly exposed to arrangements that have caused significant distress and developmental regression. Despite consistently raising concerns about his wellbeing, the focus remained on maintaining contact rather than assessing whether those arrangements were safe or in his best interests.

Court-ordered contact continued despite clear evidence that my child was struggling. Following visits, he experienced toileting regression, emotional dysregulation, aggression, prolonged refusal to leave the house and significant attachment difficulties that affected his ability to attend preschool. These were not isolated incidents—they became a pattern.

When I raised these concerns with my legal representatives and the Court, I felt they were minimised or dismissed. I was advised to downplay my concerns because they were unlikely to influence the outcome. Rather than viewing my child's responses as possible indicators of trauma, they were treated as obstacles to facilitating contact.

The family report process was itself traumatising. My child became visibly distressed and did not want to separate from me, yet the process continued despite his clear fear and emotional distress. The experience reinforced my belief that compliance with process was prioritised over my child's immediate wellbeing.

My experience highlights a significant gap within the family law system. Evidence of trauma and developmental regression should be treated as central to assessing a child's best interests, not secondary to maintaining parenting arrangements. Children's responses to fear and distress should be recognised as important evidence, and the voices of protective parents should be carefully considered rather than dismissed.

No child should experience further harm because systems designed to protect them fail to recognise the impacts of trauma or the long tail of domestic and family violence."

Recognise and Respond to Litigation Abuse

"In my experience, litigation abuse is rarely recognised as a form of domestic and family violence. Instead, it is commonly reframed as parental conflict or a difficult separation.

While the abuse within my relationship was devastating, what has caused the greatest long-term harm has been experiencing legal processes that unintentionally enabled the abuse to continue. Court proceedings became another avenue through which control could be exercised. Repeated applications, procedural disputes and parallel legal actions prolonged the litigation, increased financial pressure and forced ongoing contact. Rather than being recognised as patterns of coercive control, these behaviours were treated as ordinary litigation.

Protection orders and my efforts to de-escalate conflict were later used to undermine my credibility. Trauma responses such as delayed disclosure, fragmented memory and a focus on protecting my child were often interpreted as inconsistency rather than recognised as the impacts of family violence.

I also experienced significant power imbalances throughout the process. Victim-survivors are often restricted in the material they can file, while those with greater financial resources can prolong proceedings, commission expert reports and respond extensively to every application.

Challenging inaccurate or misleading evidence is often beyond the financial capacity of many women.

The family law system is designed to resolve disputes, but it is not well equipped to identify when legal processes themselves become a continuation of coercive control. Litigation abuse is rarely viewed as abuse unless there is clear objective evidence of a breach. The cumulative pattern of intimidation, financial pressure and procedural control often goes unrecognised.

The cost extends far beyond the courtroom. It affects mental health, financial security, trust in institutions and the ability to recover from violence. For many victim-survivors, the abuse does not end when the relationship ends—it continues through the legal system itself.

Recognising litigation abuse as a form of systems abuse is essential if the family law system is to genuinely prioritise the safety, recovery and long-term wellbeing of women and children.”

Second testimony

“My young son and I endured years of abuse while living with the perpetrator. When I finally left, I believed the abuse would end. Instead, it changed form.

Seven years after separation, the perpetrator continues to exert a profound and destructive influence over almost every aspect of our lives. Today, that control is exercised primarily through systems and litigation abuse.

The perpetrator has legal convictions and continues to engage in dangerous behaviour. Despite this, he and members of his family have been able to use repeated court proceedings and adversarial legal processes to keep us trapped in ongoing conflict. I cannot agree to arrangements that I believe are unsafe for my son, leaving me with no choice but to defend us again and again through proceedings that take years to resolve.

The litigation has become a weapon. False allegations, repeated applications and prolonged legal disputes are used to wear me down emotionally, psychologically and financially. I spend countless hours responding to inaccurate claims instead of rebuilding our lives. The stress has taken a significant toll on my mental health, and I have been unable to return to work. As a result, my son and I have been pushed into financial hardship.

The greatest loss has been my son's childhood. Instead of being free to heal after domestic and family violence, he has grown up in the shadow of ongoing legal conflict. This is not because of genuine parenting concerns, but because current systems allow perpetrators to continue exercising control long after separation.

The abuse did not end when the relationship ended—it continued through the legal system. Government has the power to change this. Stronger safeguards against systems and litigation abuse are essential to prevent court processes from becoming another tool of coercive control. Women and children should be able to recover from violence, not spend years defending themselves against it.”

Introduce a Family Violence Safety Supplement

"During COVID, my income support increased for a short time. It wasn't a lot, but it changed everything.

I used the extra money to repair our old campervan because I knew that when the payments stopped, we would be homeless again. You can't couch surf with children—it isn't safe, and child protection steps in. But at the same time, there simply isn't enough money to afford a rental.

I left my job, my home and my family to keep my son safe. Protecting him became my full-time job. Without that temporary increase in support, I don't know where we would be today.

I try to turn our desperation and constant search for safety into an adventure for my son. Sometimes I succeed. Sometimes I don't.

What I want government to understand is that a small increase in income support can make an enormous difference. It creates options. It gives you enough breathing room to plan, to act, to secure housing and to keep your children safe. Financial security is safety.

Women should not have to choose between escaping violence and homelessness. Safety should not be a lonely job, and it should not depend on extraordinary resilience alone."

End the Weaponisation of Child Support

"Yep, I entered into a child support agreement. I had no idea it would end up wrecking my life.

Seven years later, I had finally paid off a \$20,000 debt. I stopped studying, gave up my university degree, and took a low-paid job just to survive. My credit rating was destroyed. He knew how to use the system — I didn't.

I started reading about child support afterwards. It is finally being talked about in the media, but I want women to be warned: do not enter into the system; it is unsafe.

For me, child support became my downfall."

Abolish Mutual Obligations for Victim-Survivors and Sole Mothers

I am praying for mutual obligations to end. I volunteered with a not-for-profit organisation where I knew the people, I knew they would support me, and importantly, I was giving something back. I was building my confidence, my networks, and experience in the very place where I hoped I would find work.

Then my daughter turned six, and it all stopped. It did not matter that my file showed we were recovering from violence. It did not matter that this volunteering was part of rebuilding our lives.

I was told I had mutual obligations, and that volunteering where I wanted to work was not in the guidelines. I needed to do more. I lost my friends. I lost my confidence. I lost an opportunity that could have helped me move into employment.

The system took away something that was helping me recover."

Strengthen Housing Affordability and Security

My story is probably like thousands of others. The rent went up, my landlord increased it again, and my pension simply didn't keep pace. I reached the point where there was nowhere left to cut back.

One of my acts of desperation was searching for a cheap car – for carbon monoxide.

I had no home, no hope and no money. I also had an adult child who still depended on me. People often ask what happens to children when families face poverty, what happens when the system has completely broken the mum, and we have run out of answers. Well, this tells you.

The hardest part wasn't just the homelessness—it was carrying the responsibility of keeping us safe while knowing I had exhausted every option. Every decision became about survival.

Housing is more than a roof over your head. It is the foundation for safety, recovery and hope. Without secure housing, it is almost impossible to rebuild your life – and for us it was our set pension not keeping up with the rental market.

Recognise Mothers as Partners in Safety

“Through my conversations with mothers across Australia, there is a growing and consistent concern that some perpetrators are able to manipulate family law and related government systems to continue coercive control after separation. Some of the mums that I talk to report that, despite there being no child protection concerns, no findings of domestic or family violence against them, and often no adverse history of any kind, their efforts to protect their children can be reframed and used against them in parenting proceedings. This creates a profound fear that raising legitimate safety concerns may itself place a mother's relationship with her children at risk.

Endnotes

¹ A selection of these testimonies can be found in the Appendix and excerpts from them can be found in the body of this submission.

² [The Choice: Violence or Poverty, 2023](#).

³ [ABS Labour Force Status of Families, June 2025](#).

⁴ [DSS Demographics](#), December 2025.

⁵ [Respect, Reform and Recovery](#), Swinburne University's survey of 2,600 single parents published in August 2025.

⁶ Respondent to survey underpinning [Respect, Reform and Recovery](#).

⁷ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences for this submission, July 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.

⁸ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences with the Family Court following FDV, January 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.

⁹ [Australian Family Law Court Decisions about Relocation: Parents' Experiences and Some Implications for Law and Policy](#), January 2025. Juliet Behrens and Bruce Smyth.

¹⁰ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences with the Family Court following FDV, January 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.

¹¹ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences for this submission, July 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.

¹² [The Court convenes national roundtable discussions on domestic and family violence](#), Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, 2024.

¹³ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences with the Family Court following FDV, January 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.

¹⁴ [Ten to Men](#), Australian Institute of Family Studies, July 2026.

¹⁵ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences with the Family Court following FDV, January 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.

¹⁶ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences for this submission, July 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.

¹⁷ [Family Law for the Future - An Inquiry into the Family Law System](#), Family Law Reform Commission, March 2019.

¹⁸ [Parliamentary inquiry into a better family law system to support and protect those affected by family violence](#), Chapter 4, 2017.

¹⁹ It can also provide safety planning, risk assessment and referrals to other services for up to 12 weeks.

²⁰ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences for this submission, July 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.

²¹ [Child Poverty in Australia](#), November 2025.

²² [Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee 2026 Report](#).

²³ [Breaking Down Barriers Report 1](#), Melbourne Institute, 2020.

²⁴ [DSS Demographics](#), December 2025.

²⁵ [Survey of Separated Parents](#) – Report prepared for the Department of Social Services on parents' experience with the interaction between Family Tax Benefit and the Child Support Program, Social Research Centre, May 2025. (Released June 2026).

²⁶ December 2025 Government data reported in the [Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee 2026 Report](#).

²⁷ The [Commonwealth Ombudsman's report \(2025\)](#), the [Inspector-General of Taxation's report \(2025\)](#) and the report of the [Parliamentary Inquiry into the Financial Services Regulatory Framework in Relation to Financial Abuse \(2024\)](#).

²⁸ See [SMFA Family Payments and Child Support](#), 20/8/25 and [SMFA So Many Ways to Lose](#), [Child Support Brief](#), 31/3/25 for further details.

²⁹ [Fembot Debt: Data injustices, child support and family tax benefit debts](#), Swinburne University of Technology, April 2026.

³⁰ [Survey of Separated Parents](#).

³¹ Government data reported in the [Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee 2026 Report](#).

³² [Child Support Program Data](#), September 2025. 173,00 children is 18% of all children active in the scheme (960,665) at that time.

³³ [Fembot Debt: Data injustices, child support and family tax benefit debts](#), Swinburne University of Technology, 20 April 2026 found three quarters (76%) of respondents were experiencing family violence at the time of the survey. Only 37% of these women had obtained an exemption from the requirement to take action to receive child support.

³⁴ *"Including taking primary and often full care for their children, caring for a newborn, moving house, temporary experiences of homelessness or refugees, financial difficulties, or finding new employment."*

³⁵ [Opening the Black Box of Child Support: Shining a Light on How Financial Abuse Is Perpetrated](#), 2024. It also found more than half were unaware that failure to apply for child support or seek an exemption would result in the loss of around 70% of their family payments.

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- ³⁶ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences for this submission, July 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.
- ³⁷ [The Choice: Violence or Poverty, 2023.](#)
- ³⁸ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences for this submission, July 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.
- ³⁹ [Respect, Reform and Recovery.](#)
- ⁴⁰ [ABS Labour Force Status of Families, June 2025.](#)
- ⁴¹ [The Choice: Violence or Poverty, 2023.](#)
- ⁴² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [Homelessness and Homelessness Services](#), December 2025.
- ⁴³ [The declining wellbeing of sole parents in Australia in the 21st century - Life Course Centre](#), October 2025.
- ⁴⁴ [DSS Demographics](#) December 2025, figures are all median.
- ⁴⁵ [FACS Annual Report 2001-02](#) and [DSS Demographics](#) December 2025.
- ⁴⁶ [Women's Budget Statement 2026-27.](#)
- ⁴⁷ [Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is affected?](#) ACOSS/UNSW.
- ⁴⁸ [Respect, Reform and Recovery.](#)
- ⁴⁹ Woman responding to SMFA request for experiences for this submission, July 2026. Name deleted for safety reasons.
- ⁵⁰ [Safe from Harm: How we respond to family violence, sexual offences and child abuse, 2024 – 2026](#), Victoria Police.
- ⁵¹ Royal Commission Final Report. Volume IV – Chapter 21: Recovery: Health and Wellbeing.
- ⁵² [Improving the competency and accountability of family report writers](#), Attorney General, 2023.