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“You feel like an individual who matters”- the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars framework: its impact on the recovery and healing of victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence

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Abstract

Violence against women and children is widespread, and we must develop effective, holistic interventions to support victim-survivors' recovery and healing. While there are some interventions that address single or multiple areas that impact the wellbeing of victim-survivors, the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars framework offers a holistic approach to improve the social, legal, health, housing and financial wellbeing of survivors. This evaluation used focus groups to examine the impact of this model by asking victim-survivors for their perspectives on the support they had received. Using reflexive thematic analysis, eight themes were created that described the Beyond DV model of care. The findings of this qualitative study show the need for a holistic, integrated, trauma- and violence-informed intervention to improve the overall wellbeing of people impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence. It is imperative to provide ongoing care to support victim-survivors' long-term recovery and healing.

Introduction

With domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) being a global public health issue, we require evidence-based interventions to address women's experiences of this violence. The most recent statistics worldwide suggest that one woman or young girl is killed every 10 minutes by a family member [1]. With over 736 million women and girls over the age of 15 years experiencing physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or family member [2], there is a vociferous call to intervene to reduce

and eliminate these statistics. In some statistics and the extant literature, domestic violence or intimate partner violence refers to physical, sexual or psychological harm caused by a current or former partner [3], while family violence is attributed to violence by an intimate partner or family members [4], and sexual violence, which occurs in the context of families or external people who commit different types of forced or non-consensual sexual assault [5]. In Australia, the statistics parallel the global figures, with approximately 3.9 million women having experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15 years [6]. The impacts of DFSV reverberate across the Australian national economy with estimates suggesting that the economic cost for one year of violence against women and their children was \$22 billion approximately

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[7]. The gravity of this crisis is acknowledged across policy and decision-making frameworks.

One such global framework is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ensuring a safe and gender equitable society is upheld through the prioritisation of health and wellbeing in SDG3; gender equality and empowerment in SDG5; and, elimination of violence against women and reduced inequalities in SDG 10 [8]. Similarly, in Australia, the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* (The National Plan) provides an overarching framework across all systems in the country to address prevention, early intervention, response and recovery and healing and end gender-based violence in one generation [4].

The impact of DFSV on victim-survivors' lives is multifaceted, with challenges experienced in mental health (such as depression, anxiety, post traumatic symptomatology), physical health (such as chronic pain, memory loss, gastrointestinal problems, sexually transmitted infections and diseases, gynaecological complications, traumatic brain injuries), interpersonal relationships, financial status, housing, criminal justice systems, and educational and employment opportunities [9–13].

Most preventative and interpretive responses have tended to focus on symptom reduction and distress alleviation [14]. Funding is also typically allocated to crisis intervention. However, the support of long-term recovery of victim-survivors has largely been under researched and underfunded. Recovery from DFSV is multidimensional and complex, encompassing various dimensions and pathways. The goals, processes and facilitators of recovery are likely to differ across individuals. The *National Plan* defines recovery as “an ongoing process that enables victim-survivors to be safe, healthy and resilient and to have economic security and post-traumatic growth” [4]. Emerging evidence on recovery and healing has identified certain components of recovery to include physical safety, processing of trauma, managing negative emotions (or building positive emotions), reconnection with self, building hope and safety and sharing with others (advocacy, activism or peer support networks) and future planning [14–17]. Researchers and practitioners are in consensus that victim-survivors' recovery from DFSV is a unique, continuous, non-linear, and iterative process.

Interventions to support recovery and healing

The pathway to healing and recovery from DFSV includes immediate and practical support such as health, housing, legal, advocacy and/or crisis counselling assistance [18, 19]. In the moderate and long-term, victim survivors require support to navigate the trauma of DFSV, which includes changed perceptions of self, difficulty in social connection, somatic concerns, hypervigilance, avoidance,

and depressive and anxious symptoms [20]. Indeed, mental health [21], housing, legal and financial needs are likely to be chronic and continuous and therefore, interventions should be holistic, wrapped around survivor needs, and offer multiple points of service entry for emerging needs [20, 22].

Some research shows that the most effective interventions to aid recovery are those that are holistic or integrated [23, 24]. For instance, a realist review of psychosocial interventions found that trauma and violence informed multi-layered interventions that cater to the unique, complex and evolving needs of victim-survivors have been found to be the most effective [25]. The same study identified components of interventions that yield the most favourable results. These included access to economic and social welfare provisions, enhanced safety perception and planning, increased knowledge and awareness about DFSV, improved self-efficacy, self-concept and assertiveness, better emotional regulation skills and improved interpersonal relationships. It is therefore imperative to prioritise the development and evaluation of trauma-informed and holistic/multi-component interventions that extend beyond mere symptom alleviation in women, fostering their recovery and supporting their long-term healing trajectories. Holistic models comprising multiple domains include emerging pilot projects such as the *Maison des Femmes* centres in France [26], the supporting recovery pilot by the Australian government [27] and the Illawarra Women's Trauma Recovery Centre [28]. However, there is a paucity of such interventions and their evaluations.

With the research demonstrating that recovery is multifaceted and mandates a multistakeholder and multilevel response, we need to explore different models that provide such holistic support. In Australia, one such model is the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars framework. Beyond DV is a registered charity with the Australian Charity and Not-for-profits Commission and community focused organisation in Queensland, Australia that provides free psychosocial support to women, children and non-binary persons who have experienced DFSV. It operates as a one-stop-shop hub of three Recovery Centres and a Hope Hub in Brisbane, Queensland Australia. The Beyond DV model for stands on five pillars including: social connection, legal support, health support, housing support, and financial rebuilding [29, Fig. 1]. Under the pillar of social support, Beyond DV aims to foster peer support, remove social isolation, rebuild familial relationships and build confidence, resilience and hope. Legal support entails affordable, high quality legal representation and support from the police. The pillar of health includes trauma-informed counselling, group therapy, wellbeing programs and access to women's health services including dental health. Housing support provides short-term

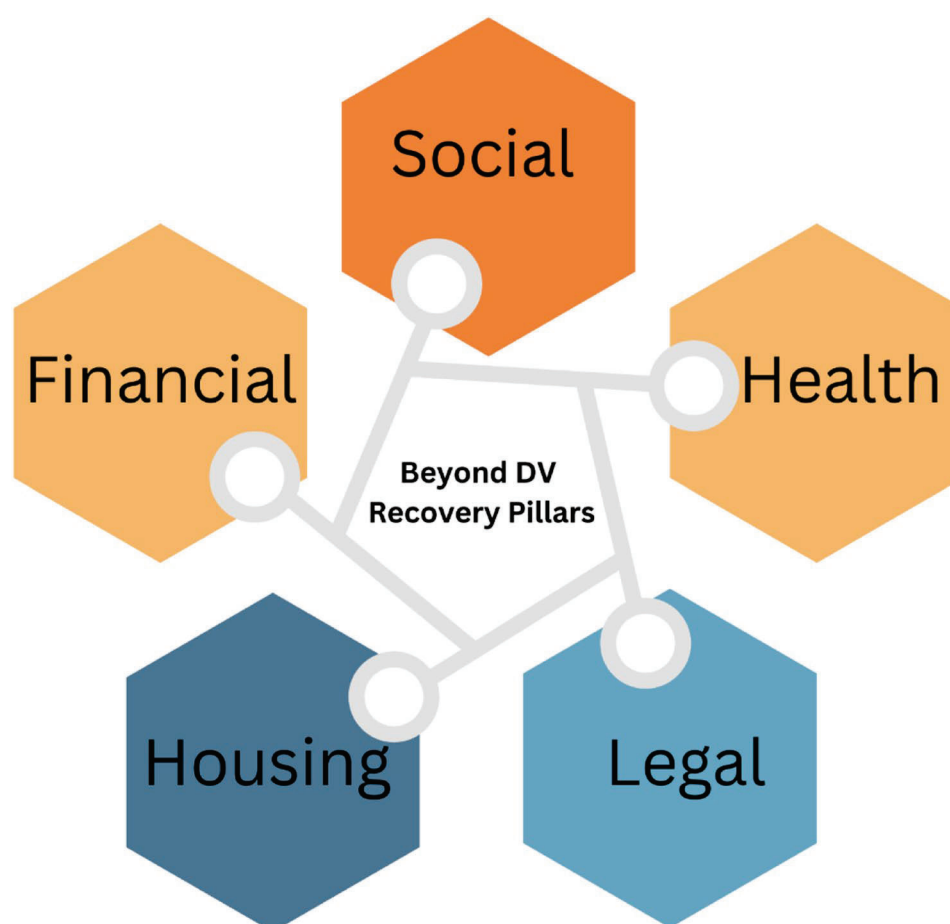


Fig. 1 The Beyond DV Recovery Pillars for victim-survivors

housing options, support with tenancy, and proximity to wrap around services. Finally, financial rebuilding, as a pillar, consists of financial counselling, debt minimisation, financial literacy and financial independence. The programs that support each Pillar are listed in Table 1. Beyond DV also offers ongoing support to women through regular meetups and online counselling groups. This long-term engagement is to accommodate any further emerging needs that victim-survivors may have even after they have completed programs. Other supports offered at Beyond DV include survivor advocacy, training programs and preventative programs such as a podcasts, teen relationship apps, and information awareness campaigns. Finally, Beyond DV recognises that women are often the primary carers for children and their holistic recovery must, therefore, include children. Beyond DV's programs for children and young people have included social activities, individual and group therapy sessions, weekly homework clubs and a community play group.

This study focuses on Beyond DV's five pillars of recovery for adult victim-survivors. The research question was: what is the impact of a multi-level intervention on the recovery and healing of victim-survivors of domestic

abuse? The specific objectives of this study were to evaluate the impact of the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars Framework on the mental, social, and overall wellbeing of adult victim-survivors of DFSV.

Method Design

This study utilised a qualitative methodology where we conducted focus groups with victim-survivors of DFSV who had all received one or more interventions from the support service, Beyond DV in Queensland, Australia. Participants were asked to reflect on the support they had received from the Beyond DV interventions and the impact of this on their recovery and healing. The project was approved by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (reference number: 2024/HE000268). The project was conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023).

Participants

The inclusion criteria were that participants had to: (a) self-identify as a victim-survivor of DFSV; (b) had

Table 1 Programs under the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars framework

Social support	Health support	Legal support	Housing support	Financial rebuilding
Weekly Time Out peer support morning teas	Five free individual trauma-informed counselling sessions	Pro bono legal advice	Hannah's Sanctuary- transitional housing complex for women and their children that can be accessed for a maximum of 18 months	First Steps New Skills – eight-week program targeting job readiness and IT* skill development
Community Connect-online support group	Pathways to Wellbeing – four-week strengths-based group therapy Shark Cage framework-eight-week group therapy focusing on boundary setting Allied health support such as dental and women's health services Trauma-informed yoga SOS self-defence classes	Question and answer session with legal practitioners Visits by Queensland police Advocacy and court support Partnerships with Legal Aid and Victim Assist	Short term accommodation Advocacy and letters of support Collaborations with external housing providers Visits from tenancy support services	Reach into Retail- seven-week program training women who want to work in retail Bridging the IT Gap- four-week foundational program for training in Microsoft Office Build your Own Business- Cert 4 small business and entrepreneurship Barista training- two-day training Pathways to Hope- additional wrap-around support

received support or were currently receiving support from Beyond DV; b) be 18 years or over; c) have sufficient English language skills to partake in the focus group; and d) provided informed consent to participate in the focus group. The exclusion criteria were participants who were: (a) under 18 years of age; and (b) had not accessed any service at Beyond DV.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through existing support programs of Beyond DV and through the promotion of the project on the Beyond DV website and newsletters. While Beyond DV promoted the project within their organisation, there was no coercion of their clients to participate in this study. Participants needed to contact the research team directly to indicate their interest and provide consent to partaking in the study; they were not identifiable to the service organisation; and they were informed that they would continue to receive services whether or not they chose to take part in the study; and that their participation or lack thereof will not affect the quality and nature of services they receive. Victim-survivors in the focus groups were paid for their efforts to participate and contribute to the study with a voucher of AUD\$50.

Data collection

A semi-structured focus group protocol that was specifically developed for the purposes of this study (Supplementary file 1) was utilised to facilitate the group discussions. This included questions about the participants' DFSV related help seeking experiences, the intervention and recovery programs in which they participated, and the impact of the support programs on their recovery and healing, including their social, legal, financial, mental health and housing support.

Two focus group discussions were held with a total of 20 participants in 2024. One of these took place in-person at the Hope Hub in Queensland, Australia ($n = 17$) while the other was held online on the Zoom platform ($n = 3$). Women ranged in age from 19 to 60 years and came from Anglo-Saxon and ethnically diverse communities. 17 of the participants had children. A Distress Protocol that included a range of procedures to alleviate distress for participants was utilised. Both focus groups were conducted in English by an expert researcher and psychologist, LS and this lasted approximately 1–2 h. All participants were provided with a Plain Language Statement and consent form and then gave either written or verbal consent prior to their participation. The focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' consent. To ensure participants' safety, no identifying information was recorded. All participants were made aware about the voluntary nature of their participation and cautioned about the potential distress in advance. Furthermore, the focus group protocol did not include questions about the nature of the abuse participants had experienced. In addition to these measures, LS, an experienced psychologist, was available to alleviate immediate distress during and post the focus groups. Participants could also access additional support at Beyond DV or externally via a resource list that was provided to them with contact

Table 2 Examples of codes, preliminary themes and final theme generation

Codes	Preliminary themes	Final theme
Individually tailored and flexible intervention	Feeling believed and valued	Support with compassion, dignity and care
Client autonomy prioritised	Caring attitude of practitioners	
Developing a sense of safety and trust	Person centred care	
Acceptance and care		

information of statewide and national helplines and DFSV violence service organisations.

Data analysis

The focus groups were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed by AS and LS using Braun and Clarke’s reflexive thematic analysis [30, 31]. The audio-recordings and the transcripts were perused multiple times to ensure familiarisation with the data. This was followed by creating codes and initial themes from the data. The next steps included reviewing the themes, refining and finalising them. An example of the analysis process is provided in Table 2. In line with reflexivity, the coding and the theme-creation processes involved ongoing discussions about researchers’ values and experiences and how they interacted with the data. Data analysis was enriched by the iterative and collaborative process wherein researchers upheld the spirit of shared and deliberate meaning-making of divergent themes through regular collaborative meetings. All authors identified as heterosexual women with extensive professional experiences in the DFSV sector in the roles of psychologists, researchers, teachers and heads of organisations. Additionally, lived experience of

DFSV and immigration among the research team shaped the interpretative process though sensitivity to and recognition of the impact of DFSV, the barriers to help-seeking, the non-linear nature of recovery and healing, the unique and diverse needs yet similar needs of women.

Results

The final set of themes created after coding the transcripts using reflexive thematic analysis is presented in Fig. 2. The findings, explained in the ensuing sections, show that participants benefited across a range of recovery and healing domains through the Beyond DV interventions.

Holistic and person-centred interventions

The women in this study had accessed multiple services and programs at Beyond DV. These included housing, social support, legal referrals, goal-setting, counselling, self-esteem development, and financial empowerment programs. They had also undertaken vocational skill-building programs such as barista training, teacher and business admin training, community service training, and teacher-aid training. Other overall self-esteem and confidence development programs that were accessed were ‘Reach into Retail’, ‘Bridging the IT Gap’, ‘Time out’ and events like ‘Dress to Express’.

While participants had accessed multiple services in the past, they continued to access programs that aligned with their emerging recovery needs. They also became involved in the programs and services to feel less isolated and more connected with their peers, that is, other women who they felt could understand their recovery journey and with whom they had formed friendships through the various programs. An example of this ongoing engagement is: “pretty much, if I’ve got spare time

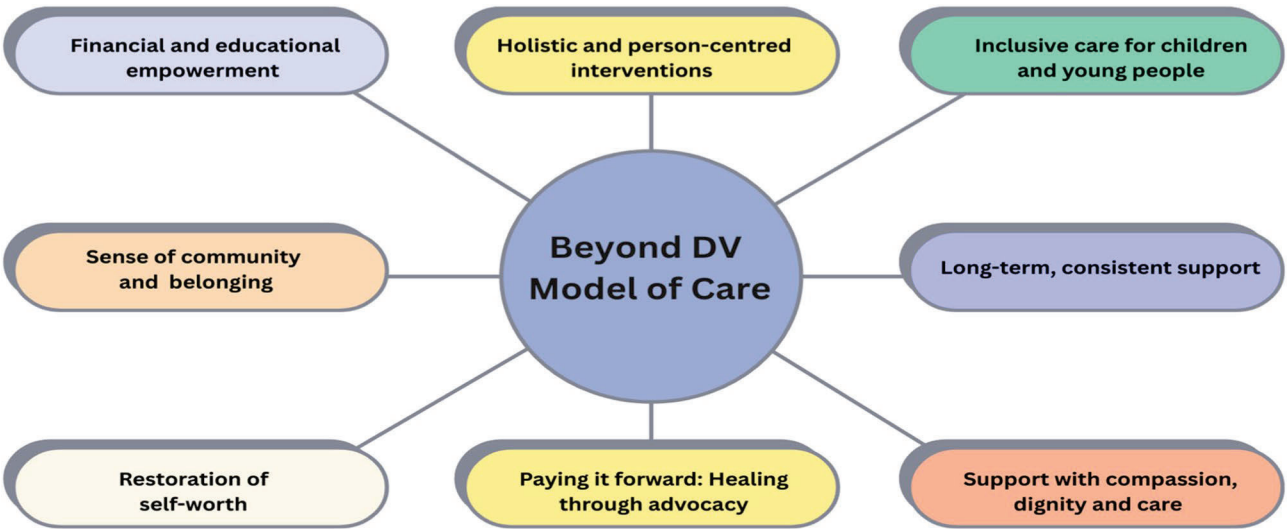


Fig. 2 The Beyond DV Model of Care: themes developed from the focus group discussions

and I'm available, I'll be down there [Beyond DV]. I'll make the most of every opportunity." Another participant emphasised their ongoing involvement through different skill-development programs:

The IT workshops...like the stuff I was just thinking I feel so far behind...I know how to do basic stuff, but to learn different things... It's just like a little bit of help [from Beyond DV] where I don't mind traveling. I will travel. It doesn't matter where it is. If it takes two hours, it takes two hours.

Specific services such as housing support, mental health counselling and legal counselling were perceived to be pivotal by many women, especially because Beyond DV was one of the only organisations where they could access this support. Describing the housing service as "supportive and accommodating", some women shared that they "feel safe staying there" and "if you ask for something they were there to help you" illustrating the readiness of the Beyond DV staff to assist. The lack of limitations in accessing support as they needed it was emphasised by a person:

...my DV had gone through the court system, and it was over, and I chose not to seek criminal compensation. And so therefore, I found that a lot of services required me to seek compensation at that point. And so [Beyond DV] was one of the very few that would give counselling support with that.

In addition to the programs embedded within the Beyond DV intervention, women benefited from the service-provider's collaboration with other external services. Some examples of this included 'Victims Assist' that provided financial support after a violence crime, or employment support, or referrals to other services, and external IT support and Barista training workshops.

Inclusive care for children and young people

Participants discussed the reasons for seeking help and the wrap-around care for themselves and their children. Several women with children indicated that their help-seeking behaviour was motivated by their concern for their children. For instance, they indicated: "...to keep my baby safe. To protect him. I was very scared. But I didn't [before]. Just thinking of him, I just decided to ask for help." Most women reported that adequate support for their children in other services was a significant barrier and challenge to their recovery. They indicated that:

The court system brings you back to play "happy families"... three fully supervised contact centres that my daughter had to endure. She did not know,

she would [have a] panic attack. She would vomit on herself....This little girl didn't know what was happening.

They also said that, "my kids couldn't go back to institutional school. They chose to do flexible learning instead because it was too traumatic to be subjected to normality when they come [sic] from a situation that was so different" and "I've been to enough of these youth clubs, homework clubs, to see that every single child of trauma has a diagnosis." Resonating with this need, women embraced ongoing services for children and their inclusion in programs through Beyond DV. For example, they emphasised, "Beyond DV doesn't just look at women. It looks at the whole unit" and "the Christmas party is absolutely beautiful, and just going there and having the kids having a good time...it's very important because they [otherwise] feel very isolated. They don't realise other people are in the same scenario, so I think to connect with that makes a huge difference."

Specific child-friendly interventions at Beyond DV provided a holistic pathway to improve the children's wellbeing in many ways. For example, one participant explained:

My one daughter took part in Hope for Life. So that was, you know, hope clubs, mental wellbeing...they had three pillars which was health and wellbeing, education. So, they had tutors and homework club and then social, so they had a camp and everything. That's beautiful.

The provision of ongoing support to the children added to the unique model of intervention. For example:

Beyond DV is still helping my son get counselling... they directed us to where we could get counselling, where we could get funding for counselling and things like that. So, they [Beyond DV] still respond and we are still getting supported. So, it's not like your case is over [years later]. No, we can still go there and be there.

Long-term, consistent support

Women shared that Beyond DV services and programs can be accessed by victim-survivors regardless of their phase of recovery and the support is not limited to crisis interventions. The women explained that the services have multiple entry points and they provide holistic, ongoing and long-term support. They clarified that the nature of recovery and healing is not linear and that there are emerging and ongoing needs. One participant remarked, "I know we go through rolling circumstances... we're doing well one month and in the next month you're

not doing well.” The women emphasised that the Beyond DV is responsive to these dynamic needs: “Everyone is always there. Like I can disappear for a year, and then you go back and then they are always there, they are amazing.” Similarly, they explained the positive impact of the ongoing support: “I think this service [Beyond DV] is providing that [long term support] and you have less return rates, less suicides, less murders...so, it’s reducing all of those things” and “it’s nice that the circle back can get bigger and bigger, but it’s still welcome and open... So, you can reach in and they [Beyond DV] already know your story....you don’t have to repeat it again.... and they’re like, ‘yeah, not a problem.’ And it just makes that process a lot easier.” Moreover, many women reflected on the sense of safety they experienced and how essential it was in their recovery and healing journeys: “... [I felt supported] mentally and emotionally. Just knowing that nobody will hurt me or come in here. I’m safe and can get help”.

Support with compassion, dignity and care

The importance of feeling safe and valued at Beyond DV services was emphasised by participants. They recounted that they felt seen, respected, and welcomed at Beyond DV. The majority of the victim-survivors reflected on their experiences of receiving personalised support and feeling cared for, even in group settings. They highlighted: “You feel like an individual who matters. There are hundreds of women, but I feel like an individual” and “I said to [name of Beyond DV worker] that she believed in me, and she made me believe in myself.” This person-centred care was a key theme for most of the women. For example,

She [Beyond DV practitioner] doesn’t just know you by name, she knows the story. She always builds you up. You always go away feeling more built up, feel valued....

Many women also noted that they did not have to retell their stories and were therefore not re-traumatised like they had been with some other services. They emphasised the importance of feeling safe and autonomous in their decision to either share or not share their stories. For example, a participant asserted, “You wanna tell be telling your story because you wanna be telling it and you’re ready, not because someone requires you to,” while another person explained:

But you never have to tell your whole story either, which, for some people it’s really traumatic to have to really tell your story. And I’ve met, probably, I would say 50% of the ladies.... and I probably know, maybe, five of those ladies’ stories in detail. Because

we don’t have to tell our story, and it doesn’t matter. Yeah, we all just have experience. And you might hear a snippet here or a snippet there, but it doesn’t matter, and that helps in that trauma process because, we’ve talked about it so much. It’s so tiring and you don’t have to stay in that cycle of telling your story.

Victim-survivors also noted that they experienced a deep sense of safety during their time at Beyond DV and that they continue to do so. Several participants noted that experiencing a state of relaxation, free from the constant need for hypervigilance, was particularly beneficial to their well-being. For example,

...even going to the Christmas parties. We went to the cinemas where you felt safe because you’re among like-minded people. Nothing’s gonna happen...It feels...Oh my goodness, you could relax....Children could watch a movie and know that we’re in a safe environment. Not looking over your shoulder, it is just amazing. Beyond DV has helped me, it continues to help. It doesn’t just stop saying okay. We’re not a number. We are actually human people.

Restoration of self-worth

Many women shared that their journey with Beyond DV played a pivotal role in rebuilding their sense of self-worth and confidence, which had been impacted by the violence they endured. They reiterated that, “They [Beyond DV] helped me to build up my lost confidence, to stay here [in the Housing Support program] a bit longer and also helped me to find new place to move in.” Similarly, “It has been absolutely transformational in terms of what they’ve [Beyond DV] done and the confidence that I’ve been given back. I’m eternally grateful and thankful. I don’t know that I would still be here if it wasn’t for the services that they provide.”

For many participants, activities such as applying makeup, getting their hair done, and attending the ‘Time Out’ workshops and ‘Dress to Express’ events provided moments of joy and self-care, helping them reconnect with their inner strength and beauty and partaking in activities that they may not have previously focused on or could afford to. They also expressed that receiving gifts made them feel seen, valued, and deserving of kindness—reminding them of their inherent worth and challenging the negative beliefs instilled by their histories of DFSV. For instance, women shared, “Even...the makeup...gifts that I couldn’t afford...it was like, even getting taken out to lunch with [Beyond DV worker], doing our hair. I felt like a queen. I couldn’t remember the last time I had a decent time.”

Other women shared the significant impact of the intervention elements as well as the group setting on their improved sense of self, with some women highlighting that greater self-awareness led to empowered decision-making:

I think it makes me more aware of my self-worth...I feel like I made better decisions because after I separated, I kind of felt very vulnerable. I lost, almost jumped in another relationship that it wasn't helping. But with all the [self] awareness, I was joining [a Beyond DV practitioner] as well to do some sessions for Healthy Relationships.

For participants whose first language isn't English, Beyond DV helped to overcome the hesitation they experienced in expressing themselves. One woman mentioned:

As an immigrant, I was looking for so many services and it was very limited. I wasn't feeling confident with the language at that time...I decide[d] to come [to Beyond DV] and from the time I say [sic] yes, it's different, and it's something that I just say. You can't find all the services that we found with Beyond DV. The whole support...we cannot find anything like this at a different place. So now, I'm feeling like I'm more confident, especially with my language, and that just made me feel like I have a voice, and people can understand and hear what I'm saying. So that made me...have a huge difference [in her life].

Women also spoke about the fostering of an enhanced self-esteem and a positive evaluation of themselves:

So, I just ended up learning to keep to myself, but when I met these ladies, it made me feel confident that I can speak and have no judgement, like, they're not saying "oh that's not too bad, mine's worse" like it's not. It's not a competition; it's just being around like-minded people. I find that my confidence is better because of my self-worth. I know that I'm a good person.

Sense of community and belonging

For many participants, the social connections formed through their involvement with Beyond DV were perceived to be integral to their recovery and healing journeys. These connections not only provided practical support, such as leading to employment, education, and social security, but also created a sense of community. Being surrounded by compassionate, understanding individuals fostered a sense of belonging, collective strength, and solidarity.

Many victim-survivors spoke about how powerful it was to be among peers who offered support without judgment, and how hearing each other's stories brought them courage, a renewed sense of hope, and feeling that they were not alone. One woman expressed, "I feel like a family. Even if we don't meet very often, or even if we do. I feel I can reach out to any of you guys [those at the focus group] anytime. I love you." Many women mentioned that the friendships they developed with each other and the multiple opportunities to connect with one another were transformational for them, with one person reflecting, "Beyond DV is like a place I can call home, and [it] also is where you can come and feel safe, make decisions, speak...anything that you want to say or chat. You just feel other's compassion." Participants also noted that the community they built at Beyond DV scaffolded them into replicating the same pattern within their other social relationships.

I've always been an extremely socially anxious, withdrawn kind of person...because I went to Beyond DV and I made these lovely friends. I now have people to talk to, people who care. It was a step up to keep doing that with the community as a whole.

Many women mentioned that their collective histories and experiences made them draw strength from one another and feel understood and accepted. They also accessed their groups for resource-building and support during legal challenges. For instance, one participant clarified, "All the women that we could talk to...on the day of the court [hearing].[there is] nobody else we could talk to without judgement. There was no judgement on us as women. We could talk to them." They further reflected on the sense of community or "family" they had developed with their peers at Beyond DV: "When we leave our relationships, very often, that means we lose all of our social networks because we have to move away from them. So, Beyond DV or my family has been just lifesaving because it has been my community."

It is genuine. That's the best bit about it because they've [other focus group participants] been through their own trauma. It doesn't have to be exactly the same, but it's still the same. It feels like you're understood. No one's bigger or better than anyone. It's just we're the same. We're all the same. And I love that. We are eternally grateful for where we are today for the help. It was like someone just listened to us and then it just escalated from there. It's like lifelong friends. I can see myself being friends with these ladies until we're old.

Women also shared that access and belonging to this community facilitated their wellbeing. Some of

the aspects included the minimization of anxiety, the introduction of a predictable routine and providing formal as well as informal social support to immigrants. I think it takes away some of the isolation too because you've got somewhere to go out to, somewhere to connect to. It just minimises the anxiety because you've got something you can do, like the exercise classes. I would often...[think] I really need to go out and do something, but I don't know what it is, but alright, they've [Beyond DV] got something scheduled today. I can go and do that.

For me, for example, I'm coming from another country and I didn't have any support network for eight years... and then for me, like, this is my family. Honestly, [this is] the place that I feel understood. I feel safe, I feel comfortable, I feel supported. I feel like I can talk to any of you [the focus group participants]. I feel happy...there's no words to say 'thank you' enough to [Beyond DV practitioner] and her team. I'm just grateful for the awesome people that I've met along the way, and this is definitely my home.

Financial and educational empowerment

Participants highlighted that the programs and interventions offered by Beyond DV played a significant role in enhancing their confidence in their abilities, which empowered them to pursue and secure employment opportunities. The supportive social networks formed through the program also facilitated professional connections and job prospects. For example, they recalled, "[Beyond DV practitioner] is fantastic at networking. She pointed at me and said, 'I have a job for you.' And then two days later, she sent me the email and she and the other person were contacting me. And it's like wow!" Beyond DV's targeted initiatives, such as skill development, resume building, and vocational training were also instrumental in enhancing employability:

I mean, thinking of even writing a resume or doing a cover letter, or thinking I would have nothing on it at all two years ago...whereas now, I know that if I was to write it up today, it would be full, because believe it or not, everything I've done with Beyond DV can be put on my resume.

Furthermore, the confidence gained through these programs enabled the women to approach job applications with a renewed sense of self-assurance.

I was very uncomfortable with my English. I still struggle a lot to speak in public. I still giggle a little bit when I'm talking in professional settings. It's something that I have to deal with every time, but I feel like it has been a massive, massive impact that

Beyond DV has had on my career. I owe what I have at the moment to Beyond DV. I couldn't do it without them.

Nobody was helping me. And when I went there to Beyond DV, I didn't think they would either...but that was the only place that brought me to where I am....I have finally managed to secure a permanent teaching role, and I don't think I would have arrived here without the help from beyond DV.

The financial counselling helped women to pay off their debts and the savings strategies helped them to plan better, leading to financial empowerment and the ability to spend their money on lifestyle related expenses- beyond mere survival. One woman mentioned:

I was given financial counselling...over about four sessions ... I was in \$80,000 debt because one of the things he [the perpetrator] kept making me do is, not only that he took out all of my super [superannuation], but he made sure that I had all these [credit] cards to pay for things, and it was all left as my debt. And I had to clear those. So, through financial counselling, I was able to get rid of that and I'm actually going on a cruise from [name of country]... I would never have been able to do that if I had not gotten that financial counselling.

Paying it forward: Healing through advocacy

Many women shared the importance of advocacy and supporting others as a meaningful aspect of their recovery and healing journeys. Most of them expressed a strong desire to use their experiences to help others facing similar challenges, often describing this process as both empowering and restorative. For instance, "It's being an advocate too I think, that's really empowering." By offering support, sharing their stories, and advocating for change, victim-survivors shared that they found a sense of purpose and fulfillment. In describing their journeys through Beyond DV, many women shared that they have transitioned to being a survivor-advocate role and derive not only personal growth, but also a reinforced sense of agency and resilience through that process. They asserted:

I can pay it forward because I come away feeling empowered. And you know, that whole bucket full kind-of-analogy and worth, and that's something. I think that it is really hard to capture and understand without having dealt with [Beyond DV practitioner]...And it's really nice to be part of such a [group of] women who feel really driven to. not just have been through what they've been through, but

come out the other side and want to change. I feel so privileged to have those connections.

This desire to support others as a survivor-advocate was discussed by many women, and because of their role, they were able to support other women outside the Beyond DV community as well, for example, “I’ll get these calls of people needing help...they know you’re a safe place.”

...you’ve gained that confidence to talk about it through the advocacy. But then, it can be friends of friends now as well. People will be like well, we know she’s been through it, and she’s a bit further along, so you give her a phone call.

I guess what I really like is with that and the advocacy, I know there are some women who aren’t comfortable yet to connect with a service like this. But I can now provide that to women I run into in other circles of my life..

Women also spoke out using their experiences to advocate for improved services at their workplaces.

I work for diversity and inclusion, and I bring the experience of this to make sure that they’ve got the structures in place to work and then because of that and the background [DFSV] that that group had heard about, they’ve now trained me up as a mate bystander, and creating respectful workplaces, trainers and facilities, which I would never have had the confidence to do. But I delivered my first one [the training session]. Five hours, and it was epic, but I got there....I wouldn’t have had the confidence without having done the advocacy training here [at Beyond DV].

Participants also shared their willingness to volunteer at the organisation and assist in other ways such as teaching languages and tutoring children of victim-survivors. Women noted that self-care and prevention of vicarious and secondary traumatisation as well as re-traumatisation is an integral consideration for victim-survivors who work as advocates. Most victim-survivors felt supported and protected in their roles at Beyond DV because of the structure of the program that emphasised safety, self-care, and boundaries. One woman emphasised, “I think that Beyond DV does give us that training...support to know that we have to have boundaries in place for that help.” Others indicated:

...I was doing it on off my own back even before the advocacy [at Beyond DV], to be honest. I was just wanting to help people anyway because that’s just like my nature. I think after a certain amount of

time, you know, it does take a toll. So, one thing I do love about Beyond DV is that she’ll [Beyond DV practitioner] always make sure and check in with our advocacy work. But we know our boundaries.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the wide-ranging, robust, and positive impact of a multi-level, holistic intervention to support the recovery and healing of victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence. This study showed that victim-survivors who were supported by Beyond DV, a recovery and prevention-focused service provider for women and children impacted by DFSV, had experienced recovery and healing in numerous ways. The holistic support of the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars Framework enhanced the women’s mental health, social connectedness, financial wellbeing and educational empowerment, employability, renewed self-confidence, management of legal proceedings, support to secure housing, and advocacy skills. The key aspects that led to these positive impacts are the long-term, consistent support provided by Beyond DV, the “open-door” policy that allows any service user to engage with the services when and for as long as they need it, and the holistic, person-centred approach to care. Such comprehensive, integrated and holistic interventions are rare to find in the literature.

The extant literature shows that victim-survivors of DFSV have a range of support needs that need to be addressed due to the multitude of challenges they experience in relation to fulfilling their basic, primary needs such as housing and food, their children’s needs, the legal and financial problems, cognitive dysfunction, mental health issues, and employment and educational rebuilding [1, 9–13]. Due to a range of impositions, such as inadequate funding or a lack of recognition of the importance of a multi-level and comprehensive support, many service providers that assist victim-survivors of DFSV are unable to meet all of the victim-survivors’ necessities. However, research shows the importance of trauma- and violence-informed, holistic and multi-component interventions to foster the long-term recovery and healing of victim-survivors of DFSV [20].

Despite funding limitations, Beyond DV has provided vital, all-encompassing, person-centred care when victim-survivors need it and for as long as they need it. The Beyond DV Recovery Pillars framework is unique and distinctive in providing on-demand support to address women’s and children’s basic and long-term psychological, financial, legal, and social requirements. The victim-survivors in this study consistently emphasised how they felt comfortable, valued, not burdensome, and well-supported to have their varied needs met. They indicated that while most other services they had approached in

the sector had limits on the length of time, number of family members, or number of services victim-survivors could access, the Beyond DV intervention framework encouraged women and their children (if any) to access support at any time with no similar limitations.

The multi-level intervention that is the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars framework impacted the wellbeing of women and their children. To have their basic, primary needs met, the women were offered transitional housing support and then supported to acquire housing for the long-term. To re-build women's sense of self-worth, which was essential for them to progress in their recovery and healing journey, Beyond DV offered a range of programs and events such as 'Time Out', 'Dress to Express', allied health services, trauma-informed yoga, and self-defence classes. The women reiterated the importance of being offered these forms of support, calling it transformational.

Indeed, research shows that effective interventions that promote recovery are those that are holistic and integrated [23, 24]. In resonance, the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars Framework applies a comprehensive and cohesive approach to facilitate recovery and healing among victim-survivors who seek their services. Apart from having their basic and initial confidence-development needs addressed, victim-survivors in this study elaborated on the lifelong social connections they had formed with people they trusted and felt safe with; they indicated how such opportunities would not have been realised had they not been supported by Beyond DV. Furthermore, the women highlighted their renewed engagement with employment and education – skills that would sustain their independent-living skills – after abuse. English-language support was also provided for women from multicultural communities who had not previously felt comfortable approaching services due to language and other visa-related barriers; this demonstrates the culturally-relevant support of the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars framework.

The need for ongoing trauma-informed interventions that cater to the unique, complex and evolving needs of victim-survivors is clear [25, 32]. The Beyond DV Recovery Pillars framework addresses the diverse necessities of women and children who have gone through or are currently going through complexities in their family life. Through the five pillars of housing support, social connection, legal support, health support and financial rebuilding, Beyond DV provides a multi-level, trauma-informed, holistic care to promote the recovery and healing of victim-survivors of DFSV. The housing support and the services for children and young people sets Beyond DV apart from other parallel services such as the Illawarra Women's Trauma Recovery Centre [28]. The one stop service model of Beyond DV, with services

ranging from crisis, short and long-term is also distinct from the Model of Care being currently implemented by the Australian government [27]. From the voices of the survivors, it is evident that they are able to go forward in their lives through securing employment, participating in education, forming positive social connections, improving their physical and mental health, and having a "sense of purpose". The latter aspect was illustrated by women's advocacy for other survivors who have had similar experiences to themselves. The women indicated that they had transitioned to becoming a survivor-advocate for their personal growth, sense of agency, and resilience. This avenue for advocacy is built into the Beyond DV recovery framework- indicating the impact of the program in empowering women and facilitating the drive for advocacy. The Recovery Pillars Framework also aligns with the needs and components of recovery and healing identified by researchers and victim-survivors in recent research [14–19]. The findings from this study demonstrate that holistic, multi-level, trauma-informed, ongoing care can be delivered by service providers within the DFSV sector. There is an urgent need to scale up such care mechanisms to facilitate recovery and healing for all survivors of DFSV. With the significant number of women and girls over the age of 15 years being subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or family member [2], it is essential that service systems across the world implement evidence-based, trauma- and violence-informed, culturally-relevant frameworks to support their recovery and healing.

Implications

Despite examining a single service provider that offers the multi-level intervention, the findings from this study ascertain the importance of a holistic, integrated framework to help women rebuild their lives and heal after abuse. Further research should be conducted across multiple service providers to examine the effectiveness of such frameworks, while also exploring women's level of recovery and healing across different points in time. While establishing holistic systems of care, it is essential that service providers and policy-makers consider the country-context, the funding in the DFSV sector, the training needs and capacity of practitioners to deliver the required care, and the legal frameworks within which such systems operate.

Conclusion

This study has outlined the facets of a holistic, integrated intervention that could lead to the recovery and healing of victim-survivors of DFSV. The Beyond DV Recovery Pillars Framework has demonstrated to be a positive and impactful care program as the findings show that victim-survivors who are supported by Beyond DV

make advances in rebuilding their lives in various ways. The comprehensive, person-centred approach that has been developed aids survivors and their children with their mental, social, legal, housing and financial health needs. Most victim-survivors are unable to access this kind of holistic care elsewhere. With the positive impacts of the Beyond DV Recovery Pillars Framework on various aspects of survivors' lives, it is imperative that such a transformational framework be implemented widely to promote the long-term recovery and healing of victim-survivors everywhere.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-25458-2>.

Supplementary Material 1

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Authors' contributions

All authors were involved in the design of the study. L.S. and A.S. were involved in the data collection and interpretation of the data. L.S. and A.S. wrote the manuscript and all authors were involved in the review of the manuscript.

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Data availability

Data is not available for this study due to the confidential and private nature of the data.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The project was approved by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: 2024/HE000268), in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2023. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study. The research also adhered to the protocol in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Lata Satyen and Arjita Sharda do not have a conflict of interest as they are independent researchers in spite of Lata having received funding from Beyond DV to evaluate their model of support. Carolyn Robinson is the Founder and Managing Director of Beyond DV. Carolyn Robinson was not involved in the collection and interpretation of data, although she collaborated in the design of the study and providing access to participants. All authors contributed to writing and reviewing the manuscript.

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