

Women's journey away from family violence

Framework and Summary

Published by the Community Care Division
Victorian Government Department of Human Services
Melbourne Victoria
February 2004

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Printed by Print Bound Pty Ltd, 8 Apollo Court, Blackburn Vic 3130.

This document is may also be downloaded from the
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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the many women who have graciously offered their time and enthusiasm to the Recovery from Family Violence research project. For many women, this has been a courageous sharing of the difficult and painful experience of their lived experience of family violence.

To the many workers and professionals from a range of services and agencies, your individual and collective knowledge has informed the project tremendously. A particular thanks to service providers who helped us identify and invite women as research participants, who provided support to women before and after interview, and who organised venues for us to use.

We acknowledge the generous contribution of the women committed to the reference group, who were always highly interested in the project and offered valuable input.

We would like to acknowledge particularly the involvement of the members of the critical reference group. Their time, energy and commitment have ensured that this report resonates with women's voices.

Our thanks to Melinda Lockhart and Erin Furlong for their tireless work in the production of this document. Their creative talents have produced diagrams that hopefully assist readers in understanding women's experiences.

Thanks also to those individuals who provided additional administrative and other practical support.

Project background

Funding for this publication was provided by the Commonwealth Government, as a result of agreements reached by all Heads of Government at the 1997 National Domestic Violence Summit to work cooperatively on the *Partnerships Against Domestic Violence* Strategy. The research was undertaken by Chisholm Institute (TAFE), in partnership with Women's Health in the South East (W.H.I.S.E.).

1. Introduction

The focus of this project was two fold: to research women's recovery from family violence (now termed journey away from family violence) and based on the findings, to develop a framework that informs a comprehensive, flexible and coordinated Victorian response.

This framework is the third component identified in the Strengthening the Victorian Response to Family Violence Strategy, released in April 1998 by the Department of Human Services.

The first two organising principles are:

- **A protection / crisis response:** providing support and assistance, through crisis and outreach services, to women and children experiencing family violence.
- **A prevention response:** both primary prevention aimed at the general community and the focus of community education and media campaigns, and secondary prevention through the provision of male behaviour change programs, and programs targeted to children and young people. (Family Violence Crisis/Protection Framework, Discussion Paper, 2000, p.8)

The Victorian Government, through *Growing Victoria Together* has outlined its commitment to providing for safe streets, homes and workplaces. As a priority action, the Victorian Government has made a commitment to reducing family violence.

The aforementioned organising principles and the journey away from family violence component will interconnect and inform a policy response that feeds into the work of Victorian Government's *Women's Safety Strategy*, which was launched in September 2002 by the Minister for Women's Affairs, Mary Delahunty MP.

At the commencement of this project, it was assumed (and this was inherent in the use of the term recovery) that this framework would complement and form the third part of a Victorian family violence framework.

The research findings have indicated that issues relating to crisis and prevention are intrinsic to women's experiences of journeying away from family violence. This framework has therefore been structured to be inclusive of parameters that address both these responses. It represents an integration of underpinning knowledge, principles and maximising elements that provides a comprehensive blueprint for a whole-of-government response to women's experiences of family violence. It also provides some direction on a partnership between Government, service delivery systems and the Victorian community.

The *Family and Domestic Violence Crisis Protection Framework*, released in February 2002, provides a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of women and children experiencing family and domestic violence. Collaborative planning is a feature of this framework, as is the development of area-based responses to family violence that allow women and children to remain connected to family members and services in their local area, where it is safe to do so.

Related whole-of-government initiatives which are set to improve strategic responses to family violence include:

- *Safer Streets and Homes: A Crime and Violence Prevention Strategy for Victoria 2002–2005*, Department of Justice
- *Review of Services to Victims 2002*, Department of Justice
- *Framework for the Development of the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Strategy*, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department of Natural Resources and Energy and Department of Human Services
- *Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence*, jointly chaired by Victoria Police and the Office of Women's Policy.

1.1 Other relevant reports

It is acknowledged that many reports and documents have informed this framework. All are listed in the bibliography. Particular mention should be made of:

- *Against the Odds: How Women Survive Domestic Violence*
- *Mapping Pathways of Service Provision: Enhancement of Family Violence Protocols and Interagency Linkages*
- *Reshaping Responses to Domestic Violence*
- *Violence against Women: An Integrated Strategy for Change*
- Family Violence Crisis/Protection Framework
- Victorian Homelessness Strategy
- *Not the Same*: Conference proceedings and a strategy on domestic violence and sexual assault for non-English speaking background women.
- The Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement
- *Out of the Fire: Domestic Violence and Homelessness*.

These documents provide comprehensive directions on responses to women's experiences of family violence. While some have a focus that is broader than the Victorian community, all demonstrate the need for an integrated and coordinated approach.

1.2 Women's narratives

It is important to acknowledge that this framework has evolved from the lived experiences of women. The information upon which the parameters of the framework are based has been born out of women's valued dialogue and overwhelming interest and commitment to the project. The telling of the story was often painful; however, the opportunity to contribute to other women's journeys and hopefully create significant social change was a key motivating factor for participants.

The framework attempts to encapsulate women's lived experience in all its complexities and emerges from an identification of those elements that impact on women's journey away from violence.

1.3 Overview of the project

Domestic or family violence has only been addressed in any concerted way in the past few decades. More recently, the focus has broadened to include the recovery stage for women who have experienced family violence. Although a range of services are available for women and children experiencing family violence, many are crisis focused. While the research indicates that recovery begins during the crisis, the qualitative dimensions to life beyond the crisis are equally part of women's recovery discourse. Many participants in this research have clearly articulated their acute feelings of displacement, loss and social isolation, in the months and years after the crisis.

1.4 Researching recovery from family violence

When women are asked about their experiences of recovering from family violence, they tend to stop for a moment and contemplate their response. Many women say emphatically that in fact 'you don't recover', but rather you 'learn to survive', and, to some extent, come to terms with the ongoing effects and aftermath of family violence.

This research project has explored the recovery experiences of women after they have recognised the violence in their relationships. There is a focus on identifying the barriers and maximising elements to this experience. The information gathered has been used to inform policy development and the development of a framework in relation to women's experiences of family violence in Victoria.

It is important to acknowledge that by concentrating on recovery as a concept, there was a risk that the inquiry could focus too narrowly on the actual experiences of women in 'getting over' or 'getting beyond' violence. In doing this, it could fail to throw the spotlight on both the perpetrators of violence and the societal context within which the violence occurs. The act of asking questions of women about recovery could have been construed to imply a responsibility to action their own recovery and to simply 'get on with it'. In striving to maintain vigilance in terms of this risk, the research was explained to women and research questions were constructed such that personal experiences were located within a structuralist understanding of family violence. This strategy allowed women the freedom to explore their individual experiences.

1.5 Research methodology

The methodology selected for any research project must take into account the specific nature of the focus for inquiry. In this project, there were two questions being asked:

- What is the nature of women's recovery from family violence?
- What are the elements and strategies that maximise recovery?

Informed by the data arising from these questions, a framework to inform policy was then developed.

The following dimensions had to be accommodated within the research design:

- The highly exploratory nature of the research, demanding a process that was flexible and not constrained by fixed or narrow parameters.
- A focus on exploring the lived experience of women, its uniqueness and how it is organised and given meaning.
- The multiple stage nature of the project; each subsequent stage building on the one before. This required a reflective capacity in the research process.
- The action element in the development of a draft framework and exploring the efficacy of this framework.

Most significant was the imperative to conduct the research within a feminist framework. Feminist theory recognises the invisibility and silence of women in our society and seeks to make explicit the nature and causes of gender inequality. Feminist theory is "concerned with such questions as how sexual stereotyping occurs and how societies are constructed so that males are dominant" (Kenny, 1994, p.69). A feminist framework in research is informed by feminist theory and provides direction for enquiry strategies that articulate the relationship between women's personal experiences and the larger social structures (Langellier and Hall, 1989, p.197).

One impact of family violence is to further silence women. The research methodology addressed this issue by maximising women's opportunities to name their experiences in their own language. In a method similar to that applied by Langellier and Hall (1989), the approach served to take women's experiences into account and aimed to improve their lives through involvement in the research process. The methodology supported a process of inquiry that was for and with women; which "attempted to take women's needs, interests, and experiences into account and aimed at being instrumental in improving women's lives in one way or another" (p.197).

1.6 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR was used because it offered a methodology for inquiry that could accommodate the project's complex and interrelated elements.

"Participatory Action Research is research that involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic and other contexts which make sense of it" (Wadsworth, 1997, p.1).

1.7 PAR processes

Using PAR enabled women who had experienced family violence to investigate systematically their experiences and issues, to formulate powerful and sophisticated accounts of their situations and to develop strategies to deal with the situation (Stringer, 1996)

The methodology required the researchers to co-opt women who had experienced family violence as co-researchers. These 'co-researchers' formed a research working group called a 'critical reference group' (CRG). This group was convened regularly throughout the process to:

- recollect and critique their experience of recovery
- provide direction on the research process
- assist with analysis of the findings.

The early steps in the research process were pre-planned, but subsequent actions were decided upon after initial experiences and outcomes of the early steps were critically reflected upon by the researchers and the CRG.

1.8 Research design

The original project brief indicated a research design of four stages; each was delineated by a specific research activity or outcome. These four stages included the literature review, intensive fieldwork (including a longitudinal study), draft framework and final reports. For methodological, practical and ethical reasons, the research design was modified to incorporate two stages or what were termed cycles. PAR methodology is premised on the principles of participation, collaboration and maximum ownership by those being researched. Hence, the researchers worked to establish the CRG as soon as possible. The research topic required strategies that initially were highly exploratory. The first data collection informed the strategies for the second cycle of the research.

Given the dual aims of this project, the two-cycle design was appropriate, with Cycle One generating broad preliminary data on the complex dimensions of recovery and informing the development of a draft policy framework. Cycle Two was designed to generate more detailed data on recovery and inform a more comprehensive framework.

2. Women research participants

Researching women's recovery from family violence immediately suggested something post family violence. Hence, broad criteria for women's initial participation as both interview participants and as members of the CRG were adopted. A preliminary literature review and discussions with the reference group and professional networks confirmed the initial decision to adopt broad criteria. A definition of family violence was adopted that included all forms of violence. The criteria for women participants were as follows:

- female (including women who identified as transgender)
- 18 years old or over—adult
- identified as experiencing, or having experienced, family violence or intimate relationship violence
- self-selection to participate in the research, based on a full understanding of the parameters of the research
- identified as feeling sufficiently safe to participate (psychological and physical safety were a prime consideration)
- currently living in Victoria.

NOTE: Attention was paid to accessing a range of women: those who for varying lengths of time, had been out of a violent relationship and those who identified as experiencing family violence, but who were living with the perpetrator in a violent relationship.

2.1 Overview of participants involved, July 2000–October 2001

Table 1: Research participants

Women

Total number of women participants: 121 (8 women were interviewed twice as part of the longitudinal study)

Service providers

Total number of service providers: 83

Total number of workers – 147 (9 workers were interviewed twice as part of the longitudinal study)

2.1.1 Diverse women as research participants

Gaining a perspective on diverse women's experiences of recovery within the timeframe available presented a challenge for the project. The researchers identified potential participants via networking with both personal and professional connections and with service networks that respond to diverse communities.

2.1.2 Service providers as research participants

Service providers reflect the voices of workers in services and agencies who come into contact with women in situations of family violence. These services and agencies were located throughout both urban and rural Victoria. Services fell into two broad categories:

Primary service providers were those services whose specific role was to support and advocate for women experiencing family violence.

Secondary service providers were those services responding to and providing some form of support to women who experienced family violence, but as part of a broader provision of service by both publicly funded and private enterprises. Data was collected in terms of women's use of these services as a result of their experiences of family violence.

2.1.3 Critical reference group

An initial discussion was conducted with potential CRG members in regard to what might constitute a framework for participation. Potential members linked into the project via personal and professional networks, reference group networks and in response to initial publicity.

Initially, nine women identified themselves as interested and were considered suitable for CRG participation. Most research target groups were represented on the newly formed CRG. Indigenous women were not represented, despite efforts by the Reference Group, the CRG and the research work group to address this.

3. Research findings

3.1 Language

Women discussed and debated the term '*recover*'. Through this dialogue, a more personal and relevant meaning of their own unique lived experience was attached to the term. Women described their experience as one of journeying away from family violence, rather than one of recovery. Their narratives indicated a 'blaming' or 'victim' connotation could be attached to recovery. Many believed the term recovery did not adequately describe the journey away from their traumatic experience, the diminished spirit and for some women, a loss of soul.

The research findings suggest the term *journey away from family violence* represents the experience of women more appropriately. Capturing women's lived experience in a language that best describes that experience is a difficult process. The process has to involve an exploration of women's connections with the external world and has meant drawing together common threads and frequently used expressions. Through such a process, a new understanding of the nature of women's recovery experience has emerged. This new understanding suggests that rather than recovery being the key defining concept, *journeying away* is a term that better captures the lived experience of women.

3.2 A definition

The following definition has been developed using women's language:

'Recovery from family violence is an ongoing journey, a process of survival, of finding 'self' and becoming free from the fear and suffering caused by the trauma of family violence. This journey is one that occurs over time and is as individual and unique as the women who travel it. For many women, this journey is a series of steps or stages which are experienced along a pathway, spiral-like in nature.'

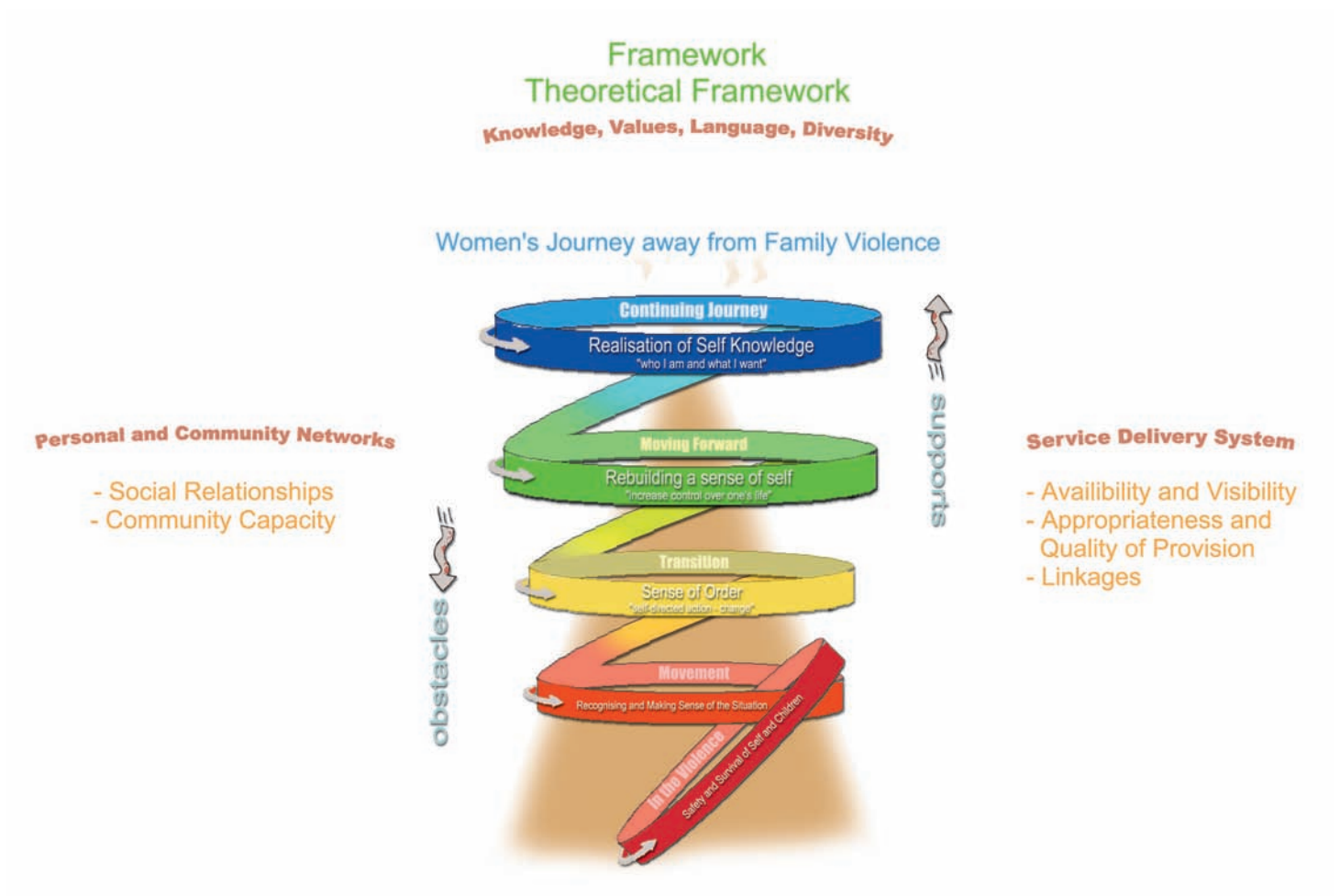
The method of expression and terminology used to convey messages is vital to women's journey away from family violence. If women's attempts to move from the profoundly disempowered position which family violence creates are to be understood, then it is imperative that language meaningful to women is adopted and used in a sensitive and culturally appropriate manner.

3.3 Women's lived experience in the journey away from family violence

The research has provided the basis for the development of a spiral pathway for understanding the experience of women journeying away from family violence. This spiral pathway emerges from women's narratives and provides a snapshot of women's shared lived experiences. This is visually depicted as an interwoven spiral with four stages or levels (see next page for Journey Diagram).

The spiral nature of the diagram allows for the differences in women's experience and attempts to reflect women's movement from one spiral to another, while including the possibility that 'recycling' back to another level may occur.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework



The broad spirals occupy particular places on the loop, and as women circulate through the spirals, they potentially learn from and integrate their experience and move upward through the spiral, closer to a point that is free from the impact of family violence.

In the centre of the spirals, women's words are used to represent broadly defined stages. The words in the diagram are those used by women to speak of their internal or personal process of change, becoming free from the experience of violence. The key phrases have been chosen from the narratives of the 121 women participants, to reflect the common core experiences of women as they journey away from family violence.

The diminishing pyramid structure in the diagram visually represents the threat of violence by the perpetrator. At the base, this is broad, depicting how the threat of violence against a woman impacts upon her whole existence. The spiral representing her experience is small, enclosed by the base of the pyramid to reflect a life defined by and constrained by fear.

Illustrated to one side of the spiral diagram are the obstacles, with a descending arrow. On the other side are supports, with an ascending arrow. These indicate the positive or negative impacts of each construct on women's experience.

3.4 Describing the spirals of experience

3.4.1 Spiral One: In the violence

Safety and survival of self and children

Women's journey away from family violence begins from a place which many women have described as like living in a fog; a fog created by the complexity of experiencing an intimate relationship with a partner who threatens or perpetrates violence against them. The complexity for women is born from the combination of the love they may feel for their partner, the confusion following attempts to right a wrong situation, responsibility and love for the children and the socialisation process which holds women responsible for making relationships successful.

Many women speak of being constantly 'on the alert' to the changing moods and behaviour of their partner. Changes in their own behaviour occur to keep their partner happy in an effort to lessen the risk that violence may follow. Women may accommodate the abusive behaviour of their partner because of their fear. They may choose not to answer back or challenge their partner, to reduce the risk that the situation may escalate into further violence.

Managing and surviving in the violence may for some women require withdrawal from family and friends in response to their partner's extreme jealousy, in the hope that this may lessen the threat of abuse against them. For many women, there is a time in the violent situation where they are unaware of the problem. They may not want to make changes or even consider them, often because they have never experienced a life lived free from harm. They may think there is nothing they can do.

When women are able to identify that the abuse is not their fault, accept that the violence is wrong and that they are not responsible for the perpetrator's behaviour, they are then likely to reach out for assistance. Even so, some women will persevere and continue to manage the violence, no matter what. Others will find change daunting, even in the most supportive environment. The majority, however, will be encouraged to consider change sooner, if their immediate environment and the community at large support their view with understanding and appropriate services.

Surviving the violence consumes all of a woman's resources; she feels unsafe and has little sense of an independent self. It is often in this time of surviving and responding to the violence, that a woman may initiate or experience certain changes that begin her movement away from family violence.

3.4.2 Spiral One: movement

Recognising and making sense of the situation

A woman's first step toward her journey away from violence begins with what women describe as a 'shift in thinking and/or responding to the violence' perpetrated against them. This shift may follow an act of violation against her by the perpetrator, which results in her stopping to take check of the situation. Some women have talked about this situation as a 'trigger event'. For some women however, this shift occurs gradually over time, with a growing understanding that their partner's behaviour is of a violent and unacceptable nature.

Women describe these 'shifts in thinking;'

- "It wasn't just about me anymore—the children witnessed the violence."
- "I realised I could be murdered."
- "I started to think: I didn't deserve this."
- "A friend reached out; it was like a ray of light."

What seems apparent in women's statements is the recognition that the perpetrator's violent behaviour is unacceptable, intolerable and unlikely to change.

The initial stage began when women moved from survival in the violent relationship, toward a state of mobilisation and then took some steps towards claiming a sense of control back over their own lives. Individuation occurred, as there was movement toward self-directed change. It may be the first time a woman has viewed herself apart from her partner and disconnected herself from being the 'cause' of the violence. For many women, there was an acceptance that the perpetrator would not change the violent behaviour and a sense of hopelessness followed. With this sense of hopelessness, the recognition that she couldn't ultimately change her partner's behaviour appeared to be her first sense of not being responsible for the violence.

The 'shift in thinking' occurred in different ways for women and at different times. Movement was cognitive and/or physical in nature. Generally, this movement was initially cognitive and often took some time before action followed. The action usually took the form of information finding or support seeking, depending on the woman's safety to do so. If women were isolated, controlled or living in fear of their life, they may have waited until such time as it was safe to initiate action.

Women's action was likely to occur in response to their drive to survive extreme terror, or in order to claim some sense of control within the situation. This time of crisis could result in a woman reaching out to the first accessible contact. The first point of contact was vital for women's safety and crucial in validating her experience of the violence and control perpetrated against her. Assistance was often sought via a friend, relative, neighbour, police, hospital, medical or services, such as emergency housing and specific family violence services.

Movement was a time that many women described as a 'growth in awareness'; a time in which connections or linking with informal networks occurred. During this spiral, women tended to disengage from the violence rather than continue to take responsibility for it. This said, women could vacillate from a state of hopelessness back to believing their partner may change. At times, love for the perpetrator overrode concern for personal safety. External constraints working against them could also seem too overwhelming. This is a time women spoke of as taking 'one step forward and two steps back'. If women were thinking about doing something to end the violence in their lives, then women used this time to figure out how to go about it, to build up social and emotional support and to explore options for economic independence.

Essentially, what appears to underpin movement is a process women identified as an affirmation of their experience, resulting in heightened awareness or consciousness raising. Women spoke of moving away from the violence, but not of freedom from it.

3.4.3 Spiral Two: transition

Sense of order, 'self-directed action—change'

In the spiral of transition, women spoke of a 'changed situation'. Women's narrative became more centred on their own experience and the changes made in moving away from the violence, rather than on the violence itself. There was often a time in which women experienced what some spoke of as 'mind space'. This time, without the immediate threat of the perpetrator's violence, was one of reflecting on and consolidating the pieces of the situation she had been living in.

This occurred during time spent away from the perpetrator, or at such time as she had access to safe accommodation. For a woman to choose to end the relationship, she may have been experiencing changes in the stage of transition whilst living in the family home, with sole occupancy and intervention orders in place against the perpetrator. For a woman leaving the situation, this time occurred whilst she was

staying with friends or family, or in refuge accommodation. There were often ongoing legal proceedings and much seeking of support via friends, family and service agencies. If refuge accommodation had been accessed, women made sense of their situation through the connections provided by workers. A woman's perspective on the violence perpetrated against her may have been challenged and informed by new understandings now presented to her.

During this spiral, women spoke of feelings of grief and loss, together with a vulnerability to going back into the relationship. Confusion sometimes occurred for women as they attempted to reconcile the contradictory feelings of love for the perpetrator with fear of his behaviour. There was often a sense of isolation and fear of the unknown. Women spoke of doubt and they asked such questions of themselves as; "Can I cope alone?"; "How will the children be without their father?"; "What effect is the violence having on them?"; "Why was I in this relationship?"; and "What will I do now?" A return to the abusive relationship was most likely to occur at this time, as women attempted to break old habits and initiate new behaviours. At this time, ongoing support was essential to assist women in recognising their own strengths and the effects of the violence perpetrated against them.

Transition was a time of organising and prioritising necessary for the woman's own safety and that of their children. Women spoke of an intense time establishing safe accommodation and secure income, settling children and seeking information that clarified their rights and responsibilities.

Transition represented a time in which there was a practical focus by women. They began to establish legal rights in relation to children and property issues and arranged to set in place these practicalities before they could continue a move away from violence. Women spoke of an awareness of future possibilities.

3.4.4 Spiral Three: moving forward

Rebuilding a sense of self, 'increase control over one's life'

The spiral of moving forward represents a stage in which there appears to be some time for women to stop and reflect. The majority of women in the research spoke of the spiral of moving forward as a time that came after leaving the violent relationship. In this spiral, women did not talk about spiralling backward in their journey, even though in some cases they may have returned to the perpetrator because of other difficulties and/or because the perpetrator may have provided a commitment to change.

For those women still in the relationship, moving forward reflected a time in which the violence had all but ceased. For the women whose partners had worked toward management of their behaviour, there were a number of practical strategies in place. Women spoke of managing the violence and their narrative reflected an approach similar to management of a dependency. Women spoke about accepting that the violence could one day occur again, that it was never over completely and that it was the perpetrator's ongoing responsibility to keep this in check.

In the spiral of moving forward, women's narrative reflected their ability to relate to the world as individuals, with greater confidence. The words of one woman represented many when she said:

"I have new ways of thinking and relating to the world."

There is a sense of energy expressed by the women. This spiral represents a time in which possibilities and a sense of the future are evident in women's narratives.

Women spoke of 'being in a better place in my mind' and of 'facing my fears as they are' and of 'having the courage and willingness to continue forward.' A more integrated sense of self was evident, as women no longer spoke of living their lives as 'two different people' to cope with the violence.

Moving forward represented the time in which women had established connections and identified supports. In this spiral, there was a recognition that the positive existed alongside the negative. Women talked about the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder and the triggers that took them back to the violence. At times, nostalgia took them back to the "better times" and there were contradictory feelings, such as "could I go back now?". As women identified the strength inherent in their own journey, they were able to draw on this and on the supports around them, to continue working through the issues as they arose.

Through established connections, there was much continued learning—about self, healthy relationships and the ability to trust. With learning came recognition, of what had occurred, of the suffering experienced and of how the abuse was perpetrated. The experience of grief often followed—for the loss of the perpetrator, loss of family ideals and the self.

During the moving forward spiral, women continued to use a process of change and worked to prevent returning to the situation of violence. Moving forward was seen as a continuation, not an absence, of change. Although returning to the violent relationship was less likely than in the stage of transition, difficulties in maintaining safe and affordable accommodation and appropriate support for the children at times contributed to a woman's decision to return to the relationship.

3.4.5 Spiral Four: continuing the journey

Realisation of self-knowledge: 'who I am and what I want'

This spiral of the journey reflected a different period in women's lives. Women spoke of reclaiming the freedom to make their own choices and determine their own direction. Learning, connecting with others and accessing society's resources continued to be an aspect of ongoing growth, development, support and life satisfaction. Evident from the data was a growing sense of personal power and identity experienced by women. An increased sense of safety was associated with women's increased control over the many aspects of their lives.

In the spiral of continuing the journey, women made such statements about the realisation of self as "knowing who I am and, what I want". This was a time during which women were able to identify their own needs and speak about them. Women took what they had learnt from the experience of surviving violence, and used it to live differently. They spoke of feeling free to be open, to trust and express themselves and of "being loved and listened to."

Women were in a better position to respond to the demands of parenting and external life stresses and recognise those times when it was beneficial for them to call on identified supports.

Some women stated that they had moved past the feelings associated with loss and grief. For others there was an ongoing process of letting go of the grief and loss sustained from the impact of family violence. There were times of self-assuredness contradicted by traumatic memories—flashbacks or triggers, which brought to mind specific incidents, feelings and fears that were most difficult and painful to deal with. For some women, the fear of the perpetrator's re-entry into their lives and ongoing contact through child contact arrangements meant that violence could remain a constant threat. These times impinged on a woman's experience of continuing the journey and on her ability to freely function in her daily life.

Women who remained with their partners identified the same qualifying dimensions to this spiral, as did women who had left violent relationships. For those women, the violence in the relationship had ceased and they were able to speak of feeling free to be open, to trust and express themselves. Women's narrative reflected their acceptance that the potential for violence would never disappear. During this spiral of the journey, women have defined their own personal ways of recognising when the perpetrator's behaviour was impacting on their rights within the relationship. Evident for all women who spoke of a situation in which they had remained with their partner, was the support provided by family and friends who assisted a woman to monitor the behaviour in the relationship.

In this spiral, women incorporated these factors into the management of their daily lives. While many women experienced anger, they attempted to live with an acceptance that there was little they or anyone else can do to remove the threat of abuse entirely. In all aspects of their lives, they continued to put in place that which maximised both their psychological and physical safety.

Through existing connections and freedom to make choices, women made decisions about coping strategies and accessing support. Part of women's ongoing experience was to weave and re-weave the intricate threads of their lives, into a whole that made sense for them.

Women expressed such statements as:

"I have a sense of identity."

"The ability to make my own decisions."

"I feel safe."

These internal reflections are the product of the change process through which women had moved and are the indicators of women's recovery from family violence.

Reaching this spiral however, did not mean a woman would not revisit the experiences of the past, or travel a pathway in which she felt positive and in control one day and affected by the repercussions of violence on another day. It was her recognition of the obstacles she had overcome in moving away from family violence, which made her continuing journey possible.

3.5 Diversity

The journey away from family violence is difficult for all women—for indigenous women, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women living with a disability and lesbians—the obstacles and systemic prejudices against them compound the difficulty of their journey. Many of the women from these groups were over represented in the group of women who remain trapped in the continual spiral of 'In the violence' and 'Movement'. Section 6 of the accompanying Research Report (Framework doc?) addresses the issues facing women from diverse groups and highlights the actions required from both policy makers and the service delivery system, to ensure that women from diverse backgrounds are assisted to break out of their entrapment.

3.6 Women's journey—four spirals of experience

Defining experiences for each spiral Listed below in Table 1 is a summary of the key dimensions that describe each spiral. This data has been used in the development of (a) each component of this framework and (b) in the identification of maximising elements for each of these spirals, as they relate to personal and community networks and service delivery system.

The detail shown in this table is a summary of the key dimensions of each spiral of women's experiences, as they journey away from family violence. It has been drawn from women's data (see section 5, 6 and 7 of the Research Report). The language is descriptive and reflects women's narratives. It is used to help contextualise the maximising elements for each component of the framework.

Table 2: Defining experiences for each spiral in women's journey

In violence/movement Key focus: safety and recognising the need for change	Transition Key focus: safety, developing a sense of order and self-directed action	Moving forward Key focus: rebuilding a sense of self and increased control over life	Continuing the journey Key focus: realisation of self and increased participation in community life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can feel like being in a war zone; they are traumatised and often feel like they're in a fog; feeling confused and often depressed • can have difficulty making decisions • often ill and/or injured • surviving for self and children • recognising and making some sense of the situation and dealing with the confusion • seeking information and support in understanding the family violence situation • seeking support and testing out reliability of support, particularly from family, friends and work colleagues • sometimes seeking support from other family violence services • can be fearful or ambivalent about disclosing to others • seeking to become safe • planning and exploring possibilities to change the situation: 'becoming mobilised' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focusing on keeping safe • most at risk of escalating violence • traumatised and feeling under siege • acting on increased awareness and sustaining the 'changes' • experiencing difficulties in accessing basic resources • consolidating the practical; particularly, overcoming barriers in arranging housing and income • better able to make decisions • often significant reduction in basic resources available • just surviving; struggling with doubts: "Will I go back?" • children often unsettled and resentful • establishing some sense of order • may be experiencing serious health issues • engaging in possibilities; recognition of choice • often feeling isolated and judged by others • often experiencing ongoing violence via children's access arrangements with perpetrator • concern for safety of children during access times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rebuilding sense of self • increasing control of economic and social life, but still experiencing considerable uncertainty and significant barriers to moving away from the effects of family violence • re-integrating in the community • setting goals and making decisions about the future • time to stop and reflect • can have difficulties managing as a single parent • continuing to implement strategies to remain safe • continued need to talk through issues • resurfacing of issues and flashbacks • dealing with doubts • becoming stronger in making decisions and setting life goals • often having to manage health issues • often experiencing ongoing violence via children's access arrangements with perpetrator • concern for safety of children during access times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • letting go • continuation of issues faced in the previous stage, but letting go of 'striving' to survive • stronger sense of personal identity and personal power • feeling safer and letting go of fear • courage to take more risks in various relationships (learning to trust) • utilising coping strategies to manage flashbacks • coping with ongoing and often chronic health issues • accessing support and implementation strategies to more safely manage ongoing violence (via children's access arrangements with perpetrator)

4. Theoretical framework

4.1 Understanding family violence in a societal context

In discussing a framework for women's journey away from family violence, it is necessary to contextualise family violence. To respond to the experience of women who have had violence perpetrated against them, a framework must view violence not only in its familial context and environment, but also in the context of its social, political and cultural matrices. To view violence and the families in which it occurs apart from this larger context is like "studying the dynamics of swimming by examining a fish in a frying pan" (Minuchin, 1984, p.118).

Feminist research over the past few decades has explored the inequalities in power experienced by women and girls in their access to the public world. For example, women's access to, and participation in, the parliamentary system is less than men; men hold the majority of positions of institutionalised violence which the police, prison system and military embody; and it is men who occupy most positions of social and political power in government, the professions and the private sector.

In considering male violence, there is a need to investigate how society's definition of masculinity involves violence as a legitimate means of preserving male identity and power and how, in effect, gender relations in our culture entail the social control of women by men through the covert or overt use of violence. (Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce, 1991)

In a family violence study by Dobash and Dobash (1980), males used violence to silence the women with whom they lived, to 'win' arguments, express dissatisfaction and to deter future behaviour and to demonstrate dominance. These differentials in power relations are the legacy of previous centuries, reflecting historical social and cultural practices. Their legacy has proved enduring and pervasive.

The additional legacy for women is the affirmation of the feminine ideal. This ideal holds that a woman's sense of self, of self-worth and feminine identity follows from their ability to build and maintain relationships with others.

Women struggle in extracting themselves from situations of violence. This struggle is not about weak character, morbid dependency or masochism, but about holding connections together, healing and caring for one another. Staying is what gender pride and self-respect demand. Staying protects the women against the guilt engendered by giving up her role as nurturer and caregiver. In carrying this legacy, women remain tied to the differentials in power relations and will until such time these legacies are challenged and deconstructed.

Despite social change and prevailing public sentiment in support of concepts such as democracy, human rights and social justice, women continue to remain dependent on men and are excluded from the broader public domain. This dependence is politically, socially and economically enforced and is the basis for the subordination of women in society and legitimised by male dominance in both the public and private sectors (Dobash & Dobash, 1998).

This is not to say that violence or the threat of violence is inevitable in male-dominated societies. It suggests however that where male domination is supported and accepted and women are culturally devalued and subordinate, violence may be seen as an easy means of controlling women. For as long as women are viewed as the property of men and lack economic and political power, violence against women, both symbolic and actual, will continue (Gelles, 1993).

Acknowledging the gender-related nature of violence does not preclude an examination of the specific context in which violence occurs, nor the manner in which race, class, or sexual identity (or indeed any other social categories) might intersect with gender.

Within a feminist perspective, it is necessary to distinguish systematised male violence from the incidence of lesbian violence.

When a man is violent towards a woman, there is social legitimisation of the act. Men's status may be maintained and even elevated by the manipulation of violence (Taylor and Chandler, 1995). This does not occur for the abusive women.

When a lesbian is violent towards her partner, she is asserting her individual power over another woman's right to safety. Her violence is a crime. She is not, however, backed by the global male power afforded men. There is no advantage of gender inequality. However, class, socioeconomic and or cultural advantages may be operating. These need to be taken into account in an ongoing analysis of the impact of gender on family violence and women's journey away from such violence (Bird, 1991).

4.2 Knowledge

Knowledge emerges from an exploration of societal context as the overriding conceptual construct or element of this framework. Both women and workers spoke directly of or alluded to the impact of knowledge on women's experiences of family violence and their journey away from it. A key factor in women's journey was that of learning to:

- name their experience as family violence and to make themselves safe
- reconstruct a different sense of self
- reintegrate into the community.

Societal attitudes as a major obstacle to women's journey were powerful themes in women's and worker's data. Attitudes evolve from understandings and intersect with values, to form individual and collective constructions of reality. These constructions give direction to behaviour and impact on all levels of society.

The research findings indicated that narrow understandings of family violence, widespread myths about the causes of such violence and the dominance of gender, race and cultural stereotypes inform the societal context of women's experiences. Such a context then shapes responses to women who experience family violence and compounds their difficulties in seeking appropriate supports.

4.3 Women's narratives

Women's narratives spoke powerfully of common perceptions held by all levels of society that are informed by a particular knowledge framework—a framework within which a narrow and poorly articulated understanding of family violence is located.

Several themes were common in women's narratives:

- The experience of friends and family who encouraged women to stay in the situation: 'keep the family together at all costs'; 'it's only the alcohol talking'; and 'he's OK really'.
- The doctor who didn't ask more about the black eye and proceeded to prescribe tranquillisers for depression.
- The district nurse who ignored the harsh words of a caregiver to her client.
- The child protection worker who expected a woman to hide in a refuge or lose her children, as if she were the one perpetrating the violence.
- A police response: 'It's a domestic, we'll get there if and when we can'.
- A court system that encourages mediation between perpetrator and survivor, with no recognition of the impact of fear.
- Intervention orders were not enforced.
- The response of service systems too overloaded for workers to take time enough to ask, 'is there anything else you need?'
- A refuge system whose resources are so limited, women often return home because they feel alienated and isolated.

These are examples of women's experiences in their journey away from family violence. For most women, it was a journey defined by struggling against the pervasive attitudes and ill-informed understandings of society, as well as the actual violence perpetrated against them. Women are constantly having to manage the feelings of shame and self-blame sent in the message, 'why doesn't she just leave?'

Despite the discourses surrounding definitions of family, violence, abuse, societal context and the feminist response, social change appears to be slow.

Any response to women's journey has to focus on widespread changes in societal understandings of family violence. New understandings are required that link women's individual experiences with social structures and that emphasise women's rights and perpetrator accountability.

4.4 Language

Language is identified as an important component of this framework for these reasons:

- The first aim of the research project was to define the nature of women's recovery from family violence.

- The way language is used, framed or explained often affects women adversely in their attempts to move away from family violence.

In undertaking the research inquiry and the development of the framework, women have discussed and debated the term 'recovery'. Through this dialogue, they have been able to attach a more personal and relevant meaning to their own unique experience. Engaging in discussion with 109 women and 142 workers opened the door to extensively explore and broadly define what is meant by recovery.

Women described their experience as one of journeying away from family violence, not one of recovery. Women's narratives suggested that a blaming or victim connotation could be attached to recovery. Women believed the term does not adequately describe the journey away from their traumatic experience, their diminished spirit, and for some women, loss of soul. 'Journey away from family violence' appears to capture the experience of women. Capturing women's lived experience in a language that best describes that experience has to involve an exploration of women's connections with the external world and a drawing together of common threads and frequently used expressions. It was through such a process that new understanding of the nature of women's recovery from family violence has emerged.

4.5 A definition

The following definition has been developed using women's language; *'Recovery from family violence is an ongoing journey, a process of survival, of finding 'self' and becoming free from the fear and suffering caused by the trauma of family violence. This journey is one that occurs over time and is as individual and unique as the women who travel it. For many women, this journey is a series of steps or stages which is experienced along a pathway, spiral in nature.'*

The method of expression and terminology used to convey messages is vital to women's journey away from family violence. If women's attempts to move from the profoundly disempowered position which family violence creates are to be understood, then it is imperative that language meaningful to women is adopted and used in a sensitive and culturally appropriate manner.

The use of language can impact on women's:

- choice of appropriate service
- accessibility of services through an understanding of the specific organisational arrangements
- quality of engagements with professionals.

Women's journey away from family violence is facilitated when the meanings that are inherent in communication exchanges are made clear, through the appropriate and sensitive use of language.

4.6 Diversity

Strategic responses based only on the experiences of Anglo-Australian women fail to address the additional structural barriers faced by diverse women. The research data indicate that:

- Diverse women have diverse needs and many of these are not well understood by the community or the service delivery system.
- Responses to diverse women are often inappropriate and devaluing and come out of ignorance of the context of women's lives.
- An inadequate response becomes another experience of abuse for diverse women to recover from.

The issues surrounding all women's experiences of journeying away from family violence are enormously complex and not easily unpacked. The issues for diverse women are further complicated by additional obstacles to accessing justice interventions and support services. These obstacles relate to factors such as cultural and linguistic background, rural location, sexual orientation and presence of a disability. Major barriers are created by the intersection of myths and prejudices within mainstream society and ill-informed responses to family violence from some sections of diverse communities. Both factors influence diverse women individually and collectively. It is essential that the Victorian community better understand the experiences of diverse women if:

- the incidence of family violence is to be addressed
- their journey away from family violence is to be maximised.

It is imperative that this framework embraces diversity, with a focus on inclusive and non-discriminatory practices at all levels of the community and the service delivery system. A broad and comprehensive knowledge base is essential for an understanding of difference.

4.7 Values

A knowledge framework is always informed by and intersects with particular values.

The key values to inform and sustain a knowledge framework have been identified as those underpin women's positive experience of journeying away from family violence. These are:

- respect
- human rights
- responsibility and accountability
- diversity and inclusiveness
- participation
- choice and opportunity
- justice and fairness.

4.8 Principles underpinning the framework

Values become principles when applied to specific issues and contexts. While it is relatively easy to articulate principles, it is difficult to translate them into a consistent behavioural response. Much can get in the way of a broad comprehension of the issues. Systemic and organisational arrangements also act as significant barriers to congruence of principles and behaviour.

The stories told by these women indicate that for responses to be effective, principles must become both implicit and explicit in society.

The following principles underpin the framework:

- Violence against women is a fundamental violation of human rights.
- Women have the right to live free from harm.
- Women have the right to be treated with respect and not judged.
- Women have the right to be treated in a fair and just manner by the legal system.
- Women have the right to choice and opportunities, through the provision of accessible and affordable resources in response to family violence.
- Women have the right to appropriate information and service provision by all those working with family violence issues. Workers to be well trained and able to respond with sensitivity to multiple issues.

4.9 Conclusion

In addressing knowledge and understanding at different levels in society, a shift toward new perceptions of women's experience of family violence and increased awareness of the associated issues can emerge. This may lead to a society less tolerant of violence 'behind closed doors'. It is a move towards recognising that the offence of violence in the home is just as serious as an offence occurring in the street.

These principles imply that a whole-of-government approach to family violence must be informed by the following:

- Recognition that family violence is a significant social problem that needs to be understood within its societal context and that such violence is often contextualised as a private experience.
- Acknowledgement that issues surrounding all women's experiences of journeying away from family violence are complex and are impacted upon by both personal and societal factors, including age, socioeconomic status and geographic location.
- Recognition that the issues for some women are further complicated by such factors as indigenous background, culturally and linguistically diverse background, sexual orientation or presence of a disability.

5. Personal and community networks

In describing the experience of family violence, women spoke of the overwhelming sense of lost identity. Linked to this were feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness. Surrounding this for many women were safety issues for themselves, their children and sometimes, their extended family. The finding of self and gaining some level of emotional, psychological and physical safety and wellbeing were recurring themes in women's descriptions of their journey away from family violence.

Women stated clearly that the experience of participating in affirming, validating and respectful relationships was one of the key factors in supporting them in all dimensions of their journey. Women identified the sustaining and rebuilding effects of positive relationships and contrasted these with the experience of a violent and controlling relationship.

Women experience family violence 'in community'. Different levels of connection or integration occur, depending on individual choice and opportunity and the nature of community. While personal relationships are individually experienced, they occur within the context of community.

Family violence for many women means isolation from positive relationships, reduced opportunities to accessing resources and limited choices about participating in the life of their community.

Opportunities to have positive relationships were identified as particularly significant in their journey.

As stated in *New Directions for Community Care*, 'communities that have strong networks are less likely to experience social problems such as isolation, violence, crime and homelessness which carry heavy social and financial costs' (2000).

Some women have identified their sense of being reintegrated into the community and 'standing (safely) on their own two feet' as a significant measure of the success of their journey away from family violence. Many women felt marginalised and were disadvantaged economically.

For some, the stigma of breaking up the family and being a single mother further exacerbates their marginalisation. Inclusion and participation in the local community can reinforce personal self-development processes.

Some women who had been out of a violent relationship for several years expressed great satisfaction in feeling they belonged in the community. Not only did this normalise their sense of their lives and that of their children (often in sharp contrast to living in a violent relationship), they felt empowered by participating in decisions that affected them. It was from within the community that women sought to meet their social and economic needs, via participation in community activities and often in employment and/or volunteer work.

Any framework that seeks to inform strategic responses to women who experience family violence must focus on building supportive communities.

As has been discussed, support and opportunities to be safe are crucial for most women in the crisis stage of the journey. While the nature of personal relationships changes over time and in part depends on what actually happens in the crisis, these relationships are significant throughout women's journey. Collaborating with women in their parent role, offering feedback on new intimate relationships, exploring new life directions and often assisting women to manage ongoing abuse and manipulation from perpetrators are the key roles of women's personal networks.

Several relationship categories have been identified by women as being particularly important in their journey experience. These are described below.

5.1 Family and friends

Family and friends were often the first point of contact as women sought information and/or to make themselves safe. They also were either the greatest supports or the greatest obstacles (excluding the perpetrator) to many women. Male figures in women's lives, such as fathers and brothers, appear to have the opportunity to play a particularly supportive role in increasing women's physical safety. Females can play a significant emotional support role.

5.2 Children

Often it was women's relationships with their children that either supported, or acted as an obstacle, to their journey away from family violence. In some cases, women were prevented by the perpetrator from developing and/or implementing positive parenting skills, or were left to parent alone. Whatever the case, the impact of violence on children and on the women's relationship with them was profound. In their journey experience, women have had to renegotiate their relationship with their children.

5.3 New intimate non-violent partner/s

Women who had established positive intimate relationships identified the experience as a powerful factor in rebuilding their sense of self and of emotional wellbeing. Perhaps most important was the realisation that they can have loving and equal relationships based on mutual respect.

5.4 Significant others

Significant others refer to individuals with whom women have a relationship that is 'significant' to their journey. Predominantly, these were women in support and self-help groups, women and sometimes men in education groups, personal development groups, leisure groups and individuals/groups within the workplace. In particular, it was those women who offered support by listening, sharing their own story and offering critical feedback, but who were not necessarily friends. Quite often, these informal relationships lead to new friendships, especially between women who have both experienced family violence.

Women reported that the function of these types of relationships was often different to family and friends. Sometimes, there was a sense of increased freedom to express themselves and explore their experiences of family violence, because there are not the same expectations of close and long standing relationships. Also, women were more able to explore feelings of shame, failure and regret, the expression of which could sometimes cause conflict with closer relationships.

5.5 Conclusion

Each relationship category represented varying levels of intimacy and different roles in women's lives. Underpinning all these categories were values of respect, equality and non-judgement. Women's emphasis on the essential role these values played in their relationships cannot be overstated. The values played out in a violent relationship are the antithesis of these and cause, to quote one woman, the "death of the spirit". Hence, women's reclaiming of their emotional and spiritual wellbeing became paramount to their overall journey away from family violence. Positive relationships supported women in doing this.

Women identified different benefits in different relationships. Women also spoke of the reciprocal nature of relationships; the two-way process enhanced them, as they recognised their contribution to other's development. Some women said they had to learn to relate again, that the isolation and trauma of family violence caused withdrawal and emotional numbness.

In addition to their maximising effects on physical safety and mental wellbeing, relationships provided a context that enhanced women's learning. The acquisition of information, knowledge and skills and their integration into conscious understanding of self and the world occurred best in a network of supportive and respectful relationships.

Strong community networks best support both these processes. A whole-of-government approach to building community capacity is an essential beginning point in response to women who experience family violence.

6. Maximising elements for Stage 1

The response of family, friends, work colleagues and other community members to women's disclosures is crucial to the actions women take to change their situation. A positive response can empower women to follow through with plans to address their situation. A negative response can immobilise women or redirect their help seeking behaviour to service providers.

Table 3: Maximising elements Stage 1—personal and community networks

In violence/movement: maximising elements	Transition: maximising elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening and validating women's experience; recognising the difficulty women experience in disclosing • raising concerns and asking questions about the violence • responding to the crisis immediately, with particular emphasis on women's and children's safety • emphasising women's right to be safe • seeking out and offering information regarding family violence/service options/safety strategies for women and their children and service options for male perpetrators • providing assistance with women's decision making processes, without becoming directive • providing practical and emotional support as women seek assistance from police refuge/court/Centrelink/housing services. • negotiating with service systems on behalf of women • perpetrator's family members and friends challenging perpetrator and offering support to women • female friends challenging female perpetrator behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening and validating; particularly hearing women's stories • supporting women in sustaining the changed situation • advocacy and support for women in relation to income, housing, child care, court, police and health professionals • supporting women to be and feel safe • supporting women to make their own decisions • allaying doubts and challenging women's self-blaming thoughts • supporting children in their adjustment and understanding of the changed situation • playing a mediating role between women and perpetrators • encouraging women's involvement in community activities

7. Maximising elements for Stage 2

Women often spoke of their needs being overlooked or forgotten, once the crisis stage had passed. Personal and community networks have an important role to play in stage 2 of women's journey away from family violence. A key element in stage 2 of the journey is women's diminishing involvement in formal crisis-oriented services, although often women have to maintain involvement with the justice system. Women have been very clear about their need for ongoing practical support, especially regarding maintaining or accessing adequate housing and child care options, and employment, training and creative pursuits. Being able to link into the local community for support in these areas is essential, not only for women's increased sense of empowerment, but also to consolidate their sense of reintegration into the community. Ongoing emotional support in the parenting role and in addressing ongoing perpetrator abuse, via access arrangements, also has implications for personal and community network responses to women.

Table 4: Maximising elements Stage 2—personal and community networks

Moving forward: maximising elements	Continuing the journey: maximising elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new equal relationship • continuing to hear women's stories recognising and actualising grief and loss • recognising and offering continued support regarding ongoing harassment by perpetrator • acceptance in community/ encouragement to be involved/integrate • support for children • support for women regarding 'time out' from parenting • reciprocity; accepting women's support, developing opportunities for women to participate in the community • encouraging women to undertake and maintain activities, pursuits, study or work • supporting women in their decision making • practical emotional support as women negotiate the service system • support for women participating in support groups • support for new relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having a new relationship • support for new relationship • being a friend/equal friendship • encouraging involvement in the community • support regarding 'time out' from parenting • support for children • supporting woman by assisting her to identify when a new relationship is not equal • encouraging women to participate in support groups (connections) • recognising how far women have journeyed away from violence to where they are now and that it may not be over

8. Service delivery system

A service delivery system that is effective, flexible and coordinated has been identified as the third component of the framework. Such a service delivery system is informed by a knowledge framework that recognises the structural context of family violence. It in turn shapes the knowledge discourse within society, by its responses to women experiencing family violence. Services are delivered within a community context and via complex partnerships between service systems, the state and local communities. It is not the intention of this framework to prescribe detailed changes to the service delivery system in Victoria. Rather, the framework seeks to offer broad parameters for strategic responses to those obstacles that impede women's journey away from family violence.

'Service delivery system' is the terminology used by service providers and includes service systems that are in place to address women's safety and rights issues and to provide practical and emotional support to individuals/families in crisis (both short and medium term). It is used here to ensure that issues confronting women are not explained as problems with particular services or individual workers. The data indicates that women's personal experiences are very much a function of the current service system arrangements.

While this component of the framework arises from women's stories, it is a recurring theme in other documents that address women's experiences of violence. Documents such as *Violence Against Women: An integrated strategy for change; The Crisis Protection Framework and Conference Proceedings and a Strategy on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault for Non-English Speaking Background Women*; discuss issues relating to service provision. Although the discussions are arranged variously and according to the purpose of the document, the type, quality and quantity of provision and the links between service systems are constant themes.

Much has been said in these documents and other literature about women survivors and their children's basic needs, such as sufficient income, safe housing, appropriate legal advice and support and adequate health care. Also covered are issues surrounding the integration and coordination of resource systems, in order to facilitate more effective service pathways.

This framework addresses similar issues and links aspects of the service delivery system to the two stages of women's journey. Much of the detail of this section addresses women's service provision needs at the crisis stage. In fact an effective, flexible and coordinated service delivery system facilitates the speedy resolution of many of the key issues confronting women in crisis. Indeed, an appropriate and immediate response by different systems to women's safety and basic resource needs can reduce the demand on systems overall. For example, if women are able to remain in the home and be safe, there is less demand on the housing systems and it maximises opportunities for personal and community supports for women. Also, an immediate response that focuses on perpetrator responsibility and imposes appropriate sanctions on behaviour reduces demand on service systems that address women's safety.

8.1 Women's narratives

In their descriptive accounts, women spoke about different resources that have supported their personal journey of recovery. These are as wide-ranging as 'enough money to manage', 'the refuge worker' and very often, 'having my own safe place to live'. Access to and availability of societal resources, via service systems, can be generalised as a huge issue for women as they attempt to journey away from family violence. For many women, the process of negotiating the resource systems in place within this society is a lonely, demoralising and sometimes, abusive experience.

It is evident from the data that service systems need to be arranged such that they are visible, available, appropriate and linked to other systems. The arrangements (right word?) of the service delivery system need to be understood within two contexts: the patriarchy and economic rationalism. Decisions about funding levels, systems arrangements and service models are made within such an ideological framework.

Those issues raised in the knowledge component of the framework provide direction for improving the service delivery system's response to women who experience family violence. Without this, the current obstacles will remain.

Obviously, easy access to appropriate, responsive and integrated resources supports all members of our society. Of particular interest are the barriers women confront in being able to 'use' these service systems in a way that maximises their journey, particularly given that one of the most damaging effects of family violence is the isolation from the assistance and support that is most needed.

Women's descriptions of their use of service systems varied considerably. There are, however, some common themes emerging from their accounts. Also, key factors for some women—such as cultural and linguistic background, rural location, living with a disability and sexual preference—clearly affect their opportunities to access appropriate resources. Many women spoke of trying to access service systems and were able to identify those elements that acted as barriers to their recovery.

8.2 Service provider data

Data from service providers suggests that the current arrangement of tightly targeting services does not allow for an effective response to the complex needs of women journeying away from family violence. A common theme was the need for increased resources, flexibility and longer timeframes within which to support women.

Despite many instances of high standards of individual professional practice and tremendous efforts by many service providers, workers discussed at length the obstacles they face in responding appropriately to women.

Narrow service criteria and limited resources were identified as key explanations for the current situation. The consequence for some women is that they have no choice but to return to or remain in the violent situation. Other women with stronger social

and economic supports are more likely to be able to continue their journey away from violence, almost 'despite the system'.

Poor coordination across the service system appears to be another consequence of a tightly targeted, remedial and insufficiently resourced service delivery system. While workers spoke of some women experiencing a 'service pathway', most related stories of struggling to set this in place and indicated that the more vulnerable and complex a woman's situation, the harder the pathway was to achieve.

8.3 Conclusion

The following qualitative dimensions relevant to an effective service delivery system need to be explored and acted upon if women's journey away from family violence is to be maximised. Such an arrangement provides a quality framework for the service delivery system and allows for a consideration of issues relating to both stages of women's journey.

8.4 Dimensions of the service delivery system relevant to Stages 1 and 2 of women's journey

Each of these dimensions is linked. Together, they form a qualitative matrix for considering service provision to women. Adequate levels of funding are fundamental to a quality service delivery system. Visibility, availability, appropriateness and linkages between systems are all essential to quality service provision. Ideological frameworks, service models and worker practice also determine the quality of response to women.

Table 5: Dimensions of the service delivery system relevant to Stages 1 and 2 of women's journey

	Issues to consider
Availability and visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quantity of resource/funding levels to provide adequate and equitable distribution of services • level of delivery: local, regional and state adequate funding to individual service providers, to ensure sufficient hours of service to reasonably meet number and needs of service users and to provide appropriate workplace environment • location of services such that accessibility is maximised—attention given to transport and central locations • innovative publicity strategies that address issues of diversity and isolation
Appropriateness and quality of provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quantity of resource/funding levels to provide varied, appropriate, high quality services • variety of service models that are rights-focused, flexible and inclusive of diversity • service criteria that allow for choice, flexible timeframes and innovative responses to women • organisational arrangements and environments that promote women and children's participation • principles of respect, inclusiveness, non-judgement and fairness underpinning worker practice • accountability and evaluation mechanisms implemented
Linkages between service systems	<p>Funding arrangements for resources at local/regional/state levels to support interconnections between services and service systems, such that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information exchanges occur between service systems • networks are supported within and between service systems • coordination structures promote linkages between services and service systems are maintained and developed • there is development and refinement of protocols • ideological differences within and between service systems are explored

Relevant service systems were categorised into primary and secondary systems and were defined as follows;

1. **Primary service system is the family violence and support service system.**

This system includes those services whose specific role is to support and advocate for women experiencing family violence. These included: Women's Domestic Violence Crisis and Referral Service, Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre, women's refuges, including refuges specifically for indigenous women, domestic violence outreach services, Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service and Centre Against Sexual Assault and supervised access services. Included also were women's domestic violence support groups and regional family violence networks, both of which are usually located within health services. Also included is the Victorian Refuge and Associated Domestic Violence Services Network and counselling services that although frequently located within secondary services, can be focused on women's and children's experiences of family violence.

2. **Secondary service systems** are those systems that respond to and provide some form of support to women who experience family violence, but as part of a broader provision of service, both publicly and privately funded. Data was collected about women's use of these services in relation to their experiences of family violence.

These are:

- **Justice system**, including the police, courts and court services such as court support and court mediation and counselling, legal Aid, community legal services, private solicitors, victims' assistance and referral services and Child Protection.
- **Housing system**, including public housing, the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (this program area overlaps with program areas in the family violence system), public tenant services and community housing.
Also, the Commonwealth Government's program for purchase of first home.
- **Income/economic system**, including Commonwealth Social Security system and services such as Centrelink.
- **Health system**, including hospitals, community health services, women's health services, general practitioners, maternal and child health services, mental health services, drug and alcohol services and general counselling services. Included in general health services are indigenous and ethno-specific services and men's behaviour change programs.

The service systems identified are discussed in terms of maximising elements for stages 1 and 2 of women's journey. They need to be understood in the light of the dimensions discussed on the previous page.

8.4.1 Family violence and support service system

It is imperative that supports are available to women to maximise their safety and provide immediate and appropriate assistance when they experience family violence. It is through this service system that women seek to make themselves safe, to have the option to access information and support. The recommendations listed below identify specific issues that relate to resource levels and service models, together with the imperative for improved integration of services within this system and with other systems.

Table 6: Maximising elements Stage 1–family violence and support services

Movement: maximising elements	Transition: maximising elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • immediate 24-hour response for women and children’s safety (provide information and welcome them into safety) • availability of information about services in accessible format (crisis service, refuge, outreach domestic violence, support groups, family violence counselling) • working collaboratively with justice system • responding in a respectful and supportive manner to all forms of family violence • accurate assessment of the needs of women and children (includes attention to diversity) • provision of support for children • work collaboratively with women to plan for response to crisis: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – supporting women to work through trauma and confusion • supporting women to make informed choices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – provide information on family violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working with women in planning to ‘sustain the change in circumstances’ • recognising and responding to women’s particular vulnerability to violence in this stage of maintaining a focus on safety • provision of clear information about the broad range of services and women’s entitlements • provision of time and space for women to recover from physical and psychological trauma of family violence • support women in reconnecting and maintaining personal and community networks, or in joining new networks • informing women of their options for legal and other support in clear and accessible language. • play educative role in expanding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – women’s understanding of their rights and the nature of family violence and societal context – women’s life skills, such as decision making, parenting and money management

Table 6: Maximising elements Stage 1–family violence and support services (cont)

Movement: maximising elements	Transition: maximising elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implementing strategies to support women: Implementing strategies to support women gain access to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - crisis housing - outreach support - income - legal responses - specialist services and supporting women in negotiating with those services - provision of ongoing flexible support and advocacy in response to women’s individual needs and choice of action 	

Table 7: Maximising elements Stage 2—family violence and support services

Moving forward: maximising elements	Continuing the journey: maximising elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opportunities to explore and ‘unpack’ issues that arise from experiences of family violence, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - grief and loss issues and post traumatic stress disorder - self-esteem and assertiveness - decision making • assistance in coming to terms with being ‘single’ • assistance in supporting their children to work through effects of family violence • assistance in responding to aggressive behaviours from adolescent and adult children • support in developing new and healthy intimate relationships • support in healthy parenting • feeling safe and availability of support and supervision during children’s access and at handover times • ongoing outreach support in own home • assistance and advocacy support in negotiating service systems such as justice (particularly family court, legal aid and sometimes child protection), income, housing, employment, drug and alcohol, mental health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opportunities to continue to unpack issues and address emotional and spiritual growth • assistance in supporting their children to work through effects of family violence • assistance in responding to aggressive behaviours from adolescent and adult children • support in developing new and healthy intimate relationships • support in healthy parenting • feeling safe and availability of support and supervision during children’s access and at handover times

8.4.2 Justice system

It is this system that has the responsibility to respond with sanctions toward perpetrators of violence. With regard to family violence, it is essential that this system consistently responds to the rights of women within the Crime's and Family Violence Act legislative framework. Both women and workers spoke of the significant maximising effects of a positive response from this system, to women's journey away from family violence.

Table 8: Maximising elements Stage 1—justice system

In violence/movement: maximising elements	Transition: maximising elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • timely response for women and children's safety • acknowledgement of different forms of family violence • communicating a clear message that family violence is wrong and women have a right to feel safe • ability to respond in a respectful and supportive manner that takes account of diversity • procedures and worker practices that emphasise perpetrator responsibility • informing women of their options for legal and other support in clear and accessible language • following policy and procedures to ensure women's and children's safety • availability of accessible and affordable legal support • takes account of the impact of violence on women and children (health, physical, abuse etc) in decision making • make appropriate referrals to community networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognising and responding, particularly to women's vulnerability to violence in this stage and maintaining a focus on safety • provision of information that further clarifies legal options • responding to women's choices and diverse needs • working collaboratively with other service systems to support women in negotiating their way through the maze of service provision • arrangements made for safe handover of children for access visits with perpetrator, under the guidelines of the order • court taking into account evidence provided by domestic violence workers and a range of support workers who have assisted women • ensuring contact orders are adhered to

Table 8: Maximising elements Stage 1–justice system (cont)

In violence/movement: maximising elements	Transition: maximising elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consistent application of legislation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Crimes Family Violence Act</i> - <i>Children and Young Persons Act</i> - <i>Family Law Act</i> such that it maximises women and children’s safety and wellbeing • support for women to remain safely in own home • courts considering factors such as answering machine recordings, doctor’s reports, eyewitness reports of violence against women as evidence in decision making process 	

Table 9: Maximising elements Stage 2–justice system

Moving forward and continuing the journey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continued provision of counselling support • efficient and expedient legal processing, in the event that child contact matters result in a return to court • efficient and expedient legal process in the event that intervention order breaches occur • responding to breaches of contact orders • accessible and affordable legal assistance • women’s knowledge of legal recourse against perpetrators of family violence • awareness of legal options • support for maintenance of legal orders • ongoing maintenance of safe handover of children for access visits with perpetrator
<p>NOTE: All of the elements of ‘<i>in violence/movement</i>’ are applicable in these spirals. The elements listed here are those more likely to apply in this second stage.</p>

8.4.3 Housing system

Through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program and the Crisis Accommodation Program, women’s refuges and domestic violence outreach services are provided to women experiencing family violence.

The recommendations detailed here need to be considered together with those listed for the family violence and support services system. Throughout women’s narratives, the need for secure and appropriate housing was evident. The right to remain in their own home, to be safe and to afford to do this emerged as an essential element that would have significantly maximised their journey. Ongoing safe and high quality housing were also identified as a key ingredient in supporting women’s movement away from violence.

Table 10: Maximising elements Stage 1–housing system

In violence/movement: maximising elements	Transition: maximising elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • right to stay in own home, to be safe and to be able to afford to do this • accessible information about housing options • availability of good quality affordable and safe housing • easy access to and a choice of housing types in locations of women’s choice • able to lease in own name, not in joint names with perpetrator • support in moving house (practical, income, transport, storage of furniture) • eligible for supports from family violence services, regardless of housing options • easy streamlined entry points into housing and support • easy access to funds to support women to establish themselves in alternative accommodation and to maintain themselves in own home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to move from crisis housing into more permanent housing when appropriate and according to individual needs • have choice to remain in one dwelling and have support available • opportunities to remain in transitional housing until change has been consolidated • affordable and appropriate choices available regarding housing options after the crisis • access to public housing for women without permanent residences

Table 11: Maximising elements Stage 2–housing system**Moving forward/continuing the journey: maximising elements**

- to be able to stay in own home, to be safe and to be able to afford to do this
- affordable and appropriate choices available regarding housing options post crisis
- access to public housing for women with permanent residency
- easy access to funds to support women to establish themselves in alternative accommodation and to maintain themselves in own house
- accessible information about housing options

8.4.4 Income/economic system

Income is a fundamental resource requirement for all individuals to participate positively in society. The degree of access to this resource is a powerful determinant of quality of life and level of empowerment. Adequate income for basic living requirements is an essential element in women's journey away from family violence. Overwhelmingly, women experience difficulties in accessing adequate income levels.

Table 12: Maximising elements Stage 1–income/economic system**In violence/movement and transition : maximising elements**

- immediate access to income support in crisis situations; availability of multiple payments if required
- access to adequate income to sustain safe and enriching living situation
- readily available information on income support options
- accessible and flexible Centrelink policies and procedures, particularly those that support women in the crisis and in maintaining employment
- immediate assessment of needs, especially in crisis, with a recognition of the extreme stress women experience and issues of safety
- Centrelink worker practices that are sensitive and informed by a comprehensive understanding of family violence
- confidential treatment of information about women's housing situation
- ability to maintain employment while in refuge
- availability of affordable financial counselling
- women not having to carry burden of debt created by perpetrator

Table 13: Maximising elements Stage 2–income / economic system

Moving forward/continuing the journey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access to adequate income to sustain safe and enriching living situation • readily available information on income support options • confidential treatment of information about women's housing situation • Accessible and flexible Centrelink policies and procedures, particularly those that support women in maintaining employment • Centrelink worker practices that are sensitive and informed by a comprehensive understanding of family violence • consistent and positive support in accessing financial support from perpetrator, as parent of children

8.4.5 Health system

The response of health professions to women's disclosures is crucial to the actions women take to change their situation. Doctors in hospitals and in general practice are often the first point of contact in women's journey away from family violence. A positive response can empower women to follow through with plans to address their situation. A negative response can immobilise women and cause them to minimise the seriousness of their situation.

Table 14: Maximising elements Stage 1–health

In violence/movement and transition: maximising elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health professionals generally aware of health issues for women and children as a result of family violence • general practitioners and other professionals recognising the signs of abuse, both physical and psychological • general practitioners and other professionals initiating discussion about the possibility of family violence, or responding empathetically and respectfully to women's disclosures • immediate response to women's disclosures, with a focus on safety, provision of information and where appropriate, referral • hospitals acknowledging women's right to privacy and space during consultations • health professionals aware of and acting on an understanding of perpetrator's controlling behaviours • health professionals documenting injuries sustained by women • thorough assessment of women's health condition and underlying causes • appropriate medical interventions made based on understanding of family violence, with appropriate referrals and prescription of medications • appropriate health support for women who have multiple needs, such as drug and alcohol dependency, mental health issues, or physical or intellectual disability

Table 15: Maximising elements Stage 2—health**Moving forward/continuing the journey: maximising elements**

- health professionals aware of the long term and often serious effects of family violence
- assessments done within a context of understanding of family violence
- affordable and accessible health care
- access to a variety of health-promoting activities including massage, Tai Chi, and active exercise
- access to counselling via local health services

This project was undertaken in 2001 and since that time progress has been made in relation to implementing a range of strategies to assist women recovering from the experience of family violence. These initiatives have been achieved through collaboration between a range of government departments and community agencies as part of the Victorian Women's Safety Strategy.

8.5 Conclusion

The focus of this project has been two fold: to research women's recovery from family violence (now termed "journey away from family violence") and based on the findings, to develop a framework that informs a comprehensive, flexible and coordinated Victorian response.

Women have spoken of recovery from family violence as an ongoing journey; a process of survival, of finding 'self' and becoming free from the fear and suffering caused by the trauma of family violence. This journey occurs over time and is as individual and unique as the women who travel it. For many women, this journey is a series of steps or stages, which is experienced along a pathway, spiral in nature.

Women's access to both personal and societal supports and a rights-based response are essential if this is to happen. Women can experience enormous barriers in their journey. This document attempts to address the many complex issues which factor in the development of a societal response that maximises women's journey away from family violence.

The research findings have indicated that issues relating to crisis and prevention are intrinsic to women's experiences of journeying away from family violence. This framework has been structured to be inclusive of parameters that address both these responses. It represents an integration of underpinning knowledge, principles and maximising elements. This provides a comprehensive blueprint for a whole-of-government response to women's experiences of family violence and gives direction for specific strategic responses to improve outcomes for women. It also provides some direction on a partnership between Government, service delivery systems and the Victorian community.

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