



## Royal Commission into Family Violence

### WITNESS STATEMENT OF ROSEMARY ANNE BATTY

I, Rosemary Anne Batty, of Tyabb, in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

#### **My advocacy work**

2 In the aftermath of my son Luke's murder in February 2014, I became an advocate for female domestic violence victims. In 2014, I established the Luke Batty Foundation to assist women and children affected by domestic violence. I was appointed 2015 Australian of the Year.

3 I have also been appointed a member of the Advisory Panel to advise Council of Australian Governments (**COAG**) on their 2015 agenda to address the problem of violence against women at a national level, building on the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children* to seek the agreement of all states and territories to prioritise the implementation of a national Domestic Violence Order scheme.

4 Since February last year, I have spoken to more than 100 organisations and groups about my story. The organisations have varied widely, from community groups, sporting clubs, unions, medical professionals, corporations and schools, universities, banks, councils and government departments.

5 I believe that one of the reasons I have been able to speak to so many people about my story, and why people are willing to listen, is because I am white, middle-class, well-educated and articulate. If I did belong to a rough neighbourhood, or I were Indigenous, or from another ethnic background or had a disability, I would not be heard.

#### **The key themes and messages**

6 The content of my speech on these occasions depends on the audience and the purpose for which I've been asked to speak. I never use notes. I relate the content of my speech to the audience members and their particular interests.

- 7 For example, a corporate organisation such as LinkedIn may have asked me to speak about my story in the context of how it demonstrates qualities of courage and resilience, the qualities that made me Australian of the Year. A community group might want to be educated about family violence; its forms, prevalence and responding to it.
- 8 Regardless of the event, however, I nearly always mention the same key themes and messages, including the following.
- 8.1 Prevalence of family violence: I always ensure I repeat the statistics about the prevalence of family violence. Even now, after there has been so much attention on this issue, I still don't assume that people know the statistics. People are genuinely surprised and horrified by how prevalent family violence is.
- 8.2 The fact that family violence is a gendered issue: the vast majority of people still don't understand that family violence is a gendered issue. People want to be able to blame drug and alcohol abuse, or a childhood upbringing affected by family violence, or even the victim herself. However, it is clear that most family violence is perpetrated by a man against the woman and that the gender inequities that exist in our society are a key driver of violence against women.
- 8.3 The importance of focusing on the perpetrator and not blaming the victim: the 'why doesn't she just leave?' debate is still an enormous obstacle and a question that is asked by both men and women. I make sure I explain the complexities of the issue; that leaving is when you could be at the highest risk for your life, you may fall into homelessness, you may fall into poverty. I ask, why is it that we have put onus of responsibility for safety on the victim's shoulders? Why are we constantly talking about victims rather than the perpetrator, and not questioning his behaviour? Why is it she has to hide or move or uproot herself or her family and he is able to have a beer with his mates and no one is challenging his behaviour?
- 8.4 Culture of women not being believed: in my view, we have a culture of women not being believed. We expect them to be lying, and require them to prove they are telling the truth. It is dangerous for a woman to show her emotions. As soon as she is seen to be emotional, depressed or anxious, it works against her and she is seen to be neurotic and untrustworthy.

8.5 Not realising you are in a situation of family violence: it can be difficult to realise that you are in fact in a violent relationship. I often use the analogy of the frog in the pot – if you put a frog in cold water and slowly turn up the heat, the frog won't notice the water is boiling until it's too late. Women often don't realise that what they are experiencing within their relationship is violence. Their self-esteem and confidence is hugely eroded and they often find it difficult to speak out about what's happening to them.

### **Response from audience members**

9 I have received, and continue to receive, so many letters, cards, poems, gifts and flowers. I have people of any age, from young children to the elderly, saying to me, 'Can I give you a cuddle?' or whispering, 'I was a victim once'. A couple of weeks ago I was opening a charity shop in Rosebud. A victim had come in because she knew I was going to be there and she said, 'You're the reason I've been able to get out.'

10 I think that speaking openly about these issues can make it easier for some women to confront their situation and make a change, and perhaps take steps to leave a violent relationship.

11 When you're in a violent relationship, your self-esteem is so eroded that you believe it's your fault. You're depleted in every way; worrying about where you are going to live, the effects on the children, how you can afford legal representation. In many cases and for many reasons, the woman is not confident to speak about the violent relationship. As a result, she wears the blame and remains silent. To hear other people are going through the same issues can have the effect of helping the woman to realise that it is not her fault and that she is not alone.

12 In many cases, the majority of people that attend the events at which I am speaking are women. From my experience, women tend to be more likely to be involved in these sorts of community events than men. One of the issues I am interested in is identifying opportunities for how to talk to men about these sorts of issues. How do we engage them? Where do they turn up? Where do they willingly go to have these conversations?

13 It can be very confronting for men to hear my story, although I don't speak ill of my ex-partner Greg. The reactions from men vary; there are some who say to me, 'You could have gone harder' in relation to how I speak about the gendered nature of family violence. I have a lot of warmth from men and a lot of close male friends who have been very emotionally supportive. There are others who sit quietly in the

audience and look uncomfortable and I am reminded that if 1 in 3 women experience violence, there must be some perpetrators in the room too.

### **The role of schools**

- 14 I understand that a lot is asked of schools; we expect schools to fix many social problems and address all kinds of issues in their curriculum. However, I think schools do play an enormous role in terms of creating cultural norms. Further, schools are extremely relevant as they form the basis of years of social interactions and development of relationship skills. Children practice their relationship skills from a very young age, as soon as they can communicate, and spend a large proportion of their time doing so in the school environment. As a result, it is very important for schools to take an active role in addressing not only the specific issue of family violence but the broader issues of gender equity and respectful relationships.
- 15 For example, schools should consider and work towards modelling gender equality. They should consider and work towards ensuring both teachers and students are behaving in a respectful way towards each other. It needs to be a whole of school approach, where issues such as the gender balance, communication, and respectful relationships are considered.
- 16 I also think schools could do better at responding to children who are being affected by family violence and addressing the issues that arise as a result of that situation. Schools should consider, for example, how children might react to the situation. They are not likely to come to school and explain to everyone exactly what is going on at home. So what are they going to do? What sorts of behaviours are they going to exhibit? Issues such as family violence often manifest in their behaviour. If you respond punitively to such children and stigmatise them, they may be more likely to become disengaged or drop out of school.
- 17 Schools have an opportunity to look at how they can understand such behaviour, address it appropriately and engage and mentor students and support the family.
- 18 There are some great schools already addressing these sorts of issues. However, to have a real impact at the societal level, accredited programs need to be rolled out in every school in every state as part of the curriculum. It cannot be piecemeal or ad hoc. I understand that this is currently occurring in the New South Wales school system.

## Leadership

- 19 I also believe this kind of attitudinal change needs to be led from the top.
- 20 Ken Lay, for example, is a great example of someone who provided leadership from the top. He knows that every police officer in the force doesn't necessarily think in the same way he does. But he created a legacy which I believe will continue. It appears to me that the police are heading in the right direction in wanting to be more transparent, understand the issues and how they can better respond to them.
- 21 My understanding is that societies which have greater gender equity, have less family violence. If we can achieve gender equity within our upper echelons, this will in time have an impact on our broader societal beliefs and attitudes.

## The role of the media

- 22 I think changing the culture is about raising awareness in the public domain to such a level that what we learn can't be unlearned, and what we know can't be unknown. I think it is imperative to raise this issue to the point where everyone knows it's an issue, everyone knows the statistics and everyone understands the different forms of family violence.
- 23 In my view, societal change happens through saturation. I think we have to saturate the public minds for a period of time so people can't escape it. Only then does there begin a deeper need for change. That is why the media is so important. If the media are reporting properly and intelligently, they have enormous influence in attitudinal change. The media are an integral part of the currently raised profile of family violence.
- 24 Once people are aware of the issues, we can start to challenge and question our cultural norms and our current approaches to the issue of family violence and, through this, begin to create change.



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**Rosemary Anne Batty**

Dated: 6 August 2015