Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs

Inquiry into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV) and Self-Harm and Suicide Deaths

Name: [Name Withheld – Survivor of Coercive Control]
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1. Introduction

I am writing this as someone who has survived domestic and family violence, coercive control, economic abuse, disability discrimination and years of systemic neglect.

I am also writing as someone who has attempted suicide more than once, because the systems that were supposed to help me instead made escaping violence feel impossible.

I am still here.
Not because the system protected me, but because I refused to die in the place it left me.

Research shows DFSV survivors are dramatically more likely to attempt suicide *(Devries et al., WHO, 2013)*. Coercive control specifically is a strong predictor of suicidal behaviour *(ANROWS, 2020)*.

But that's not the shocking part.

The shocking part is that Australia's own policies replicate the same tactics as abusers: isolation, surveillance, disbelief, economic punishment and the removal of agency.

This is what breaks people.
This is what almost broke me.

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2. Systems That Mirror Abuse

The worst part of surviving DFSV in Australia is discovering that leaving the abuser does not end the control. It simply transfers it to institutions.

These institutions don't realise they're doing it — but that doesn't make the consequences less lethal.

2.1 Endless retelling, reliving and re-proving

Every system asks for evidence of harm, then denies harm unless it is delivered perfectly.

Retelling trauma repeatedly is correlated with increased mental health deterioration *(Courtois & Gold, 2009)*.

2.2 No recognition of coercive control in systems where it matters most

Research consistently shows coercive control drives suicidality *(Stark, 2007; ANROWS, 2020)*, yet policies act like it's a fringe term instead of a daily reality.

2.3 Punitive responses to distress

Trauma responses are treated as instability.
Self-protection is treated as non-compliance.
Distress is treated as a procedural hiccup.

2.4 Fragmented systems mean survivors navigate a maze alone

The Productivity Commission (2020) and AIHW (2021) repeatedly state this fragmentation worsens outcomes. Survivors already running on adrenaline and fear are expected to solve a puzzle that would overwhelm any ordinary citizen.

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3. Lived Experience

I want to speak to the lived reality behind the data.

I am neurodivergent. I am a single mother. I grew up disadvantaged.
I have experienced intimate partner violence, parental alienation, coercive control and financial abuse.

And I have self-harmed more times than I can count because the world around me kept telling me, in a hundred indirect ways, that my survival was inconvenient.

There were moments where the violence was unbearable — but the violence was not the part that nearly killed me.

It was the systems that kept me trapped after.

It was being told:

- that child support "cannot consider coercive control"
- that even if my ex withheld my child for years, my care level is "0%"
- that I must pay full child support as if I chose not to see my child
- that challenging this will notify him, giving him the satisfaction of retaliation
- that my trauma responses look like "non-compliance"
- that distress from violence is a bureaucratic inconvenience

The system echoed my abuser using official language and government logos.

Every month I paid child support for a child I was legally allowed to see but prevented from seeing.
Every payment was a reminder that the abuse continued, just changed hands.

There is no spreadsheet for that kind of psychological torture.
There is no statistical category for the moment a survivor sits on the floor and says, "I can't do this anymore."
There is no checkbox for the nights I nearly didn't make it.

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4. Child Support: A System Built Perfectly for Abusers

If this inquiry wants to understand DFSV-linked suicide, it must examine the child support system — because it creates the exact conditions research warns against.

4.1 Withholding children is a recognised tactic of coercive control

Academic literature identifies manipulation of child contact as a core feature of coercive control *(Douglas & Stark, 2010; ANROWS, 2019)*.

Yet the child support formula treats it as a "care pattern," not an abuse pattern.

A father can withhold a child in breach of orders, and the mother is financially punished for his actions.
This is not neutral.
This is not accidental.
This is predictable systemic harm.

4.2 The system notifies the perpetrator if the survivor attempts to challenge the abuse

This is not a small oversight.
This is a breach of every principle of DFSV safety.
Safe disclosure pathways are internationally recognised as best practice *(SafeLives UK, 2020)*.

Australia is years behind.

4.3 Economic abuse is a known predictor of suicidality

Economic abuse increases suicidal ideation *(Stylianou, 2018)*.
The child support system facilitates economic abuse every time it:

- disregards coercive control
- penalises the survivor for withheld contact

- exposes the survivor to retaliation for trying to correct the assessment

The system becomes an arm of the abuser.

4.4 The survivor's emotional reality is erased

No one asks:

- What does it do to a parent's mental health to be forced to pay for a child they're prevented from seeing?
- What does it do to be legally correct but institutionally punished?
- What does it do when the only "choice" is between financial devastation or further abuse?

This emotional toll is not secondary.
It is the mechanism by which suicide risk escalates.

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5. Recommendations

1. Explicitly incorporate coercive control into child support policy and legislation

This aligns with ANROWS (2020), the National Plan (2022), and the Domestic Violence Death Review Team recommendations.

2. Create a safe, confidential review pathway for survivors

No automatic notification to the perpetrator.
Use risk flags.
Use specialist staff.

3. Establish a DFSV specialist unit within Services Australia

Trained in trauma, coercive control and economic abuse.
This reflects best-practice models in the UK and NZ.

4. Coordinate across Family Court, child support and DFSV systems

Fragmentation kills.
Integration saves lives.

5. Provide immediate financial protections for survivors experiencing DFSV-related care manipulation

Temporary reassessment pathways.
Debt pause options.
Survivor hardship categories.

6. Collect data on child support and suicide risk

Currently non-existent.
You cannot fix what you refuse to measure.

7. Embed survivors in policy design

Not tokenistically.
Not after decisions.
From the beginning.

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6. Conclusion

The inquiry is examining data on DFSV-related suicides.
But data will never tell you what it feels like in the moment a survivor decides their life has become too small, too controlled, too impossible to keep going.

Policies do not need to be violent to contribute to suicide.
They only need to be indifferent.

What almost ended my life was not “a lack of resilience.”
It was the slow erosion of hope at the hands of systems that refused to see the abuse happening right in front of them.

If this inquiry is serious about saving lives, it must treat coercive control and its reproduction in government systems as a national emergency.

Survivors do not need sympathy.
We need a system that does not help our abusers finish what they started.

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