

## Domestic Violence survivors find their voice

**National Release, embargoed until Thursday 11 February 2010, 8am:**

A group of Domestic Abuse Survivors have taken the rare step of standing up for change, taking a raft of concerns directly to the Prime Minister and his cabinet of Ministers.

In what could be a world first, The "It's STILL Not OK" lobby group has presented a report (attached) to the heads of Government identifying areas where systems are failing victims of domestic abuse and their children. These failings, they say, make it twice as hard to leave abusive situations and rebuild their lives.

Dr. Bonita Meyersfeld, an international human rights and constitutional lawyer who holds a doctorate from Yale Law School in Violence against women as a Human Rights issue says *"this is one of the strongest calls globally by victims of violence who have come together to lobby their Government for positive change to the policies and practices that are failing abuse survivors"*.

Dr. Meyersfeld, also a Professor and author of "Domestic Violence and International Law" (Hart Publishing) met with Lisa Close during a visit to New Zealand in January, she says *"Only these women know what the experience is in reality and it is exciting and inspiring to see this group make a stand for their human rights - they have my full support"*

The "It's STILL not OK" lobby group comprises women who are striving to become survivors not victims of domestic violence. Lisa Close, spokesperson for the lobby group says *"Our Government is spending vast amounts telling New Zealander's that Domestic Violence 'Is Not Ok' and victims are leaving abusive relationships in greater numbers than before, only to find that the same Government doesn't support them after they leave. Women tell me they feel twice abused - once by their partner and then again by the system"*

The Domestic Violence Act 1995 sets out to eliminate power and control in domestic relations. The reality for victims is that once they leave, the power and control is permitted to continue.

Lisa says *"They struggle to get protections orders and navigate their way through the court process which doesn't reflect their experience. Their mental health is often questioned. Many face financial crisis. It is common for them to be alienated by family and friends. They face drawn out court cases regarding custody of their children. They struggle to get help for their children traumatised from the effects of the violence. They receive inconsistent responses from Police regarding breaches of Protection Orders. They fear Child Youth and Family will take their children away. They battle to get Government Departments to understand their needs and their rights. Non-residents face being sent home without their belongings. Their wellbeing and general health is affected"*.

Survivors applaud the Domestic Violence Act 1995 but say it is simply not being implemented by Government agencies and the legal system making it an Act of words not deeds.

Lisa says *"Many women find the process too difficult. The reality we hear over and over is that to escape the violence women must leave their abusers with nothing and somehow support their children with little or no help. They often feel they cannot rely on the Justice system to protect them and their children. When these systems fail them they have nowhere to turn."*

The New Zealand Government is a signatory to The United Nations CEDAW (Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) and this obligates them to take all steps at their disposal to eliminate violence against women.

Ruth Herbert spokesperson for the Roundtable for Violence Against Women says *"the examples the survivors have provided of Government system failures are convincing evidence that our Government is not fully meeting its international legal obligations or the legal requirements in our own Domestic Violence Act (1995)".* Herbert asks *"Is the New Zealand Government encouraging women and children to leave abusive domestic situations or not? If our Government wants to fulfil its legal obligations then they need to start listening to these survivors and working with them to make the process of leaving as easy as possible, not impossibly hard as it is today".*

Lisa Close says the group has formed to create positive change for fellow victims of domestic violence. They wish to work with the Government appointed Family Violence Taskforce and individual Government agencies to create awareness for the realities that survivors face and take steps to put fewer barriers in their way. *"We realise that as survivors we have a unique perspective and the ability to make a real difference. We offer a way for all victims who have been through this experience to make their suggestions on how Government and legal systems could be changed to make the journey easier and more just. We would like to encourage others to contribute to our discussion papers and voice the issues they have faced. We also welcome any positive experiences that may help others. For a long time researchers and advocates have done their utmost to represent us but have not been heard. Domestic Violence survivors have felt too afraid or ashamed to speak out.*

*That has now changed.*

*It is our human right and we have found our voice".*

**ENDS**

### **About the “It’s Still Not Ok Lobby Group”**

The lobby group was formed by a group of women who had recently left abusive situations and met at Women's Refuge. These women are still going through the processes described in this document in order to keep themselves and their families safe and protected. The group states their purpose is to help clear the path for the next women who have the courage to leave their abusive relationships:

“We do this on behalf of the women who have found the incredible strength needed to leave Domestic Violence behind but are left struggling to survive, and the children who are given no voice and suffer on in silence - our future generation. We do this for those who find no way through this difficult process and return from where they came, or simply give up. We do this because we want to be able to recommend leaving violent and abusive relationships. We would like those following behind us on this journey to travel a more respectful and just path and to truly feel like survivors.”

Over 100 years ago Kate Sheppard fought to give women the right to make comment about laws that affected them. It was a world first. We hope that by taking this rare step to speak out and work directly with Government, that New Zealand will again have the opportunity to lead the world and address this human right issue that occurs globally.

### **For more information contact:**

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The survivor's document entitled “Protecting victims, rebuilding lives, sending the right message” is attached to this press release and is also available from the above email address or in printed version for \$10.

### **Interviews are available with:**

Lisa Close  
Ruth Herbert (Spokesperson for Roundtable for Violence Against Women) m: 027 448 6422

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