



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 11:00AM, SATURDAY 25 AUGUST 2018**

### **Domestic violence victims let down by gendered Social Security system**

Women experiencing domestic violence are often left at risk of homelessness with debts to Centrelink while violent partners have no liability, according to new research released today by the National Social Security Rights Network (NSSRN).

The major research report titled *'How well does Australia's Social Security System Support Victims of Family and Domestic Violence'* was launched at the NSSRN national conference in Sydney today by the CEO of Domestic Violence NSW, Moo Baulch, and attended by the NSW Shadow Minister for Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, Jenny Aitchison.

"In many ways, the social security system is based on outdated and gendered assumptions about how finances work in relationships", said Leanne Ho, Executive Officer of the NSSRN. "The expectation that members of a couple will share income and assets ignores gendered power imbalances in many relationships and increases some women's risk of domestic and family violence".

The research, which considers the relationship between social security and domestic or family violence, draws on the frontline casework experience of NSSRN's member community legal centres which provide free legal assistance to people having issues with their Centrelink payments.

In many of the cases studied as part of the research, the inability to secure income support forced some women and their children to stay in the home where they were subject to violence. In other cases, perpetrators used social security obligations to leverage unfair agreements about care of children.

"Delays in processing of crisis payments for people trying to escape violence and debts resulting from problems with Centrelink reporting obligations leave many of our clients in financial distress and at risk of homelessness" said Ho. "Often women seen by the system to have been living as a member of a couple are left with large social security debts while their violent partner or ex-partner has no financial liability".

While there have been significant improvements to the system's response to people experiencing family violence, the report's recommendations suggest areas where further improvement of policy and service delivery are needed to maximise support rather than presenting obstacles for those experiencing violence.

"Many of our clients reported significant distress in understanding their social security entitlements. Centrelink offices are not set up in a way that encourages disclosure of domestic violence and it has become more difficult to access social workers who can help support victims", said Ho. "This report highlights the need to adequately fund our services to assist people experiencing family violence and enable our work with the Departments of Social Services and Human Services to improve services for those who are currently falling through the cracks".

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