

# The Sydney Morning Herald

NATIONAL SOCIAL SERVICES

## How Centrelink leaves domestic violence victims out in the cold

By **Jenny Noyes**

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In 2009, Mona\* was the victim of a serious car accident that left her with physical injuries and a reduced capacity to communicate. She was awarded \$900,000 in compensation, and precluded from receiving social service payments for 10 years. But a few years later, after marrying and having three children, she was victimised again – by her husband's serious and sustained domestic violence.

By 2017, Mona's compensation money was gone. She left her abusive partner, who had coerced her into giving him \$80,000 to start his business; and had an AVO out against him, exempting her from seeking child support. She was relying on charity to feed herself and her kids.



Centrelink rules are putting vulnerable women more at risk. PAUL HARRIS

The violence was so serious, police requested an extension to the AVO. But Centrelink refused her application to waive the remainder of her preclusion period and allow her to receive the Parenting Payment – twice.

Mona was represented by Welfare Rights Centre (NSW) to appeal that decision, and eventually won. Her case forms part of a new report from the National Social Security Rights Network

(NSSRN) into the role Centrelink currently plays in further harming victims of domestic violence.

The report highlights the problems with Centrelink's one-size-fits-all approach to couples' finances – and found its inflexibility risks forcing domestic violence victims into homelessness by handing them large debts, or precluding them from payments after escaping abusive partners, as Mona's case demonstrates.

In other cases, men had stolen their partner's money, lied about their income and assets, refused to share their income with their family, withheld information needed for women to give accurate details to Centrelink, used intimidation and violence to coerce their partner into lying to Centrelink, and delayed tax returns to avoid child support payments while Centrelink assumed women were receiving them.

The research 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.

Leanne Ho, executive officer of NSSRN, says Australia's social security system is based on "outdated and gendered assumptions" about how finances work in relationships.

"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," she said.

Women in abusive relationships are often "left with large social security debts while their violent partner or ex-partner has no financial liability," Ms Ho said.

More than a third of cases analysed in the report involved a debt, often incurred without the debtor being aware they were receiving an incorrect payment or rate of payment.

Startlingly, the report found 60 per cent of cases involved homelessness or risk of homelessness.

The report also noted that in many instances, cases were resolved in the client's favour following NSSRN's intervention – meaning Centrelink was getting it wrong and forcing vulnerable clients into "unnecessary and often drawn-out appeal processes, adding significantly to their stress and trauma".

Katherine Boyle, principal solicitor at Welfare Rights Centre which represented Mona, said without their advocacy "it is highly likely that our client would have fallen through the cracks – as many others have done over the years."

Ed Husic, Shadow Minister for Human Services, said the report shows Centrelink "desperately needs the staff and the necessary training to deal with the added complexities confronting income support recipients dealing with family violence".

The report makes a number of practical recommendations for changing Centrelink's rules and definitions to better acknowledge and accommodate domestic violence victims, and enable staff to more easily navigate family situations that don't fit the assumed model.

Newly-appointed Minister for Families and Social Services Paul Fletcher said the report "provides important information on how policy is working in practice" and that his department would consider its recommendations.

Linda Burney, Shadow Minister for Families and Social Services, and for Preventing Family Violence, said services need to rise to the challenge.

"The circumstances confronting victims of family violence are complex, and it is up to the government, government agencies, and support services to rise to meet these complexities," she said.

"Labor has made commitments in these areas and will work towards ensuring that the social security system supports victims of domestic and family violence."

\* **Name has been changed**

**Support is available by phoning Lifeline 13 11 14; or 1800 RESPECT**



**Jenny Noyes**



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