

The banking sector can do its bit to combat family violence

Written by The Conversation USA

The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence has laid out a challenge to Australian banks [in its recommendations](#) to better respond to victims who are suffering from economic abuse as much as physical, mental and emotional abuse.

[The recommendations](#) focus on restoring the financial security of victims of family violence and measures to protect victims from further financial hardship and assist their economic recovery. The Australian Banking Association responded by making a commitment [to produce industry guidelines](#) for family violence within 12 months.

Banks are among the largest employers in Australia. For example, ANZ, which has engaged family violence campaigner and former Australian of the Year Rosie Batty as a consultant, employs 21,000 people in Australia, more than [half of them are women](#) .

The bank said in [its submission to the Royal Commission](#) that family violence was not only an issue among its customers but also in the bank's workforce.

More generally, there are financial implications in every case of family violence - most are severe and result in permanent financial hardship.

How are Australian banks responding to family violence?

Economic abuse is the most common form of family violence that confronts the banks but is the most [difficult to identify and is poorly understood](#) . [It can be in the form](#) of financial control, for example when a partner insists on seeing how all money is spent or makes important financial decisions without input or discussion; or financial exploitation when debts are accrued in the victim's name or a partner spends money needed for household bills; and also financial sabotage when someone is prevented by their partner from working or studying.

As part of my current research, I conducted interviews with ANZ employees who confirmed that staff in bank branches and call centres, reported dealing with customers who are experiencing, trying to leave, or have left abusive relationships. It's undeniable that some of the responsibility

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of responding to victims falls to the banks.

[Research shows](#) that staff training is critical to identify customers who may be experiencing family violence and to give them the skills to provide effective care and appropriate assistance.

Banks are also examining how abusive situations may be exacerbated due to banking procedures. My current research indicates this is proving difficult because changing procedures can have negative effects for other customers.

One of the ways that banks can get on the front foot is through financial education to help victims regain control of their financial situations. The ANZ will work with Rosie Batty to launch an internal Global Domestic Violence Strategy which focuses on education and awareness for employees and interventions for customers.

Another financial initiative [endorsed by the Royal Commission](#) is the provision of small loans through community organisations. The National Australia Bank has provided these sorts of loans through a [No Interest Loan Scheme \(NILS\)](#)

. The criteria for these loans can be changed to help the applicant, by not requiring them to have been in a fixed address for a period of time and also increasing the loan amount above the usual limit to allow for more household goods to be purchased.

The role of financial literacy

As pointed out in the [Royal Commission's report](#) much of the investment and attention to date is given to treating the aftermath of family violence; this is warranted and critically important. However, prevention efforts deserve matching investment if Australia wants to eradicate, not just treat family violence.

The commission recommended that the Victorian Government support the expansion of initiatives that deliver financial literacy training and education for victims of family violence, within two years.

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[A US study found that](#) offering financial education to domestic violence victims at certain times can empower women with the financial knowledge and skills needed to rebuild their lives. This critical time is when a victim first leaves an abusive relationship and is trying to navigate an independent life.

When people apply for financial products such as joint accounts or mortgages, [research in the UK recommends](#) banks can use this opportunity to help educate customers of the importance of financial independence and joint money management practices.

In Australia the ANZ has developed [MoneyMinded](#), a financial literacy training program which is a set of resources used by community organisations to help people build money management skills, knowledge and confidence. It includes a range of topics from budgeting, saving and dealing with debt to consumer rights housing and planning for the future.

Financial education is not a cure-all for economic abuse nor should it absolve banks from taking other actions needed to assist victims. It should be tailored to suit the context of family violence, delivered at the right time and in the appropriate manner.

It can provide women with the necessary support and also knowledge, skills and resources to help recovery from an abusive relationship and build resilience for the future. Also, there is the potential for financial education to provide women with strategies to prevent economic abuse or at least stem its impacts.

The Royal Commission for Family Violence has brought to Australia's attention the range of disparate sectors that have a critical role in the prevention and alleviation of the impacts of family violence.

The corporate sector have been formally called to action to "do its bit" to protect and help victims recover from family violence. No longer should the community sector have to shoulder the full burden of addressing family violence – it requires a concerted effort from all sectors.

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The National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line – 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732) – is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for any Australian who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/the-banking-sector-can-do-its-bit-to-combat-family-violence-57215>