

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Social security vital to women's safety but missing from national plan**

Social security reform should be a key focus of this week's Women's Safety Summit but is notably absent from agenda and the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children - despite the fact that access to income support is a vital safety net for women living with or escaping domestic violence.

Leanne Ho, Executive Officer of Economic Justice Australia, said:

"Social security must be central to any discussion of women's safety given the reality that socio-economic inequality and discrimination are key drivers of higher rates of violence against women, and that supporting victims' economic independence and security is key to ending family and domestic violence. It's harder for women experiencing domestic violence to escape and find safety without an independent source of income."

The National Plan outlines as its goal to "allow women who have experienced violence to rebuild their lives as quickly as possible as part of a community-wide response", noting "all systems need to work together to make a major difference to the prevalence and impact of violence against women".

"While the investment in women's economic security and safety announced in the Federal Budget is a positive, with financial support packages of up to \$5000 being trialled for people escaping family and domestic violence, there needs to be systemic and structural support through the Commonwealth social security system to ensure women's economic security", said Ho.

A forthcoming report from Economic Justice Australia looking at Centrelink debts and domestic violence, shows that survivors of domestic violence, usually women, are unfairly held responsible for social security debts in situations where the debt was the direct result of perpetrators' threats, physical violence and/or coercion.

"In many of the cases we looked at, the woman or her children received no financial support from their partner, or their alleged partner, during the debt period. They did not receive any direct benefit from the Centrelink payments allegedly overpaid, but now they owe a debt to Centrelink. The perpetrator of violence may have intentionally lied about their income or assets, and this lack of knowledge or misinformation led to the victim's debt", said Ho.

Many of the Centrelink debts examined in the report are the result of Centrelink assessing a victim of domestic violence to be a 'member of a couple'. The single rate of payment is more than half the

couple rate, based on the idea that the cost of living is lower for two people living as a couple than it is for two single people and the income and assets of both members of a couple are taken into account when working out how much they are entitled to receive. Where a person is assessed to be a member of a couple and Centrelink considers that they failed to advise Centrelink of commencing the relationship within 14 days, as required, a debt will be raised. The debt could be the difference between the single and couple rate, or if their alleged partner has significant income and assets, the debt could be for the full amount the person received, which can amount to tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“We have cases where the victim should not have accrued a debt because she should never have been considered by Centrelink to be a ‘member of a couple’ due to the domestic violence. Women can be left with significant debts of hundreds of thousands of dollars that they will be repaying for the rest of their lives, or even jailed as a result of their Centrelink debt, while perpetrators walk away with no repercussions at all. The ‘member of a couple’ rule, based on the idea of traditional gender roles, is out of step with the reality of modern relationships”, said Ho.

EJA’s forthcoming report identifies how the absurd rules around debt waiver mean debt recovery cannot be waived for victims of domestic violence even when they have done nothing wrong. Under the Social Security Act, a Centrelink debt can be waived in ‘special circumstances’ such as domestic violence – but not if the debt was caused by the person with the debt OR ‘another person’ making a false statement. This means that a woman’s violent and controlling partner can make the offending statement or omission, and she will be the one who is stuck with the debt or even worse, prosecuted for fraud.

“Until the system is reformed to recognise and reflect the nature of modern relationships and the impact of family and domestic violence, the social security system’s ability to play its role in addressing the economic insecurity of women will be limited”, said Ho.

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