

# THE BACKBONE COLLECTIVE LAUNCH PRESS RELEASE

Women experiencing violence given voice with new independent body

New NGO gives voice to women and their children let down by NZ's system

NGO says women are returning to violent partners as battling NZ system too hard

Women experiencing violence or abuse asked to join new women's collective.

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New Zealand has the highest rate of women experiencing violence and abuse in the developed world, which is due in part to our broken response system, says a new body launching this week.

“Violence against Women is NZ’s great shame. It is time to stop looking the other way and start listening to what women say about what needs to change. It’s time to start building a system that keeps women and their children safe and stops the violence and abuse from occurring.

“This week the world will mark International Women’s Day and it’s timely that all New Zealanders make a stand against the violence and abuse of NZ women’

The Backbone Collective “Backbone” is a newly established independent body taking action to change NZ’s alarming violence-against-women statistics (domestic and sexual violence and abuse being the most prevalent forms in NZ) by examining the present response system through the eyes of its users - women who have experienced violence and abuse.

“Many women tell us they have to battle the system and that it leaves them feeling unsafe and re-traumatised.

“Others tell us that they returned to the abuser as keeping themselves and their children safe and rebuilding their lives was just too hard,” says Ruth Herbert, one of Backbone’s founders.

Ruth has worked for years trying to improve the system, most recently as Director of Family Violence at the Ministry of Social Development and Executive Director of the Glenn Inquiry - an independent inquiry that provided a detailed outline of initiatives and reforms required to develop an integrated system for family violence in New Zealand. In 2014 Ruth co-authored an independent report ‘The Way Forward’ with Backbone Cofounder Deborah Mackenzie which showed how broken our current system is and recommended a model for an integrated response system to ensure that women get the right support and services at the right time in a way that would save the NZ economy in the long run..

Ruth says an integrated system would wrap around women and their children, keep them safe and help them rebuild their lives. Each part of the system would ‘talk to the others’ and share information about how to best support a woman and her family. Processes that women go through after reporting violence can include communicating with the police, GPs, safehouses and family courts as well as countless NGOs and Government departments.

“Women need to know that when they reach out for help the system will be there to help them. Instead women tell us they are finding a system that doesn’t understand their experience, that minimises the violence and abuse and that fails to protect them and their children.”

In a first for New Zealand, women’s feedback is gathered to then measure the success of the system and each of the processes within it. Women are the true experts says Ruth and their feedback is drawn through anonymous surveys and confidential focus groups.

“We want to make sure that the system that is supposed to protect women and their children is more consistent and powerful than the abuser. No one else is asking women how to achieve this goal.”

Backbone is wasting no time, having run its first survey late last year, with the following key findings from women experiencing violence or abuse:

- The current system is not keeping women safe
- Only 3% of women said that people who responded to them did an excellent job of understanding their experience and what they needed
- There is a lack of information available to help women navigate the system, understand who to seek help from, understand their experience of violence and abuse
- The Family Court is the highest ranking ‘issue’ that women want Backbone to focus its next survey on
- Women want an independent complaints body

Ruth says there is tellingly no review process of the current response system, which means there is no way to readily identify where the system is failing and to make improvements:

“You can’t fix what you don’t measure. We need to monitor and measure the system to see where it is going wrong.”

Ruth says the current system reveals huge cracks through which women and their children fall, BUT women's feedback can make all the difference.

"Women are the expert users of NZ's response system. This is why we use their feedback as evidence for change. Women who have experienced violence and abuse are central to improving the system.

"We want to hear from women who have experienced violence or abuse."

Being failed by the system has seen some women returning home to their abusers when a separation can place them in more danger through unsafe decisions being made within the system. This is no doubt a nightmare for the women and can spell dire results for their children.

"We know of children terrified of their violent fathers, who are forced to stay with them as their father has been awarded 50/50 or full custody even though they are violent and abusive," says Deborah Mackenzie.

Mackenzie has worked in the violence-against-women sector for many years as an advocate, network coordinator, policy analyst, and independent contractor. She has seen countless cases of women and children sidelined by the Family Court process:

"Women and their children are forced to endure years of mental anguish and financial ruin in the Family Court system even if the husband has been violent towards the woman and/or children. It's like one very important piece of the puzzle (the violence and abuse) is ignored in the decision making. There is a gaping hole in the picture which no one acknowledges and the woman and her children are falling into it"

Deborah says the flow-on effects of violence against women have other severe social consequences that add urgency to Backbone's agenda.

"Women who experience violence and abuse are more likely to attempt suicide, to be welfare dependent, to have mental health conditions, be homeless, abuse alcohol and drugs and more. By seeing these as red flags for women suffering the effects of violence or abuse effective intervention could lead to a reduction in the multiple consequential social effects.'

“International evidence is clear that children exposed to domestic violence are at greater risk of suicide. The New Zealand Youth '07 study found that both male and female students who had experienced or witnessed violence in their home were much more likely to have attempted suicide than students who had not experienced or witnessed violence in their home; 3.65 times for male students and 3 times more likely for female students.<sup>1</sup>

“Our youth suicide rates are the worst in the world. We believe that better responding to women when they have experienced violence and abuse will ultimately lead to a reduction in other associated social issues like this.’

Deborah says Backbone’s aim is to improve the overall health and mental well being of all New Zealanders by addressing our country’s severe violence-against-women problem.

Perhaps the most telling symptoms of New Zealand’s broken response system are the crimes against women that go under-reported or unreported, suggesting women have a deep mistrust of the system.

- Despite New Zealand’s high rate of domestic violence, a staggering 80% still goes unreported. One in 3 women experience violence or abuse from a partner or (ex) in their lifetime in New Zealand.
- Only 9% of sexual violence against women is ever reported to police even though almost a third of women experience it <sup>2</sup>. It is the least likely crime to be reported in New Zealand.

Deborah says Backbone wants to talk to the women who are and who are not represented in these statistics:

“It doesn’t matter if you have reported the violence and abuse before or if you have told no one about it - we still want you to join the collective so that we can hear what you think about the way our system responds.”

Deborah says Backbone wants to help women make complaints to the right places when the system puts them and their children in more danger than if they had not reached out for help.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/faculty/ahrg/\\_docs/2007-violence-report-2010a.pdf](http://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/faculty/ahrg/_docs/2007-violence-report-2010a.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *The 2006 Crime and Safety Survey*

Backbone Cofounder Tania Domett has campaigned against gender inequality for decades in her role as a researcher and evaluator. Her expertise in building secure, online data collection platforms, and quantitative research methods, has enabled Backbone to offer women a safe way to contribute their feedback on how to improve the response system on a grand scale, with potentially thousands able to participate.

Tania says Backbone's research is powerful as it is based on empirical research from the women who have actually experienced the system and is producing robust data:

“Backbone surveys women experiencing violence and abuse about different aspects of the response system and collates the findings into reports which are made publicly available. The surveys are anonymous so women do not need to worry about being identified. The online survey process is completely secure with the highest security protocols in place.”

Tania says Backbone is New Zealand's first and only independent watchdog of the system with this monitoring function which will become part of a system of continuous improvement driven by research, feedback, change and then more research.

Tania tells of the women who took Backbone's first survey last year and says there are many more who want to share their experiences with the system through Backbone's unique and anonymous data-gathering method.

“We are not prepared to wait any longer while we know more and more women and their children are being hurt by the system.

“Many reports have been written about where the system is broken but they have fallen on deaf ears.

“We think that government and others in a position of power will start listening when hundreds, and potentially thousands, of women speak up about what needs to change.”

Backbone is being established from the kitchen table with the founders and others giving of their time in a voluntary capacity.

“The more we develop this initiative the more impact we will be able to have. To do that we need all New Zealanders to get behind us – to share their particular skills to help us or to support us financially. And most of all we need women to join the Backbone and have their say.”

## GET INVOLVED

**Register** as a member who has experienced violence or abuse at <https://www.backbone.org.nz/>

**Offer your support** to help at <https://www.backbone.org.nz/>

**Like us** on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/thebackbonecollective/](http://www.facebook.com/thebackbonecollective/)

**Tell others** about Backbone

**Donate** to us at our Givealittle page at <https://givealittle.co.nz/org/backbonecollective>

**Email** us in confidence at [info@backbone.org.nz](mailto:info@backbone.org.nz)

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## The Backbone Collective Founders

### Ruth Herbert

Ruth is well known as a researcher, campaigner and advocate working to improve New Zealand's system response to violence against women and children. She has written and spoken extensively on the issue. The fact that Ruth is a survivor of domestic violence herself has meant numerous other survivors have trusted her with their stories and experiences of the system. In recent years she has been a member of the independent review into ACC's sensitive claims pathway, Director of Family Violence at the Ministry of Social Development and Executive Director of the Glenn Inquiry.

### Deborah Mackenzie

Deborah has worked in the violence against women sector for many years as an advocate, network coordinator, policy analyst, and independent contractor. She has a lasting commitment to ensuring that 'the system' listens to women's voices and responds to keep them and their children safe. Deborah has a strong interest in the justice sector. In 2014 Deborah co-authored The Way Forward report with Ruth Herbert which showed why we need an integrated response system in NZ and how to create one.

### Tania Domett

Tania is a researcher and policy analyst who over the years has worked with many agencies and organisations providing evidence-based solutions to improve the work they do. Tania sees violence against women as a human rights failure that must be addressed so that New Zealand women can exercise their fundamental human right to bodily integrity and freedom from fear. Tania believes violence against women is the most critical social issue facing New Zealand right now, from which many other forms of inequality and social harm stem, and that improving the response system is key to improving the life chances of not only women survivors, but also those of their children and entire communities.



## About The Backbone Collective

- The Backbone Collective “Backbone” is an entirely independent body formed in Feb 2017 by Founders Ruth Herbert, Deborah Mackenzie and Tania Domett.
- Backbone aims to recruit as many women as possible who have experienced violence or abuse and anonymously surveys them to collect data that will then be used to continually improve the response system.
- Backbone always listens to women and will do all it can to provide them with online information to help them understand how the system works, what resources are available for them and who are safe and understanding people in the system to approach for assistance.
- Backbone gathers evidence from women who have experienced violence and abuse in New Zealand to find out where the ‘leaks’ and gaps in the current response system are. Backbone reports this evidence to highlight problem areas and advocates for change to start a cycle of continuous improvement in the system.
- Backbone speaks the truth on behalf of women experiencing violence and abuse. It is entirely independent, so it can share information without the worry of having its funding cut. That said; Backbone has no funding for this venture and those involved are volunteering to make it happen. Backbone hopes other New Zealanders will support it to grow into something truly life changing for women.
- Backbone works with the media, Government, the legal system and all agencies working within the response system to help them understand what women are saying. Backbone also advises on how to implement change needed if its help is requested. Backbone charges for this service.
- Backbone acts as a watchdog of the Government, the legal system and all agencies working within the response system by using evidence that women give it through Backbone’s surveys and focus groups to recommend change, and to monitor what change is happening as a result.
- Backbone tracks actual progress against government work programmes and recommendations from other major reports. It does this by checking such programmes are doing what they said they would do - and what other authorities have said needs to change.
- Regular reports will be publicly released outlining our findings
- The Backbone aims to recruit supporters and volunteers who will help us build the Collective, to reach more women and collect more information from them and to develop a louder and louder voice calling for improvements to be made to the system. We need people with skills, time, professional advice and donations to help us with running costs.

## Backbone differs to other organisations working in the field of violence against women as Backbone:

- Is the only independent body focused on gathering the views of women about where the response system is and isn't working and using that information to shine a light on areas where improvements are needed
- Is the only body with robust client informed data that is available to the Government and agencies working within the response system to make improvements
- Is the only independent watchdog body for the violence-against-women response system in New Zealand.
- Is entirely independent, so we can share information without the worry of having our funding cut. That said; we have no funding for this venture and we are volunteering to make it happen – we hope other New Zealanders will support us so we can grow this initiative into something truly life changing for women.
- Demonstrates continuous improvement in its own processes by constantly asking members what can make Backbone work better for them.

## What Backbone does not do

- We cannot provide advocacy and support for individual women but we will provide online information on where good help and resources are available.
- We do not pretend to know the answers or be the experts - we think the women we work for know the system best.
- We do not make unfair or unsubstantiated accusations against other bodies helping women experiencing violence and abuse.
- We cannot implement fixes to the system - others are responsible for doing that.
- We do not accept funding from any body that will compromise our ability to be transparent, tell the truth and uphold our principles of putting women at the centre of everything we do.
- We cannot force change - only attempt to influence it.
- We do not offer membership to men experiencing violence or abuse.

## About Brillard & Tulloch Digital Marketing

We are an Auckland-based digital-marketing agency specialising in online marketing and advertising.

We are one of many volunteers helping to build The Backbone Collective to make New Zealand a safer place for everyone's benefit by trying to improve the response system that women in New Zealand face when they experience violence and abuse.

Get involved too - The Backbone Collective needs skills like ours. Register your interest as a supporter or a woman who has experienced violence or abuse at [www.backbone.org.nz/](http://www.backbone.org.nz/)