

THE BACKBONE COLLECTIVE

Responses from authorities to Backbone Watchdog Report

PRESS RELEASE

**Women from Backbone are appalled at lack of accountability
in Family Court system.**

**Those in charge of The Family Court refuse to listen to
women.**

The Backbone Collective was established two months ago by Deborah Mackenzie, Ruth Herbert and Tania Domett. It is an 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.

In early April Backbone released their first Watchdog Report - All Eyes on the Family Court - using the questions from 10 of their members to shine a spotlight on issues that women were raising in the Family Court.

“As soon as we launched women started contacting us and sharing horrendous stories of their experiences of the Family Court. We wanted to learn more about those issues so we went out to ten members to help us gather more insight.”

The Watchdog Report outlined fifteen themes identified by members of Backbone as ways in which the Family Court was putting women and their children who had experienced violence and abuse in more danger. In essence, those themes raised concerns that when women go to the Family Court seeking protection from a violent or abusive partner they are placed in much more danger by the Family Court itself through its practices, processes and decision-making.

“We forwarded the Watchdog report to the three parties who have authority over the Family Court – the Principal Family Court Judge, The Minister for Justice and the Chair of the New Zealand Law Society. we had imagined that the three people tasked with keeping women and children safe in New Zealand would be very concerned about what women were saying and would want to know if their system was making things worse not better.

“The three bodies have now all responded to our Watchdog Report (the last being Minister Adams on Friday last week). Unfortunately none of them have been open to the issues women have raised and none have attempted to answer any of the women's questions either!”

Backbone co founder Deborah Mackenzie states “We believe that the issues raised by the ten women were big red flags about what is going wrong in the New Zealand Family Court. The issues were so concerning to us that we designed a survey on the Family Court to gather more women's voices. 600 women who have experienced violence and abuse have answered the survey - nearly 500 of them have been part of proceedings in the Family Court. These women have resoundingly confirmed and amplified the issues raised by the first 10 women in the Watchdog Report.”

“The Principle Family Court Judge, the Law Society and the Minister all inferred that because the Watchdog report contained questions from only 10 women, that the issues their questions raised were somehow not important. Perhaps they will listen now that we have nearly 500 women reiterating the comments of the first 10 women. We will be releasing a number of reports over the coming months about the survey findings.”

Backbone members are seriously disappointed with Minister Adams response. Ruth Herbert cofounder of Backbone says “Over the weekend, we made the Minister’s letter available to the over 700 members on our facebook page and website. We invited them to let us know how the response made them feel. Here are some of their comments:

There is nothing inherent in anecdotal evidence that means the evidence should be disregarded or minimised as the Minister has done.

Not at all surprised by Amy Adams response. It's a form of control in itself. Gaslighting 101 - denying that anything is happening and we made it up so we start to devalue our own worth and ability to assess things for ourselves.

The Backbone Collective’s research is a SOS crying out for a humanitarian response by the Government, not procedural pointers by Ministers.

As a woman who has endured many years of domestic violence, the lack of understanding, empathy, and basic knowledge of how the family court works is disturbing.

The system is a big bully. And a liar. We live in country with the worst domestic violence statistics in the western world. But we have a legal system that is corrupt, and traumatises domestic violence survivors and their children in a brutal fashion. We have a court system that employs people who have ZERO training in domestic violence. Absolutely disgusted with Ms. Adams response.

I feel a fundamental and entrenched mistrust lies there, a cultural prejudice against abused women, and that officials are truly afraid to hear from us. Officials would rather propose changes to the letter of the law (at best hoping this will 'fix' the problem, at worse trying to look like they are doing their bit in election year).

Hon. Amy Adams is alleging that Judges are making fair and unbiased decisions in domestic violence cases, and that is simply not true; their decisions are unfair and biased.

Hon. Amy Adam writes, ‘the judges role in proceedings is to listen to the evidence’, which is such a joke because the judge [I had] refused to listen to any evidence relating family domestic violence.

“It is outrageous that Principal Family Court Judge Ryan and Minister Amy Adams would suggest that the current complaints process is a safe and effective route for Backbone members

to use. It simply is not. 30% of women from our survey did complain – including complaining to these authorities – and most were either not satisfied with the response they received, or did not receive a response at all. The 70% of women who did not complain said this was because the process was too hard, they were too scared or they thought the process would trigger their trauma.”

Ruth explains “Minister Adams infers that the Family and Whanau Violence Bill currently before select committee will address issues raised in the Watchdog Report. Backbone members are saying it won’t even touch the sides. Women are telling us that the problems in the Family Court are about how the legislation is implemented, interpreted and decision making around the legislation – not in the legislation itself. We see nothing in the Family and Whanau Violence Bill that will address the problems Backbone members have told us about.”

Deborah Mackenzie adds “The women are telling us their experiences of violence and abuse are shut down, minimized and not believed by the Family Court – for example over 50% of the women who participated in our survey said that the violence and abuse was minimized and told it was at the lower end of the scale, 30% said the violence and abuse was excluded from the evidence by the Judge. These practices mirror the abusive behaviour the woman have sought protection from.”

“Something is terribly wrong, says Deborah, when over 80% of the survey participants tell us that they felt the abuser was viewed as ‘safe’ by the Family Court even when their experience was that he is not.”

GET INVOLVED!

Register as a member who has experienced violence or abuse at

<https://www.backbone.org.nz/contact/>

Volunteer your help at <https://www.backbone.org.nz/contact/>

Like us on Facebook at [facebook.com/thebackbonecollective/](https://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

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For more information: Ruth Herbert ruth@backbone.org.nz

Backbone Collective Cofounders

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.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12AM WEDNESDAY 17 MAY 2017

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 anybody 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