

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 8 June 2017**

# **THE BACKBONE COLLECTIVE**

## **FIRST FAMILY COURT SURVEY REPORT PRESS RELEASE**

**Royal Commission of Inquiry desperately needed into  
functioning of the New Zealand Family Court**

**Backbone answers Prime Minister's call for external link to  
real service users' feedback**

**Women tell Backbone the Family Court puts them and their  
children in more danger**

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The Backbone Collective was established three months ago and is voluntarily staffed by Deborah Mackenzie and Ruth Herbert. 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.

“Backbone is not-for-profit and is working outside of government to enable women who have experienced violence and/or abuse to have their say about how the system that responds to them can work better - to make them safer and help them rebuild their lives,” says Ruth Herbert, one of Backbone's founders.

“When we launched we were inundated with registrations from women from all over New Zealand. Our membership has swelled to over 800 members in just three months. Women obviously want to tell those in authority where the system is failing them”, says Deborah Mackenzie.

Backbone released its first Watchdog Report 'All Eyes on the Family Court' early April 2017 based on questions from 10 Backbone members about the Family Court. At the time of releasing the report Backbone opened a survey to New Zealand women who have experienced violence and abuse to find out more about the Family Court. Over 600 women took part in the survey and 496 of those women have been involved in Family Court proceedings.

Backbone is releasing its first Family Court Survey report 'Out of the Frying Pan and into the Fire' publicly today.

“We were really relieved to hear the Prime Minister announce yesterday at the Family Violence Summit in Wellington that the Government needs to and wants to hear how the people that use its services are finding them.

In his opening address Bill English said: *“Any discussion we have about a public service has to be focused on the people for whom the service exists – that is not the provider, not the agency and not the Minister.”* So we are really pleased that

we can answer that call so quickly and comprehensively. Our report shares with those in authority what nearly 500 women have to say about the Family Court” says Deborah Mackenzie.

Backbone is pleased that the Government acknowledges the lack of trust that exists between service users and that those in authority see the need for independent organisations like Backbone to shine the light on issues they themselves cannot see. Prime Minister English said: *“There is just a whole lot of things that policy makers do know that other people don’t know about how public policy works, but there are a whole lot of things we just can’t know and we need that external pressure – it is a vital source of change.”*

Women have told Backbone loudly and clearly that when they go to the Family Court seeking protection after leaving an abusive partner their situation and that of their children is made worse not better. This is of enormous concern and requires urgent attention by all those in authority.

*“Read the report and see for yourselves – action is required right now. Women and children are telling us they need change urgently for their safety. The number of women raising serious issues with the Family Court signals that greater investigation is needed and the only safe and appropriate way that investigation can happen is through a Royal Commission of Inquiry – that is the only responsible step Government can take based on the information contained in this report.”* says Ruth Herbert co-founder of Backbone.

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](mailto:info@backbone.org.nz)

For more information: Deborah Mackenzie [deb@backbone.org.nz](mailto:deb@backbone.org.nz)

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## **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.

## **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 an 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.

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- 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 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