



Report calls for re-design of banking products to protect women from financial abuse

“My message to financial institutions is, ‘Do not become active participants to intimidation, harassment and financial abuse.’”

Victim-survivor of financial abuse

22 November: A new report released today from the Centre for Women’s Economic Safety (CWES) calls for banks to disrupt domestic violence in Australia by re-designing products to prevent financial abuse.

Rebecca Glenn, CEO of the Centre for Women’s Economic Safety says *Designed to Disrupt* makes a series of recommendations for banks to make it harder for perpetrators to use financial abuse as a tactic of coercive control.

“Currently, banking products are designed in a way that assumes all relationships are healthy and equal. But the reality is that financial abuse is rife in Australia – and there’s more banks can do to protect victim-survivors.

“Banking products can and should be re-designed so that couples who set up joint accounts have protections in place from the very beginning.”

The report calls for all 97 Australian banks to make simple but transformational changes to their products – starting with changing terms and conditions to make it clear that a bank account is no place for abuse.

Report author and former bank executive Catherine Fitzpatrick, says “Few other businesses are better placed to protect women against financial abuse and its devastating health and economic impacts for them and their children.”

Minister for Social Services Amanda Rishworth said financial coercion and abuse was one of the many barriers to women and children leaving a violent partner, and it was important that financial institutions looked at how their products and services could be improved to help meet the goal of ending gender-based violence within a generation.

“Women should not have to choose between their financial security or their safety,” Minister Rishworth said.

“I welcome the findings of this report and thank the Centre for Women’s Economic Safety CEO Rebecca Glenn and report author Catherine Fitzpatrick for their important work. I hope that along with the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 this report will assist in achieving our goal to reduce – and ultimately end – violence against women and children.

“Perpetrators should not be enabled by systems that exacerbate their abuse.” Minister Rishworth said.

The paper highlights the banking products commonly implicated in financial abuse are joint products such as transaction accounts, credit cards, personal loans and mortgages. It recommends specific changes to counter the ways products are weaponised. For example, setting up every joint account with separate passwords, logins and portals for each person so it’s simpler and safer to separate if the relationship ends or is abusive.

Ms Fitzpatrick says, “I’ve seen first-hand the progress Australian banks have made to improve support for customers who disclose domestic and family violence.

“Their focus has rightly been on the safety of victim-survivors and addressing the harm of financial abuse after it’s occurred.

“Now it’s time to send a clear signal to perpetrators that abusive behaviour is unacceptable. “

Banks have taken the first steps, modelled on the eSafety Commissioner’s Safety by Design. The report includes new data showing:

- More than 90% of customers stopped sending abuse through payment descriptions following a warning letter from their bank
- Since 2020, more than 500,000 abusive transactions have been intercepted in real time; and
- 3,000 customers have been issued a warning letter, had their online banking suspended or were exited from the bank.

Ms Fitzpatrick says: “That’s a powerful example of how banks can play their part in ending gendered violence within a generation.

“I’d urge them to keep going and introduce Financial Safety by Design for a wider range of products.”

Financial Counselling Australia CEO Fiona Guthrie said financial counsellors saw the devastating toll of financial abuse among their clients every day and recognised the role banks can play in preventing that abuse.

“It’s essential that banks have safeguards in place to protect people against economic abuse and the crippling impact it has on their health and wellbeing, and that of their children.”

Ms Guthrie said the report highlighted the practical steps that banks have taken to reduce financial abuse, but that there was still much more than can be done.

“Embedding safety by design would be ground-breaking. Banking products should not be used as weapons to harm people. The key opportunities to do that are with joint accounts and lending products, and this report shows just how that can be done.”

Ms Glenn says: “Women are more than twice as likely as men to experience financial abuse, and they do so within existing structural economic inequality.

“Financial coercion can stop women from leaving their abusive partner, it strips them of their financial autonomy and can wreck their credit score and leave them mired in debt.”

To victim-survivors of financial abuse, Ms Glenn says: “Know that you are not alone. The system can be very unhelpful and difficult to navigate. We have resources available, and you can start by going to financialsafety.org.au.”

The report has been released ahead of the second **International Economic Abuse Awareness Day**, which takes place this Saturday 26th of November.

For more information about CWES: <https://cwes.org.au/>

For resources: <https://financialsafety.org.au>

CWES CEO Rebecca Glenn is available for interviews, as is Catherine Fitzpatrick, author of the report ‘Designed to Disrupt: Reimagining banking products to improve financial safety’.

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