

SOME RECENT THOUGHTS ON COLLUSION

Definition: Collusion – *a deceitful, secret agreement: doing nothing to stop a perpetrator is covertly condoning what he is doing (turning a blind eye to criminal behaviour); protecting him from being held accountable, dismissing the seriousness of the abuse. “Staying out of it”, “doing nothing”, or “not doing what needs to be done” permits perpetrators to continue abusing and places the victim in greater danger. It doesn’t matter if it is unintentional, inadvertent, implicit, or unconscious – **COLLUSION is COLLUSION!***

Collusion emboldens perpetrators because there is impunity for their criminal actions. This exponentially increases the risk of harm for the victim/survivor.

“Less than helpful” responses are not neutral. They are dangerous and, in many cases, deadly, as our Qld Fatality Review Committee Reports remind us annually. Are we listening? Systemic failure, systemic inadequacy, systemic incompetence, systemic complacency all contribute to domestic violence fatalities. The need for tight, integrated, and coordinated community responses is paramount. Even helpful responses from an agency or a professional, can be undermined and sabotaged, by other professionals or organisations if we do not act uniformly and consistently safely and accountably for victim/survivors. Recently, when Professor Kerry Carrington reported on the death on a Qld DV victim, she called the response to the woman’s repeated cries for help, a **‘calamity of errors’**. These errors can include: missed opportunities; small mistakes which compound; failures to communicate risk information; rushing the intervention process; inconsistency; lack of awareness of unintended consequences; working in isolation, insufficiently trained and inadequately supervised; and inappropriate work practices.

All of us who work with perpetrators of domestic violence, and all who work in responding to victim/survivors need to work intentionally and consistently to avoid ‘a calamity of errors’. We know that is what contributes to women’s deaths. In some cases, with such systemically poor responses, victims can become **‘dead women walking’**. It is that predictable. However, we are ‘joining the dots’ and ‘reading the writing on the wall’ after the fact instead of before. Too late then. So, predictable is not leading to preventable. If domestic violence homicides are so predictable, why as a community are we

not better at prevention? We have to learn from past mistakes to change the ending for other victims/survivors/

Individual practitioners and our systemic response can collude with perpetrators. We all need to be on our guard against this as our common work practice. Collusion can take many often subtle and covert forms. I have identified some and illustrated them below. I am sure you could add to this list. We need to discuss collusion in our staff training, in our services, in our professional development, in our supervision and management. We need to increase our critical awareness of this problem and further develop ways and means to circumvent it.

- 1. Are we facilitating women's safety or are we frustrating her safety needs and safety plans?*
- 2. Are we focusing due attention on the offender and his level of risk and responding swiftly and certainly to contain his dangerousness?*
- 3. Are our organisational policies and procedures taking precedence over her safety? Do they need to be changed?*
- 4. Are we working together (courts, police, corrective services, child safety, women's services, men's programs, allied health services, government departments, etc) or are we undermining and sabotaging each other?*

These questions must be answered if we are going to stop domestic violence homicides.

Sometimes, maybe even often, in our work, we are under pressure. (Although never under as much pressure as the victim – let's not forget her). Within agencies, we should never work alone. We need a team approach, with specialised training, supervision, and accountability processes in place, with adequate supports, resources, and oversight, to work consistently and effectively for safety and accountability. Risk assessment, risk management, and safety planning should never be left to an individual to manage alone. That weight is too heavy and the consequences too dire for one person to bear. This is why **integrated and coordinated systemic responses** are critical for safety and accountability. Individual collusion and systemic collusion are preventable.

In fact, women's safety is depending on this.



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