‘Passion around Violence against Women’:
Billi Clarke and the Victorian Domestic Violence Services Movement

Jacqui Theobald

PhD Candidate, Centre for Applied Social Research
RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC. 3001
jacqui.theobald@rmit.edu.au
School of Social Work and Social Policy
La Trobe Rural Health School
La Trobe University, Bendigo, VIC. 3552
j.theobald@latrobe.edu.au

Abstract: Billi Clarke is a staunch advocate for women and their right to live free from violence. This paper examines Clarke’s leadership within the context of the Victorian domestic violence services movement. In addition to working within a range of domestic violence services for more than twenty years, Clarke has initiated new directions for the sector by means of establishing innovative services, and radicalising the practice of existing ones, in part with the aim of improving service responses for women with diverse subjectivities and requirements.

Keywords: Billi Clarke, domestic violence, women’s refuge movement

As a feminist and political activist, Billi Clarke has been a staunch advocate for women, and their right to live free from violence, since she was a teenager. This paper will highlight Clarke’s leadership within the context of the Victorian domestic violence services movement, from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. The Victorian domestic violence services movement emerged as part of women’s liberation when the first women’s refuge was established in Melbourne in 1974. Within the movement, Clarke’s leadership has been marked by a consistent commitment to promoting legal justice and accessible services for women who have traditionally been marginalised by mainstream domestic violence services. In addition to working within a range of these services for more than twenty years, Clarke has been in the vanguard of initiating new directions for the sector and radicalising the practice of existing ones to include women with diverse subjectivities and requirements and those whose experience of violence has occurred outside the home. Clarke’s leadership style can be characterised as forthright, fearless and candid, and she has been unflinching in raising her concerns and criticisms publicly to highlight the ways the domestic violence service system has mirrored the exclusionary practices of mainstream society.
Whilst services providing accommodation to women and children in crisis have existed for a long time, the refuge movement of the 1970s made explicit the link between what became known as domestic violence and the need for refuge.\(^3\) Using creative forms of political campaigning, members of the movement made public what had otherwise been considered a private issue, and identified the ‘intolerable circumstances’ facing women in their intimate relationships as a reason for large numbers of women and children seeking emergency accommodation. The first refuges established in the 1970s operated as communal households, and those that identified with radical feminist politics operated under collective structures where violence against women was conceptualised within the same context that informed their understanding of all forms of women’s oppression.\(^4\) Radical feminism came to be the dominant theoretical discourse within the refuge movement and thus domestic violence was defined within the parameters of gender inequality and the patriarchal home.\(^5\) This framing of the problem worked to challenge a number of long-held assumptions about the causes of domestic violence as a result either of the failure of women, or of ‘aberrant conduct of individual men’.\(^6\) Victorian refuges were also particularly focused on safety from their beginnings, an emphasis exemplified by their powerful campaign to maintain the secrecy of their addresses during the 1970s.\(^7\) Whilst the high-security model of refuge continues today, outreach and other specialist women’s domestic violence services were also gradually developed, and services have become increasingly responsive to the diverse requirements and subjectivities of women.

Born in 1958, Clarke grew up in a housing commission estate in Frankston, an outer suburb of Melbourne, where her political awareness, and her feminism, began at a young age. Clarke recalls that she had ‘always been a feminist’ and, unlike other adolescents at the age of fourteen, she wasn’t ‘getting in trouble for going out with boys … [but] for attending pro-abortion rallies’.\(^8\) She recalls that her mother ‘was horrified’ and, like the rest of her family, simply ‘wished [she] was normal’.\(^9\) Clarke reflects that she was ‘an odd child’, who was ‘highly political’ but felt unsure about ‘where it came from’.\(^10\) However, Clarke’s memories provide some clues as to the origins of her identity as a feminist and political activist. And, although she characterises her involvement in the domestic violence services movement by the mid-1980s as ‘accidental’, it seems probable that her past experiences and identity played a significant role. Institutions such as the police and the nuclear family operated as systems of overt oppression for Clarke as a young woman. She recalls, for example, how the housing commission estate where she grew up ‘did not cope with her sexuality’\(^11\) as a lesbian in a ‘straight
world’. Clarke had also experienced violence within her family perpetrated by her alcoholic father, and had been assaulted by police, who would frequently target the gay community and ‘bash the crap out of you’. Indeed, it was a result of these kinds of experiences that Clarke ‘knew about injustice and, in the early days, anger at this injustice was [her] driver’. It was conceivably Clarke’s desire for action against the injustices experienced by women, combined with her sense of solidarity with other lesbians, that propelled her to join the women’s liberation movement as a young teenager. This provided her with a ‘flourishing intellectual environment’ as well as a new framework for interpreting women’s lived experiences, just as historian Anne Curthoys has noted was the case for many other women.

Clarke began attending meetings at the Women’s Liberation Centre (WLC), which opened in Little Latrobe Street in Melbourne in March 1972. The WLC in Melbourne was more closely connected to working-class activism and trade unionism than was its counterpart in Sydney, and its members were often affiliated with the Communist Party. Whilst Clarke was not part of the Halfway House Committee that emerged from the WLC to establish Victoria’s first women’s refuge, she was engaged in the initial ‘discussions and early meetings around violence against women’. Taken together, these experiences undoubtedly enhanced her class consciousness, awareness of violence against women and the destructive consequences for those who were marginalised on the basis of their sexuality. Through her engagement with the women’s movement she learned direct action tactics and applied them to her leadership of local campaigns on issues relating to young people and women’s rights. While still at school she made a film about the women’s liberation movement, which she envisaged would be used ‘as an educational tool for high school students’. Clarke’s political convictions and activism were, therefore, well developed before she left high school. However, her teachers were unable to deal with her attempts to ‘mount political campaigns’, which partly explains why she left at the age of seventeen. In pursuit of more meaningful activity, she then established a youth action group in Frankston, which worked to generate employment options for young people—a model that was subsequently adopted state wide and funded by the government.

It was when she became involved in the establishment of ‘At Last’ Young Women’s Refuge during the early to mid-1980s that Clarke discovered her ‘real passion around violence against women’. As she recalls, ‘you were able to be violent to your children, and your wife, and whoever else you fucking wanted to be in those days without anything really happening’. But, at this time, women’s services and organisations were rapidly expanding, and general issues of concern to women were assuming an increasingly central
place on the government’s political agenda. The refuge and broader women’s movement’s lobbying were having a significant impact, generating impetus for feminists in the bureaucracy to develop policy and to find funding for new services in relation to domestic violence.23 ‘At Last’ was funded in this context.24 It aimed to provide support to young women who were very often unable to access mainstream women’s refuges. However, it was not considered by workers in refuges to be a part of their movement, which was restricted to adult women and their children.25 Clarke also noted that many of the young women coming to the refuge were from non-Anglo backgrounds, had often experienced sexual and/or physical assault from their fathers and were frequently ‘punished around their sexuality’.26

Until very recently, the Victorian domestic violence service system was dominated by a model of high-security communal refuges with secret addresses, but it is now widely acknowledged that ‘the model … did not suit a lot of women’.27 Many refuges imposed strict rules, which had the unfortunate consequence of excluding ‘women who had older boy children, women who didn’t want to move from their region, women who couldn’t or wouldn’t live communally, women who had mental/physical health issues, [and] women who didn’t want to sever contact with their partner’.28 Over time, the mainstream domestic violence services movement was increasingly challenged to incorporate the differing requirements and subjectivities of women into their services. Migrant and Aboriginal women, for example, were active from the 1980s onwards in responding to and promoting the needs of women in their communities for such services.29 Lesbian women and those with disabilities were similarly marginalised, and domestic violence services activists in Melbourne increasingly tackled this problem from the early 1990s.30 Critiques from these groups presented new opportunities for the movement, whose conceptualisations of feminism, and domestic violence, had tended to universalise the experiences of middle-class, Anglo, able-bodied and heterosexual women. It is important to note, however, that refuges were never allocated additional funding to support these kinds of innovations, and were radically under-funded from the outset.31 Nevertheless, by the mid-1990s, the movement was generally acknowledging that its service response ‘required diversification’.32 Indeed, some refuges had already adapted their ways of operating to become more responsive; for instance, Brenda House undertook to implement a dispersed model of accommodation, enabling workers to support women with mental health and substance abuse issues outside a communal setting.33 Moreover, rural refuges were often forced to approach the issue of security differently, and, as a result, they often worked in close collaboration with their local communities. Some did not adopt
In 1989, Clarke attempted to respond to the particular needs of women with mental health issues by establishing an outreach service called ‘Safe Place for Women.’ The organisation operated as a feminist collective, and provided support for women who combined these problems with an experience of domestic violence. Clarke initiated the service because, as she recalls, those women:

[W]ere not being catered for anywhere and unfortunately probably still are not … they were not accessing mainstream services [and] were not being treated seriously by even the inadequate police response or court response in those days. They were often losing their children based on their mental health and were not able to live in the communal living setting which was the only model of service available.  

The model of service designed to provide outreach support to women experiencing domestic violence was new to Victoria at this time; even so, by the mid-1990s there was several services that had been established across the state. Controversy surrounded their development, however, and a clear divide emerged between refuges and outreach services. This reflected, in Clarke’s view, the position of some refuges who ‘saw [outreach] as a real threat’ and ‘a watered-down response to domestic violence’. But the position of refuges can in part be explained by the fact that, throughout the 1990s, domestic violence services confronted a barrage of changes imposed by the state government, including proposals for a service model emphasising outreach services at the expense of refuges. In the same period, domestic violence services faced serious challenges relating to their relationship with their state funding bodies. In particular, services suffered a rigorous application of economic rationalist principles under the Kennett Liberal government. Whilst domestic violence services managed to survive, they were subjected to transformed methods of administration and governance. In particular, the application of free market principles to the delivery of human services meant that human services delivery had to adopt different methods of operating to survive.

By the mid-1990s, Clarke had established another domestic violence outreach service called ‘Women’s Place’, which also functioned as a drop-in centre for women and children. Within a service system primarily designed to maintain its anonymity, Women’s Place worked with the contrary aim of providing ‘a public face to domestic violence’. Based in Morwell in country Victoria,
which had one of the highest rates of reported domestic violence in the state, this new service ‘put domestic violence right in the face of the broader community and forced police to do their job by continually exposing the level of violence through media events and by never shutting up’.  

Clarke recognised that domestic violence was originally conceptualised by the refuge movement as occurring within the private sphere of the patriarchal home, reflecting a tendency to universalise the experiences of white, heterosexual and able-bodied women. As she argued, an unfortunate effect of this policy was a lack of attention to the service needs of those women whose experiences of violence occurred outside of the home. Continuing a trajectory of establishing services designed to respond to the needs of marginalised women, Clarke established the St Kilda domestic violence outreach service in 1997. In this capacity, Clarke recounts how she was seeing:

[W]omen who were not necessarily experiencing intimate partner violence, but it was environmental. Like women living in rooming houses, sex workers, homeless women who were experiencing violence on a daily basis … And we’re seeing that today, if a woman’s not in an intimate partner relationship, she’s not getting a service … There was no real thought given [to] that whole group of women that are already marginalised for different reasons … it really was focusing on white middle-class women who were just experiencing that physical violence … Now I work in a service with women exiting prison, almost all have experienced violence and they never get seen by specialist (refuge/outreach) services.

Inspired by what she was witnessing in her day-to-day work in St Kilda, Clarke publicly challenged Victorian refuges to ask themselves whether they ‘want[ed] women to fit the model of service that we operate, or should we be changing the model to actually fit the women that we are supposed to be servicing?’ In particular, Clarke criticised refuges for not being open to the needs of ‘women who work, to NESB women, or to women whom we may describe as having “difficult behaviours”’. These criticisms were also supported by advocates of Aboriginal and migrant women.

The peak body representing Victorian domestic violence services at this time was the Victorian Women’s Refuges and Associated Domestic Violence Services (VWRADVS). VWRADVS represented women’s refuges, outreach services, the Refuge Ethnic Workers Program (REWP) (later Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service), and other related services including the Women’s Refuge Referral Service (WRRS) (later Women’s Domestic
Violence Crisis Service), Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre (DVIRC), and Women in Supportive Housing (WISH). VWRADVS was built on a number of subgroups, including a legal group of which Clarke was a member from the mid-1990s onwards. Clarke led the group to engage the legal community in forums that encouraged debate in relation to legal justice for women and children, particularly in relation to the issue of Legal Aid funding, which had been slashed following the 1996 election of the Howard-led Commonwealth coalition government. The group engaged key women magistrates, including Sally Brown and Anne Goldsbrough, and stressed the need for their profession to take into account the safety needs of women and children experiencing violence during legal proceedings. The group were also supported in their work by the then state Liberal attorney general, Jan Wade, who met them on numerous occasions; there, representatives such as Clarke were able to raise concerns in relation to the impact of Legal Aid funding cuts on women and children experiencing domestic violence. Clarke asked Wade to appoint her to the community member position on the Legal Aid Consultative Committee. An advocate for domestic violence services, Wade agreed to Clarke’s appointment. The experience enhanced Clarke’s awareness of the ‘blatant discrimination’ in the allocation of Legal Aid funding to women experiencing domestic violence. She found that funding decisions were made arbitrarily, often on the basis of whether the committee liked or disliked a woman. This prompted her to produce a report titled Trial by Legal Aid, published with funding from the Women’s Trust. The report exposed the appalling experiences of Melbourne women within the judicial system, and included a number of case studies of women whose Legal Aid funding had ceased once their allocation was exhausted. Many thus lost legal representation, which had at times resulted in them being cross-examined by men who had committed crimes against them. Continuing a long tradition of feminist challenges to the provision of welfare to women within a deserving and non-deserving paradigm, Clarke’s report ensured change ‘within the practice of the grants division’, to make them ‘much more accountable for decisions of not granting aid rather than just, “we’re not doing it”’. As I have suggested, Clarke’s leadership has been characterised by an attempt to provide services to women who were excluded from the mainstream. Thus, during the early 2000s, when she ‘finally got [her] hands on a refuge’, she wasted no time in radicalising its practices and developing a ‘new model of service’. As manager of Mary Anderson Lodge (MAL), a Salvation Army–auspiced inner city Melbourne refuge, Clarke ‘dropped the high security profile’ and set about encouraging women to ‘determine their own level of required security’. Women were encouraged to decide for themselves ‘who would know where they were’, and to ‘continue working and … invite
supportive family and friends into the space’. Women also had the possibility of opting out of living communally because the accommodation offered private as well as shared facilities. These changes enabled MAL to accept a range of women who had been unable to access other refuges, or for whom other refuges were too restrictive; they included sex workers, women using drugs, women in rooming houses, and Aboriginal women seeking respite shelter who ‘didn’t want to leave the relationship but wanted time out during times that they identified as high risk’. Significantly, women who would ‘never [have] survived the strict rules of high security thrived in this environment’. Clarke recalled feeling ‘proud to see women that didn’t fit the box finally getting a responsive and appropriate service response’. Clarke’s work at MAL not only made the refuge environment more flexible for all women, it challenged the movement to broaden its ideas about who was entitled to access domestic violence services and, by extension, their conceptualisation of domestic violence.

At the same time, and in partnership with DVIRC, Clarke extended her work from radicalising the practice of a Salvation Army women’s refuge to similarly transforming the Army’s officers. Specifically, she was involved in developing a training program for chaplains titled ‘Domestic Violence and the Christian Mission’, which generated important changes in their approach to marriage guidance for members of their congregations. In particular, many women had been ‘forced to stay in violent relationships due to church values … [and] the training provided chaplains with an understanding of their legal obligations [and] the impact and possible consequences of their collusion’. Remarkably, the Salvation Army embraced this training package framed by feminist principles, and agreed to make perpetrators ‘take responsibility’ for their violence, to the extent that they supported the ‘separation’ of partners to a marriage when it was necessary for the safety of women and children.

During this period, and in addition to her role in the legal subgroup of VWRADVS, Clarke was involved in advisory groups to government, including the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Women’s Housing in 2001 and the State-wide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence (SSCRFV) as a representative for VWRADVS. In acknowledgment of her leadership in the field of family violence, Clarke was entered on to the Victorian Honour Roll of Women in 2004.

A key challenge for Clarke was the criticism she received from members of the domestic violence sector, some of whom voiced concerns about risks to women’s safety as a result of the changes she had implemented. However,
Clarke insists that, ‘during that five year period’ when she managed the refuge, they

never had any more breeches of security, in terms of men, than any other refuge. I thought it was really empowering because if a bloke came I’d say, “get off the property or I’m ringing the police because you’re trespassing”. And it gave women a bit of power. A lot of women in my mind.60

Clarke contends that it was the ‘system itself’ from which these women were at risk because so many women were locked out of access to services and were thus forced to ‘present at generalist services as homeless rather than victims of violence’.61 Her reflections highlight the role of the service system in the discursive construction of women’s experiences as policy problems, and the consequences for the women who are left out of these problems so defined, thus shaping the construction of domestic violence in ways that have silenced many women’s experiences of violence.

As a result of her preparedness to raise concerns publicly and to implement controversial methods of services delivery, Clarke received ‘a lot of flack’, which meant that she felt ‘isolated at times’ and ‘lonely, being a leader [and] going against the grain, people either loving or hating you and it’s definitely gotten to me’.62 This also encouraged a tendency to ‘overwork’ and, at times, ‘burn out’.63 However, she has survived these periods by ‘taking time off to regroup’, and has learned to ‘re-invent’ herself. Perhaps her biggest challenge, in her own words, was ‘not believ[ing] in myself … sometimes I would be sitting in meetings with really powerful people and think “I’m out of my league”’.64 However, over time, these concerns have tapered, and Clarke has become less ‘worried about what people think’.65

Clarke’s path as a leader, and activist, was not planned; indeed, she ‘didn’t really think about being a leader or taking on leadership roles—it just happened’.66 Despite Clarke’s own ambivalence concerning the nature of her leadership, I have argued that a number of key factors can be identified as pivotal to its formation and direction. First, Clarke’s identity—shaped as it was by her sexuality and class position—meant that she understood the impact of poverty and sexual intolerance on young women. Moreover, Clarke’s personal encounters with men’s violence meant that she was alert to the injustice and vulnerability experienced by women both within and outside the private home. In addition, her involvement with radical feminism and the women’s liberation movement further politicised her ideas and radicalised her actions. Thus, when Clarke became involved with young women’s refuges
during the early 1980s, her understanding of their problems extended beyond dominant framings of ‘domestic violence’ and took into account the impact of age, sexuality, poverty, and other forms of violence against women sanctioned by state institutions. Clarke received no formal mentoring or training, and attributes her achievements to luck.\textsuperscript{57} It is apparent, however, that her achievements in generating change within the services and systems affecting women and children experiencing violence have stemmed less from chance than individual agency. Analysing Clarke’s narrative reveals that her capacity to initiate change has also stemmed from her courage and a preparedness to stand alone, seize opportunities, ask hard questions, push boundaries, and adapt to working within and outside of mainstream institutions. Indeed, Clarke acknowledges that ‘the more I learnt, the cleverer I got at negotiating the system’.\textsuperscript{68} Finally, these factors cannot be divorced from her deep-rooted ‘passion around violence against women’, combined with a determination to ‘make the world a better place’.\textsuperscript{69}

---

1 This research was supported under the Australian Research Council’s Linkage Projects funding scheme (LPO562154). My thanks to Judith Smart and Suellen Murray for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper.

2 Typically in Australia, the ‘women’s refuge movement’ is now talked about in terms of domestic and family violence services (rather than ‘refuges’ or ‘shelters’ as they are known in some Australian states), reflecting the much greater diversity in service models and programs now than in the earlier days of the movement. For ease of discussion, at times I refer to the ‘Victorian women’s refuge movement’ in acknowledgment of its history and, at other times, to the ‘domestic violence services movement’ to better reflect the current state of the sector.

3 Whilst domestic violence has been referred to in other ways in the past such as ‘cruelty’ or ‘wife bashing’, the Australian women’s refuge movement adopted the phrase ‘domestic violence’ to refer to intimate partner violence from the late 1970s. Throughout this article, I primarily use ‘domestic violence’, and accord it the same definition, because it continues to be the preferred terminology adopted by Victorian women’s services. More recently in Victoria, the term family violence has been adopted as the preferred terminology of the state government to acknowledge that violence may be perpetrated by intimate partners as well as other family and community members, in particular in relation to Indigenous women.


5 For a critique of the notion of ‘home’ and domestic violence, see Anannya Bhattacharjee, ‘The Public Private Mirage: Mapping Homes and Un-domesticating Domestic Violence Work in the South Asian Immigrant Community’ in Feminist

6 Murray, 99.


8 Billi Clarke, interviewed by Jacqui Theobald, 1 April 2009.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Clarke interview.

12 Personal correspondence with Billi Clarke, 5 November 2010.

13 Clarke interview.

14 Clarke correspondence.


18 Clarke interview.

19 Clarke interview.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 On women’s policy machinery in Victoria during the 1980s, see: Marian Sawer, Sisters in Suits (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 162–70.

24 Susan Feldman, interviewed by Jacqui Theobald, 1 April 2009.


26 Clarke interview.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.


Correspondence with Wendy Austin, 1 August 2010.


Clarke interview.

Ibid.


Clarke interview.

Clarke correspondence.

Clarke interview.


Ibid., 60.

Meeting Minutes, VWRADS, 15 January 1998, BHA.


Meeting Minutes, VWRADVS, 12 February 1996, BHA; Meeting Minutes, VWRADS Legal Sub-group, September 1998, BHA.

Meeting Minutes, VWRADS, 11 June 1997, BHA.

Clarke interview.
Billi Clarke and Helen Mathews, *Trial by Legal Aid: A Legal Aid Impact Study* (Melbourne: Crossroads Family and Domestic Violence Unit & Victorian Women’s Refuges and Domestic Violence Services (VWRADVS) Legal Sub-Group, 1999).

Clarke interview.

Ibid.

Clarke correspondence.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Following the release of a review into domestic violence by Victoria Police in 2002, the establishment of a State-wide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence (SSCRFV) was announced by the then chief commissioner, Christine Nixon.

Clarke interview.

Clarke correspondence.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.