

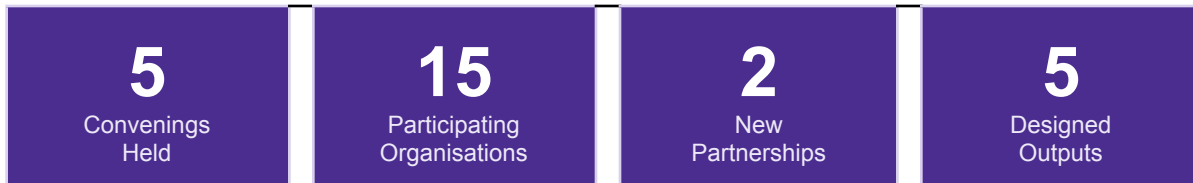
Employers as Changemakers:

Creating Pathways for Women Impacted by Domestic and Family Violence

This community of practice was commissioned by Social Enterprise Australia as part of the Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI), funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

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PROJECT AT A GLANCE



Introduction

Employment is more than a job — it can be a lifeline for women rebuilding their lives after domestic and family violence (DFV). Over a series of five convenings hosted through the Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI) and Arise Foundation Australia, corporate leaders, educators, not for profits, mentoring providers and survivors came together to explore how workplaces can provide that lifeline.

What emerged was not a neat checklist of solutions, but a deeper truth: employment outcomes cannot be separated from trauma, systems, culture and care. Progress is shaped as much by how workplaces respond to survivors as by the resilience of women navigating their way forward.

This consolidated report reflects the key insights and commitments that surfaced across all six sessions — surfacing what is working, what is missing, and what must change.

Convenings Overview

Five sessions were held:

- 📅 Employers / Corporate Partners
- 📅 DFV Survivors
- 📅 Frontline Survivor Support Organisations
- 📅 Education, Training & Mentoring Providers
- 📅 Not-for-Profit & Social Enterprise Organisations

Each group offered a different lens, but together they told a consistent story: the current system is not built for people navigating trauma, instability, and structural disadvantage. The insights shared were practical, grounded, and deeply human. They showed that if we want employment to be a genuine pathway to recovery, we need to move beyond short-term job placement thinking and focus on whole-of-person support.

Participating Organisations

Sessions brought together a cross-sector mix of corporates, social enterprises, DFV specialist organisations, recruitment agencies, and government stakeholders, including:

- Wotton + Kearney
- Westpac
- Insignia Financial
- NSW TAFE
- The Salvation Army
- MTC Future Ready
- Sydney Womens Fund
- Liberty
- Open Support
- St Vincents
- DV Alert
- Breakthru
- Be Recruitment

The Challenge for Employers

Women impacted by domestic violence often face complex barriers to employment: career gaps, loss of confidence, housing instability, legal proceedings, and cultural or language challenges. Recognising these realities is the first step for employers seeking to create meaningful pathways.

"Building confidence, providing flexibility, and understanding are critical if we want survivors to not only access jobs but stay in them."

— Heidi Anderson, Head of Pro Bono & Responsible Business, Wotton + Kearney

For many survivors, the challenge is not motivation — it is re-entry. Long gaps in employment, often caused by violence, displacement, parenting responsibilities or recovery, are routinely misread as a lack of ambition or capability. Survivors shared experiences of being funnelled into low-quality, insecure roles, regardless of prior qualifications or professional experience.

"You're competing with younger people who haven't had their lives interrupted. And no one asks why the gap exists — they just judge it."

— Survivor participant

Others spoke about the invisible labour required just to show up to work: managing trauma triggers, court processes, housing instability, or ongoing safety concerns — all while trying to perform in environments that rarely acknowledge these realities. Yet when survivors are met with patience and flexibility, the difference is profound.

"It wasn't just the job — it was colleagues who believed in me before I believed in myself."

— Survivor participant

Creating Supportive Workplaces

Employers have the power to shift outcomes by building workplaces that are both flexible and trauma-informed. Participants shared practical ways to start:

- **Flexible Arrangements:** Offer adaptable work schedules to accommodate court dates, childcare needs, and transitional housing.
- **Staff Training:** Equip all staff with awareness and tools to respond to domestic violence — organisation-wide education is essential.
- **Confidential Support:** Encourage safe disclosure by embedding privacy in recruitment and HR practices.
- **Career Development:** Provide opportunities that align with long-term goals, not just immediate employment.

"Employers need to equip all staff with awareness and tools to respond to domestic violence."

— Heidi Anderson, Head of Pro Bono & Responsible Business, Wotton + Kearney

Leading Through Partnership

Cross-sector collaboration emerged as a key driver of change across all six sessions. Educators were clear: without psychoeducation, workplaces will continue to unintentionally fail survivors — even when their intentions are good.

"Coercive control is still misunderstood — employers need to know how it shows up in the workplace."

— Ubah Gabris, Deputy Chair, Westpac National Respect Employee Advocacy Group

"Job-readiness training and wraparound support make all the difference when survivors are navigating the workforce."

— Amy Kayrouz, Senior Industry Engagement Manager – Strategic Growth, MTC Future Ready

Mentoring providers spoke to a critical gap in the ecosystem: the transition point between specialist DFV services and the workforce. Survivors often receive intensive support while in crisis, but once employment begins, that scaffolding can disappear overnight.

"We're not asking corporates to do more. We're asking them to link in with those who already exist to hold our hands through this."

— Mentoring provider participant

Education must go beyond surface-level awareness days. It needs to include:

- How trauma manifests in the workplace
- Why flexibility is not a 'perk' but a protective factor
- How productivity, attendance and engagement are shaped by safety and wellbeing
- Why gaps in employment are often evidence of survival, not failure

"Sometimes a break doesn't mean someone was lazy — it means they were trying to stay alive."

— DFV Education & Training provider participant

These insights point to the value of partnerships between corporates, recruitment agencies, and social enterprises. Programs such as Arise's cadetships and mentorships provide tested models employers can adopt or support.

Ripple Effects: What Has Emerged

Beyond the sessions themselves, the convenings have catalysed tangible connections and momentum for change:

New Service Partnerships for the Arise Recovery Hub

- Breakthru' — identified as a potential new Service Partner through connections made during the SEDI project.
- Be Recruitment — identified as a potential new Service Partner, bringing specialist employment support expertise.

These connections reflect the multiplier effect of sustained peer learning: when practitioners, survivors, and employers share space consistently, trust forms and collaboration follows naturally.

There was also a call to engage policy-makers, recognising that real change requires pressure as well as goodwill. Regulation, incentives and accountability mechanisms all have a role to play in shifting corporate behaviour at scale.

Arise Team Reflections

The Arise team who participated in SEDI sessions were invited to reflect on the experience. Their perspectives are captured below.

What has stayed with me and has the greatest impact was Heidi's comment about shifting from accidental employers of women experiencing DV, to intentional employers. This is so important and underpins all of my conversations with organisations I speak with.

— **Shey Hooper, Head of Operations & Partnerships, Arise Foundation**

The different perspective and energy brought into the space. It was refreshing to see organisations willing to come together, have honest conversations, focus on outcomes, and explore ways to work collaboratively. In my experience, this can often be difficult, as services can sometimes operate competitively or be reluctant to work together in supporting clients holistically.

The project in my view, has helped shift that dynamic by creating a space where collaboration, shared understanding, and client-centred outcomes feel possible and genuinely encouraged.

— **Caroline Khalil, Recovery and Program Manager, Arise Foundation**

Moving Forward: From Awareness to Action

This series of convenings reinforced a simple but powerful insight: employment pathways for DFV survivors are not just an economic issue. They are a human one. To move forward meaningfully, we must:

- **Centre survivor voices** in program design and success measures.
- **Urge organisations to take responsibility.** The onus is never on the survivor. Invest in education for employers, employees, leaders and HR teams to be the first line of defence.
- **Normalise flexibility as a strength**, not a risk.
- **Strengthen collaboration** across corporates, community organisations and government.
- **Recognise that trauma-informed employment is essential, not optional.** The language here is very important.
- **Continue peer learning** through future sessions to build sector-wide solutions.
- **Capture and share learnings** across the employer network to create a comprehensive resource.

When survivors are supported to work with dignity, safety and understanding, the impact ripples far beyond the individual — into families, workplaces and communities.

This is no longer about charity. It is about responsibility, equity and building systems that no longer punish people for surviving.

Arise Foundation Australia | arisefoundation.com.au

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