



Episode 20: Jess Hill

Transcript

Jess Hill: [00:00:00] So much has changed over the past 10 years that felt impossible. This stuff moves sometimes like you are in quicksand, and sometimes it moves like lightning. Mm-hmm. And I, I just think that we have so many smart people putting their minds to this. I feel like this is, you know what, a, a kind of a golden time that we're in right now, that some stuff we'll look back on in 10 years and go, "Things changed."

Intro: Welcome to Voices Towards 2050, the official podcast series of the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission. Please be aware that this podcast discusses topics related to domestic, family, and sexual violence, which may be distressing for some listeners. Support is available. If you need assistance, please contact 1-800-RESPECT or reach out to your local support services.

[00:01:00] Thank you for joining us

Micaela Cronin: Very pleased to be welcoming my next guest to this episode of the podcast, Towards 2050. I want to begin, as I always do, with making an acknowledgement of the lands that I am on today. It's the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and pay my very deepest respects to their elders, past and present, and their care for these lands.

Much of what I have learnt in my career and in this role, and that I continue to learn about what needs to be done, is from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and leaders and community work that is done. So today I'm joined by one of Australia's most influential voices on domestic family and sexual violence.

Over the past decade, her work has helped reshape how we understand abuse in this country, particularly by bringing a national attention to coercive control, the [00:02:00] behaviors of those who cause harm, and the role of our systems in either preventing or enabling, and unfortunately in some circumstances, causing further harm.

Jess Hill, welcome to the podcast.

Jess Hill: Good to be here.

Micaela Cronin: So Jess, many listeners will have first come across and know you from your investigative journalism and award-winning book, *See What You Made Me Do*. Mm. In fact, I remember reading that long before I met you, and it was really influential to me and helped shape my thinking.

Jess Hill: Mm.

Micaela Cronin: Your work, uh, through your work, you've managed to really translate, um, I know the probably thousands of conversations you've had across the country- Mm ... and bring complex evidence into public awareness and political attention. That has been hugely impactful. You've challenged us all to look closely at what is and what isn't working, and to think more ambitiously about it, what it's gonna take to end domestic family [00:03:00] and sexual violence in Australia.

Jess Hill: Mm.

Micaela Cronin: Jess, your dedication to addressing domestic family and sexual violence is so apparent in everything that you do and in every conversation I've had with you. Uh, and I really valued the experience of working alongside you on the rapid review to prevent domestic family and sexual violence, um- Mm ... and all that you brought to that.



Where I wanna start this conversation is by asking you what first motivated you to do this work. What brought you to this work, and what stayed with you most over time?

Jess Hill: Small question, and one that, you know, occurred long ago. So I guess what, well, what motivated me to get into the work is like any journalist, um, is that you get a commission, so an editor asks you to write something and you say yes.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And so I was asked by the then editor of The Monthly, Nick Fike, to write a piece on domestic [00:04:00] violence that would explain why and how this is still occurring in the twenty-first century. Mm. You know, aren't we past this?

Micaela Cronin: Yeah.

Jess Hill: And it really was, I guess, motivated for Nick as someone who was living in Melbourne, um, by the advocacy of Rosie Batty.

So this was really at the end of, towards the end of twenty fourteen. Um, so it was just a few months after Luke was murdered and not long after Rosie had really shot to prominence in Victoria particularly. And- Uh, essentially what he was asking me to write, which is gonna sound very strange at this point, was something that really had very rarely been written for the popular press, which was not about a homicide, not about, uh, a- any particular sort of salacious element of it.
It was-

Micaela Cronin: Mm ...

Jess Hill: why is this happening? And he gave me almost 5,000 words to write it.

Micaela Cronin: Mm-hmm.

Jess Hill: Again, quite unheard of- Unusual ... at that point.

Micaela Cronin: Yeah, yeah.

Jess Hill: And so I was [00:05:00] like, "Oh my God, this is very important." Yeah. Um, and I have no idea, for starters, I have no idea why this is still happening. I don't think I've ever really thought about it, and I was intimidated by the task, and I knew that I had to do it justice.

And I then thought, "How am I going to write 5,000 words about this?" Like, what are we talking about here? Like, we're talking about guys, you know, lose control and, you know, go too far. I mean, I'm disparaging myself slightly by- Yeah. ... sound like I'm- You

Micaela Cronin: are, I think ... really

Jess Hill: not smart. Yeah, yeah. But like, but, uh, it wasn't so far from where I was sitting on it, and I, I did not even know the right questions to ask until about three or four weeks in, and that was thanks to the many professionals that I met, particularly one phone counselor at Safe Steps, uh, who I, you know, virtually [00:06:00] dedicate the book to, uh, 'cause it's right up the front.

And it's where I'm sitting at the, uh, at the call center, and I've been there for a couple of hours, and I'm listening to these calls come in, and they're coming in every few minutes. It seems utterly relentless, and they're so serious. These are people who are needing to be, like, immediately picked up and transferred to refuge. High-risk cases. And there's this lull in the calls, and, you know, the smartest thing I could think to



ask at that point was like, "Do you, like, sometimes feel really frustrated when you're speaking to people who've called before, and, you know, you've a- you've advised them to leave and then they've gone back?"

Micaela Cronin: Mm-hmm.

Jess Hill: And this phone counselor just fixed me with this stare and is like, "No, I'm frustrated that the abuser promised that they wouldn't abuse her again, and then they broke that promise." And I'm like, "That is an excellent reframing. Thank you." Mm. And, uh, and I just, I remember going out to the tram stop afterwards and going, "Wow, I have been [00:07:00] coming at this all wrong.

I haven't even been asking about the perpetrator." And I guess the philosophy that started building at that point for me was not asking Why doesn't she leave? Because actually, I mean, yes, we, I, you know, kept on looking into the reasons for that, and that's- Mm-hmm, mm-hmm ... important to explain to the public. But the philosophy that built was why doesn't he let her leave?

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And that, I guess, has driven all of my work ever since, and, and as a corollary to that, why don't systems let her leave either?

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And I think what happened next, which is what fixed me and kept me here, is that I got a phone call from a mother who had been through family court, and she described a scenario that to me sounded so far-fetched I could not, I could not fathom it being true.

And my first [00:08:00] response to that was, "Hmm, you know, I've heard of these, like, sort of fathers' rights activists that make up all this stuff about family court proceedings being biased." Mm. "Maybe this is kinda like the equivalent." But something about what she said just made me think, "No, everything that you've h- learnt so far, this is worth looking into."

And so I went and visited her, and I read through all of her court files. And I remember sitting in this woman's lounge room, who'd had her children removed in what protective mothers often call a cold swap, immediately and without notice at the court after having predominant custody and there'd been child sexual abuse allegations.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And we sat in her lounge room. The sun set. It went dark. We were sitting there like a couple of mushrooms just reading through these judgments, and I'm seeing on paper what she had told me over the phone that I could not believe would have happened. Like, you know, orders that prevented the children from accessing counseling, orders that put a absolute stop to any [00:09:00] contact between the mother and the children and even the grandparents and the children, uh, with no clear evidence as to why they were considered so dangerous to those kids, aside from the fact that they wouldn't let go the idea that these kids had been sexually abused, w- which the kids had disclosed to many different professionals. And I'm just... My, my mind was just being blown. And I think... So basically, that is what has kept me here, is what I discovered over that period of time, and I think I spent about six months investigating family court in 2015. I was like, "This is something that people do not understand."

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: I don't know if the government even understands what's going on here," or cares at that point. Um, and I could work my whole life on this, and I will, I will never report everything that is, you know, relevant to this issue. But it is like someone's gotta get into this and gotta [00:10:00] get into it big time, and it may as well be me.



Micaela Cronin: Well, you have got into it big time, Jess. And you have been really dedicated and committed, and I think what, what you've just described in terms of that deep listening to individuals and really hearing them is a lot of people's experience of working with you, and what, and how you take that up to, you know, and, and, and synthesise all of that into thinking about the system.

Um, it's, it's interesting listening in terms of the parallels, 'cause I started off working at, um, what was called, what, what is now called Safe Steps, but was the women's refuge, Statewide Women's Refuge Referral Service. And I remember having some of the same kind of epiphanies listening to the same calls over and over again, and the women that I worked alongside, you know, um, growing me up, because I was pretty young when I started working there. So those... kind of... But I, I, I think the an- other thing I was thinking as I was listening to you is that point [00:11:00] about the reframing, that our s- whole system has been focused on women and, uh, a- and not at all on, on, on the predominantly men who c- who cause this harm, and their behavior, and, and what needs to happen about that.

Jess Hill: Mm.

Micaela Cronin: What, when you, when you look back, so that's just over 10 years ago you're talking about. When you look back on that, um, now and, and the national conversation since then... what do you think has shifted most meaningfully?

Jess Hill: Hmm. Oh, gosh, a lot, and I know it can feel like not much has shifted, but I think when you really, like, take the time to think about what sort of things you were having to explain-

Micaela Cronin: Mm

Jess Hill: either to the public or to government, um, back in, you know, 2016 or even back in, like, 2019, um- I think, I mean, the, the most fundamental thing that I've recognised over time... Well, there's two [00:12:00] things. One, and this was already happening when I, when I, you know, became a part of this whole area, and that was the rise of victim survivor voices officially ... and outside of their roles as practitioners. Because the whole service sector is founded on victim survivors essentially ... who've then gone in and, and, and done the work. Um, but this was different because it was people from outside of the system entirely. Um, and the power of that in redirecting, not only how governments responded, but also it's like...

And, you know, a lot of this credit goes to Rosie, um, in terms of, in terms of teaching journalists how to hear. And it's not that she went one by one to each journalist, it's that there was something about her voice. And as I said, you know, in the, in the opening to the book, she was from the demilitarised zone of the white middle class.

Um, [00:13:00] she also had a British accent, so it was sort of like, there's like kind of this just, there's this otherness. But somehow there's, uh, even with that, like, with that point of difference, it's like she, she opened journalists' ears to hearing what victim survivors were saying. And there's a real difference between, you know, lis- talking to victim survivors and hearing what they say.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And, uh, I mean, I remember Evan Stark talking about that, you know, um, and for those who might not know, um, Evan Stark is one of the re- predominant academics, um, and se- social workers who advanced the notion of coercive control and developed it further. And he talks about in the '70s when he was working in refuges with his wife, and victim survivors would say to him, "The physical violence was nowhere near the worst part. The worst part was the humiliation and the degradation, and the feeling that I was trapped. I didn't know myself anymore. It changed who I was." And he just for [00:14:00] many years thought, "Maybe they're just a bit ashamed to talk about the physical violence and about the sexual violence, and it's easier for them to talk about the stuff that was non-physical."



It took him 1- years and years to actually believe what they were saying to him, and to say, "No, no, it's true for them. It was not the worst part."

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And what does that actually mean? Because that throws everything that we presume about family violence on its head. Literally, it throws the whole pyramid of harm, where we put physical violence right at the top, and it turns it on its head in, in a lot of cases.

Um, and so I guess what, when Rosie sort of taught people how to hear- We stopped getting this whole sense of if it bleeds, it leads over many years. Um, and you started to read stories that really started with what I knew from interviewing victim-survivors, [00:15:00] what they would bring up first. So you started to hear more about financial abuse.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And you started to hear more. These things were centred, and you didn't have to have someone who had experienced really severe physical violence to warrant them getting media coverage, and that was, like, a huge change. Um, and then I think the next big change was obviously the notion that Evan Stark had first identified, um, or had been one of the first to identify, um, after others had identified it decades earlier-

Micaela Cronin: Mm

Jess Hill: that coercive control is not just a collection of abuses, that it is a process of thought reform, that it changes the way that victim-survivors think and behave in ways that often do not make sense to them-

Micaela Cronin: Mm ...

Jess Hill: and do not make sense to outsiders, and certainly don't make sense to many people who become decision-makers in their lives.

[00:16:00] Um, and I think, you know, obviously, I mean, my book came out in 2019, uh, middle of 2019, and I remember there was, you know, a bit of media. It was very unclear as to whether it was gonna take off at all. I mean, the, some bookstores put it right up front. Other bookstores didn't even order it. Other bookstores sort of hid it up the back.

They didn't know what to do with it, basically.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And, um, and I remember being on Q&A, it was sort of, like, in November of 2019, and explaining coercive control to people, and it was like I was, I was talking about something completely esoteric. There was n- virtually no public understanding- No ... outside of people who've lived it- No people who are maybe lawyers, and in the sector, of course. But even in the sector, it was, you know, something, it was, it was certainly an, an alien term to a lot of people. And then of course, you know, so aw- awfully often happens in, in our area is that you have a watershed homicide-

Micaela Cronin: Mm ...

Jess Hill: that is the thing that- It just m- [00:17:00] makes people listen in different ways again. And of course, that was the murder of Hannah Clarke and her three kids. And, um, and I remember this is happening right before COVID, and I was at one of the last writer's festivals that I'd be at for a while, and it was like the world has changed now. Like, people are now believing when victim survivors say that, "I was terrified I would be killed, and yet he'd never really laid a hand on me."



Micaela Cronin: Yes.

Jess Hill: And they hadn't believed that before that moment. We'd seen it in, in so many murders. I mean, it had been writ large across so many cases. Tara Costigan in Canberra. There's so many horror stories. They just hadn't broken through. It was like an idea whose time had come, but it was also like the horrible murder of Luke, it was done in public, so there were witnesses.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And that changes everything, I think. Um- When [00:18:00] the whole system of coercive control is visible, and that you understand basically that this is a system of entrapment. It is not just a collection of abuses. This is a ... system of behaviour designed to entrap and terrorise. Then the post-separation abuse suddenly becomes so much more visible, and I think that's the next, really the next step we have in, in awareness around just the, the way in which abuse functions, is really getting the public aware that this just does not stop when she leaves, that too many cases just change.

That it, that the perpetrator just changes what stage they're playing on, and that's what I'm very keen to keep working on and to show government what they can do to stop that from happening.

Micaela Cronin: And Jess, I think it's so powerful giving a name to something, and [00:19:00] giving a language so people know how to talk about it.

'Cause you, you're absolutely right. I remember I've worked in this sector since I was in my early 20s, and went, and I went and worked overseas for a while, and I came back, and this term coercive control was, was hadn't been in, in the discourse before I left and was suddenly that's all everyone was talking about.

Jess Hill: Mm.

Micaela Cronin: And I remember being slightly embarrassed about I didn't quite know what people were talking about. And then I had a conversation with someone, and they described it. I was like, "Oh, yes, I know what that, I know what that is."

Jess Hill: Mm, mm-hmm.

Micaela Cronin: It's just not what we had called it, and we had not-

Jess Hill: Mm ...

Micaela Cronin: named or discussed it in that way.

So it's given enormous power to people to be able to describe in a way that others can understand. Giving a common language to something is really powerful, for all the reasons you're talking about now. And, and so my question to you in thinking about that, 'cause I know you have been thinking, and again, talking to a lot of people about that, is what does it mean about how we need to think differently [00:20:00] about risk and danger, um-when responding to a- abuse through that lens, not, as you say, just through a physical violence lens?

Jess Hill: Well, I mean, first of all, we need to take our incident-based lens-

Micaela Cronin: Mm ...

Jess Hill: out of our eyes, right? And we need to think much more, in a much more sophisticated way about what it means for a victim survivor and their kids when the incident, a physical violence incident or something serious, happened three years ago, and no incident has occurred since.



And being able to actually show the system of behavior that has happened since, that there didn't need to be an act of physical violence since three years ago because the message was already sent, that if you do not comply, this is what I'm capable of. Um, and is reinforced through various other ways and, and [00:21:00] consequences and subtle messages.

Um, that's something that is, at the moment, you know, you go for an intervention order and they're like, "Well, when was the most recent incident?" Or, "We can't renew this because nothing's happened since." It's like ... yes, but they're still the same person and there's no indication that they've changed, right? And so it's like the threat has not abated. I know the threat has not abated, but I have nothing on paper to show that the threat has resurfaced in a way that you need to see it. And so I think that there's that. There's also, I mean, I do a lot of, um, judicial education, so I like to travel around the country with the National Judicial College, speaking to magistrates, uh, sometimes, you know, teaching family court judges and, but a lot of it is for magistrates.

And one of the, one of the things I would drum home to them is that when you see someone who just keeps on doing these, what they call like technical or low order [00:22:00] breaches, non-violent breaches, sometimes they're sending flowers, sometimes they're just trying to get in touch over and over again. So even stuff that's quite benign.

You need to see those breaches in the context of w- how coercive control operates. That coercive control operates through access, and not through physical proximity, but through psychological proximity. If that coercive controller can continue to access their target and nothing can get in their way, not even a court order, there is no space for that victim survivor to reclaim their own mind, to, to even start to recover from what they've experienced.

It also emboldens the perpetrator because it shows them that nothing can get in their way, so long as they're subtle, so long as they don't do something stupid. I mean, even if they do, let's be honest, even if they do something [00:23:00] stupid, often they get away with it anyway.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: But you know, that's what I'm saying to magistrates, is that those low order technical breaches, that is how the coercive controller gets the victim survivor back in his web.

That's how he does it. So, you know, obviously paying attention to whether there's been misidentification or someone's been coerced to breach, um, or in, in, incited to breach, um, who is actually a victim survivor. You've got to have all these things in mind as a magistrate. But if you're seeing someone who's a clear perpetrator who does these low order breaches, you should make a consequence for that.

So that's the sort of things that, you know, you're trying to change practice at various levels To, so that it aligns with what victim survivors require, um, and what coercive control demands as a, as, as, as a, as the basic construct for family violence, which we now have in the national principles that the attorney [00:24:00] generals across the country recognise that in most cases of family violence, coercive control is the organising principle of the violence.

It's the umbrella under which everything else sits. Yeah.

Micaela Cronin: Yeah. You wrote an, an article recently in The Guardian, and one of the things that really struck me about it was the, not just the description about, you know, the postcode, but front desk lottery. Um ... and listening to you talk about, you know, the, I know how much you've put, the effort you've put into training, and how, how far and wide you've gone doing that, because one of the things that really strikes me too, in what I hear, is, is that front desk lottery.

It is which magistrate you caught, get, which police officer ... you get, which, you know, GP when you're telling your story. What. So, so thinking about that, and, and what do you think needs to happen at a



systemic level ... so that it isn't just about the next good person, whether it, who, who it is you're lucky enough to [00:25:00] get or not lucky enough to get?

Jess Hill: Well, first of all, I think training and education is super important, but it cannot fix culture and process.

Micaela Cronin: Yes.

Jess Hill: And, um, you will lift the top 30, 40, let's be generous, maybe even 50%, um, of people in a certain institution or agency with education and training, and it's super important to do that. But the others, unless there is some change to process and culture, will not, and they will, you know, threaten to drag down the others who are trying to do the right thing, um, and who are trying to advance, um, things towards better outcomes.

So say, for example, police. You know, one of my big bugbears with police has been, A, the lack of civilian, like, proper civilian-led accountability mechanisms, um, which we recommended in the rapid review- Mm ... um, such like they, they have in Northern Ireland. Uh, they have a [00:26:00] separate civilian-led ombudsman, um, that investigates complaints.

We don't have anything that is a proper independent civilian-led body here in Australia, no matter what the, the various bodies say they are. They are not operating in that way, um, where they can compel police to change. So that accountability and transparency is the first thing. But the second thing is process, and I think that, you know, when you have in police, like putting aside the, you know, in some of those, um, local, you know, the police areas- That you've got higher rates of misogyny or higher rates of racism or, you know, a number of cultural issues that go on there.

There's also just the fact of how police are incentivised to work, and that their performance is managed mostly on, you know, statistics. Like did you get, how many charges did you get? How many, you know, how many intervention orders did you apply for? It's like this [00:27:00] stats-based game. When in fact, the fact that they are spending 40 to 60% of their time working on, on the issue of family violence, and a lot of that requires interventions that may not look good on paper, that are actually about relationship building, about trust building, about just appearing at the right moment because the victim survivor needs someone with greater power in the room just to be there to deescalate the situation, but may not yet be ready to pursue an order or pursue a charge.

But will be potentially later if they see the police turn up again and again, and act in a way that seems trustworthy and protective. If they can be like, "You know what? If I go out on this limb, if I go out onto this cliff edge, and I pursue the order, or I pursue those charges, I can trust these people will back me, and they understand what is happening, and they [00:28:00] understand what is needed to protect me."

That's, and so unless you, with some, I mean, some people are going to come to police already ready to do whatever they need to do, but a lot of people are gonna need to build that trust. And so police who spend that extra time, I hear this again and again from police, so often they're like, "I almost need to be, like take a charitable approach to my job, because I'm not gonna get promoted for doing this work."

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: In fact, sometimes I might be excluded and ostracised if I'm in a particularly sort of toxic workplace that doesn't see this work as legitimate or important So that practice, just the way that performance is managed, the way that, you know, the, the level of paperwork that needs to be filled in, what... I just want people to go back to a basic sort of like workplace assessment.

What are the incentives or [00:29:00] disincentives for police to do this work, and how can we change the structure of this, the structure of who is hired? What do they expect when they're going into policing? Do they expect fast car chases- Yes ... and, you know, arresting mobsters? 'Cause that's not what the most of their work is gonna be.

And whether or not they wanna be social workers, the fact is they're going into very complex situations in the vast majority of the time they're spending in this job. And if you're 18 and you are new on the job and you don't even know what it is to have a freaking partner or, yeah, you haven't even started dating yet, you know, there's gonna be problems.

Um, so these are, I think, just broader questions for how things are structured, but also, like, we need to have, you know, performance linked to funding. If you, as an agency, cannot do the number one job that you're assigned to do, well, then there needs to be some, like, [00:30:00] questions asked as to whether that agency should continue to receive the funding for that work.

Instead of just year after year going, "Oh, well, they continue to fail. That's a shame." And that's what it said in The Guardian article. It's like, imagine if you were going into an operating theater and you're like, "I don't know. I've got about, like, a, hmm, 80/20 chance of not bleeding out on the table. I hope my surgeon knows what they're doing."

Micaela Cronin: Mm-hmm.

Jess Hill: I hope my anesthetist knows how to administer anesthetic, but I can't quite be sure." And these are life and death situations that we see, as we see reflected in coroner's cases. It's like, this is not... It's, it's no joke what the police are turning up to, and they need to be better at responding consistently, and we need to do the things that make that consistency possible

Micaela Cronin: Jess, I think it's such a good analogy, and I, I, I think, I think you could stretch the health policing of [00:31:00] domestic family and sexual violence analogy a bit further too, um, uh, because I think the how, how do we hold hospitals accountable?

What is the ... what is the learning mechanism so that when there have been failures, they are examined properly?

Jess Hill: Yeah.

Micaela Cronin: I think the health sector, there's a whole range of things that... A- a- and I think it's one of the things that we need across the board to be thinking about what can we learn from other similar adjacent a- and often much better-funded systems about

Jess Hill: Totally.

Micaela Cronin: What we need to do better. How can we... And I think it's one of the things that I have also really, um, appreciated about the approach that you've taken to this work, is how do we really ruthlessly hold ourselves accountable to getting the outcome? Mm. Not what the ... not what the, you know, the, um, common wisdom is about what needs to be done, but how are we gonna get better outcomes.

Jess Hill: Totally. And that's the thing is, like, about trying to [00:32:00] be strategic and, you know, you become strategic, I guess, over time once you've like, you know, had a few rodeos um, with, you know, with, uh, politics and with various systems of, like, how do we get things a- how do we get things through?

You know, how do we, how do we help decision-makers solve problems that they also wanna solve- Yes if you're working with decision-makers who care? You know, and it's like instead of coming at this in an adversarial way or in a I'm gonna kinda try to humiliate or publicly shame you into doing what you need to do, it's like let me sh- let me help you see past the sort of brick walls that you, you seem to not be able to move past.

And it's not just me. Like I s- I guess I see my role as someone who conveys what, what I hear often from frontline practitioners, from victim survivors- Mm ... um, all around the country. Like, they're all [00:33:00] my teachers, and they don't have the same access As, as I do sometimes. Not that I, you know, have



everyone's ear, but I- it's easier for me to access politicians and decision-makers than someone working at the Women's Health Center in Wagga Wagga, you know?
Um-

Micaela Cronin: Yeah.

Jess Hill: But they've got incredible ideas that need to be conveyed to those decision-makers, and that's what I guess I try to do in my work.

Micaela Cronin: And, and you do that amplifying those messages and synthesising them up really well. I think it's one of the things that I really think about in this role as well.

It's not like that you or I have to have the answers. A lot of, a lot of- Mm ... the understanding and answers are there. It's about how to amplify those other voices who aren't getting listened to.

Jess Hill: Exactly.

Micaela Cronin: One of the reasons I started doing this podcast was to have a conversation about really believing that this future that the national plan commits us to is [00:34:00] possible.

Jess Hill: Mm. Mm.

Micaela Cronin: And having hope that we can make domestic, family, and sexual violence rare, brief, and non-recurrent, right? Mm. That kind of commitment to ending it in a generation. And I don't, I don't think ending it in a generation is measurable- Mm ... but I do think a commitment to making it rare, brief, and non-recurrent is something we could hold our feet to the fire about and is measurable. Mm. Mm. So, but you have to h- you have to have hope and belief that that's possible. What is it that gives you hope?

Jess Hill: Mm. Well, um, my delusional positivity helps. Mm,

Micaela Cronin: mm.

Jess Hill: And, uh, and, and what gives me hope is also I think w- you know what? When I'm flagging and I feel like I'm going down the cynical tubes, um, nothing's ever gonna change, this is just all hopeless, uh, what gives me hope is I spend the [00:35:00] day at a, you know, I'm, I'm, uh...

'cause I do a lot of public speaking across the country, I'll spend the day with frontline practitioners, and I'll see what they're doing and how they're getting around, you know, blocks, and how they're looking at further opportunities. And it's like, "Oh my God, you guys, this is... all the smarts are here." Um, I had a great day with the Child and Adolescent, uh, Mental Health Service out at Lismore, um, big shout-out to all the crew out there, um, just a couple of weeks ago.

And I just came away so, like, geed up and worked up, and like, this is all possible. These people are amazing. They are just absolutely g- going every day, coming and working with these children and young people, and just bringing their whole hearts and whole brains to this, and doing what they need to get around systems and, you know, not asking for permission, but asking for forgiveness.

And ... and it's like, I... those people just bring it back [00:36:00] to the reality of where we're at. Um, and also I get a real kick out of when I have time, as I have over the past year, you know, uh, in, in terms of the family law system, when I have time to really dig into a system, I'm like a total girly SWAT. Like, I will just, like, dig into every nook and cranny of that system, and I love getting to know it really n- intimately, such that you can start to see like, "Oh, if we just did this part a bit differently over here-" This might change if we did this part of it differently.



But also, like working alongside those who have professional experience of that system, but also those who have had to live through that system and hearing what they think should be different, and then trying to figure out, okay, they are really reasonable things to want. It can sound impossible when it, when they first say it, but how can we make that real?

I love that [00:37:00] process. I feel so, like excited by it, and I just work away in my little beaver hole, um, on that. And then I try to think about how do we bring this to decision-makers in a way that will make them as excited about this prospect as I am. Which is, you know, that's quite a task. Um, and not get, not... S- and I saw this, this was something really great, actually. Morgan Cataldo wrote an article about this recently of what lived experience can really bring.

Micaela Cronin: Yes.

Jess Hill: And that is ambition And it's like be ambitious. Yes. Be as ambitious as these people need us to be, and as ambitious as they are-

Micaela Cronin: Yes ...

Jess Hill: for change.

Don't let the, "No, it can't be done because of X, Y, Z," get in your way. Find out if there's a way that we could change our assumptions. That's all super exciting, and even when you see stuff drag and not, and take super long and be like, [00:38:00] you know, brick wall after brick wall. I don't know. I just feel like so much has changed over the past 10 years that felt impossible. It felt impossible in the December of 2019. I thought absolutely no way we're getting coercive control laws anywhere in Australia, and within about six months various states and territories were debating whether to introduce them. This stuff moves sometimes like you are in quicksand, and sometimes it moves like lightning.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Jess Hill: And I, I just think that we have so many smart people putting their minds to this, and at the moment we have a government and certainly ministers who are so dedicated and s- and ambitious, as ambitious as we want- Yes ... them to be.

Micaela Cronin: Yes.

Jess Hill: And this is like, I feel like this is, you know, what a, a kind of a golden time that we're in right now, that some stuff [00:39:00] we'll look back on in 10 years and go, "Things changed."

Micaela Cronin: I think that's an incredibly, such an in- A, I completely agree with you about the moment in time, and I think I've s- I mean, I've seen some of those things. I agree about 10 years, but even in the last 12 months, you know, since we've had- Mm ... two national cabinets, the work that came out of the rapid review, the work that's being led in government.

There is change that is happening like lightning. It looks like quicksand, I think, from the outside. Mm-hmm. But I think it is happening much faster. Mm. And we will, we will see the, we will... And we will all, we will all be contributing to keeping, keeping the eye, everyone's eye on the ball for that. I've got one final unreasonable question of you, Jess.

If there's one thing, if there was one action right now to get us- Mm ... to that future, that, at that level of ambition about change, and this is not the only one thing, but right now, what would that one change be that you would back in?

Jess Hill: [00:40:00] So I have one change, and I have a, a principle ... that drives it.



As someone who is currently writing a paper with recommendations. Um, but- Yes ... and that is that the, the principle that drives it, um, is if you, and this is in cases where there are families, if you attend to children and young people, then you, you know, you fix things for the victim survivor, not the other way around.

Micaela Cronin: Yes.

Jess Hill: And it's, traditionally it has been the other way around. That if we just attend to the victim survivor, the children and young people will take care of themselves. That's not the case. Yeah. And we've discovered that now, um, or we're in the process of discovering it. Um, it's not, this, what I'm about to say, is not necessarily the one thing that would lead to everything being fixed-but it's the one thing that I can see a way into fixing at the moment.

Micaela Cronin: Yep.

Jess Hill: Which may surprise people because it feels like one of the places that is the hardest to reform, but that is, um, the family law [00:41:00] system.

Micaela Cronin: Hmm.

Jess Hill: Um, and making the family law system truly child-focused is not out of our reach. Um, and there are lots of things I'm very excited about bringing to the public and taking to decision-makers, um, as suggestions which really bring in a lot of what has been discussed over the last 30 years.

Micaela Cronin: Hmm.

Jess Hill: Um, but also brings in some new potential innovations that could achieve that. And it's not just that this is for people who go through the family law system. I always think back to one of the first judicial education sessions that I had, and I met a magistrate who said that back when she'd been a barrister and she was in a viol- she was with a violent partner, the first time [00:42:00] that she saw him hit her son, she knew she'd not be able to leave that relationship until her son turned 18.

And that's because she knew as a barrister-

Micaela Cronin: Hmm ...

Jess Hill: that there was no way that the family law court would give her sole custody, and that she would not be able to be there at times when the father had unsupervised, had supervised, unsupervised access.

And so she stayed in the marriage from that time on as a supervisor.

And this is a person with access to means, this is a person with knowledge of the law, and they stayed because they knew- Yeah ... the family court system could not protect them.

Micaela Cronin: Yeah.

Jess Hill: That is something that the federal government has the power to change. And I think that we can find ways to do that. And I just feel like this is a moment.

We've come so far, we've made some really hard-won changes to the family law system, but [00:43:00] we've got 90% of matters, of parenting matters going through, almost 90%, having family violence, almost 80% having child abuse. This is now a family violence and child protection court, and the federal government needs to step up and do what's needed for that court to work properly and to be properly child-focused and safe.



Micaela Cronin: That's a big one, Jess. And I'm very glad you're putting your attention to it, and I'm really looking forward to hearing, um, more about, more about your paper and findings, uh, and to doing, and to putting my shoulders to the wheel to do that with you. So. Lovely ... thank you for the, thank you for the work that you do, and thank you for talking to me today.

Jess Hill: Oh, thank you, Michaela, and thank you for everything you do. It's always great to have a comrade in arms and we, you know, we've pushed through some brick walls ourselves which I've been very grateful for.

Micaela Cronin: Appreciate it, Jess. [00:44:00]

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