Involving men in ending violence against women: Facing challenges and making change

Michael Flood

I have long argued that men have a positive role to play in ending men's violence against women. And I've worked to foster men's involvement and to build networks of profeminist men. Indeed, I've been something of a 'cheerleader' for men's violence prevention. I've identified the principles which guide men's involvement in violence prevention. I've written at length about the strategies which are most effective and the standards for best practice in this field (Flood, 2005, 2014, 2015a, 2015b).

But rather than being a cheerleader today, I want to do something different. I want to highlight some hard truths, some of the challenges of this field. Because of that same fundamental belief, that hope, that we can make progress in ending violence against women.

I will focus on three key points:

- Men's violence against women is fundamentally linked to gender inequalities.
- Men's involvements in violence prevention are shaped by these same gender inequalities. Putting this another way, these same gender inequalities pose challenges for engaging men in change.
- Gender inequality is the problem, and gender equality is the solution.

First, I will look *outwards* – outside the White Ribbon Campaign and other violence prevention efforts, towards Australian society in general. After this, I will look *inwards*, at the field of violence prevention itself.
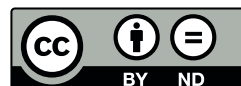
Men's violence against women is fundamentally linked to gender inequalities.

Men's violence against women both expresses and maintains men's power over women.

Let's start with the most basic point, that there is a crucial link between violence and *power*. Men's violence both maintains, and is the expression of, men's power over women and children. Men's violence is an important element in the organisation and maintenance of gender inequality. In fact, rape and other forms of violence have been seen as paradigmatic expressions of the operation of male power over women (Miller & Biele, 1993). Violence is targeted at and inflicted on women as a gender. Men's violence serves a *political* function, of subordination. There are ways in which all men benefit from some men's violence against women. And many men collude or are complicit in some men's violence.

Men perpetrate violence against women because they believe in gender inequality. Men assault and control their wives and partners because they believe that men should have status and authority over women, that they have a right to punish 'their' women; and that violence is a legitimate form of punishment (Adler, 1992). Men pressure and coerce women into sex because they believe in gender inequality: that they are entitled to access to women's bodies; that women are malicious and dishonest; that men should be strong and forceful and dominant.

Another way of putting this is that there is a crucial link between men's violence against women and *sexism*. Men's use of violence in intimate relationships "is particularly reinforced by sexism, the ideology of male supremacy and superiority" (Gamache, 1990).

Taking a global view, rates of men's violence against women are higher in societies in which manhood is culturally defined in terms of dominance, toughness, or male honour. Rates of violence against women are higher in societies with rigid gender roles.

Men perpetrate violence against women because of gender inequalities of power. Men's domestic violence in families and homes is only understandable in the context of power inequalities. In fact, it can be seen as a development of dominant-submissive power relations that exist in 'normal' family life (Hearn, 1996).

Again taking a global view, cross-culturally, male economic and decision-mak-

ing dominance in the family is one of the strongest predictors of societies showing high levels of violence against women (Heise, 1998).

This means that violence against women isn't a problem of a tiny number of mad, bad men. It's a problem of normal men, of men like me and other ordinary men. And a problem of the ways in which normal men have been taught to behave, the ways normal men have been taught to see women, and the normal ways in which we learn to behave.

Men's violence against women has social and structural roots.

Common explanations of men's violence against women show both an *individualist* and a *culturalist* bias. They focus above on attitudes held by individuals. These same biases then are visible in prevention strategies, again focused largely on shifting individual attitudes.

There are two issues here. First, the problem is not only individual attitudes, but social and cultural norms and ideologies. When it comes to sexual violence and sexual harassment for example, the problem is, in part, the social norms and ideologies through which male aggression is expected, girls and women are seen only as sexual objects, males' sexually coercive behaviour is normalised, and girls and women are compelled to accommodate male 'needs' and desires. These social norms means that sexual coercion actually becomes 'normal', working through common heterosexual norms and relations (Flood & Pease, 2009).

The second issue is that explanations of violence also must also be grounded in social relations and social structures. We must move beyond a strictly *cultural* emphasis in both explanation and intervention, recognising that 'violence has much deeper roots in the structural foundations of interpersonal relationships (and societal arrangements in general)' (Michalski, 2004).

In scholarship on violence against women, one contemporary trend is an increasing critique of approaches focused on individual and particularly psychological determinants of men's violence against women, and an emphasis instead on the social and structural foundations of this violence. There has been in recent years a resurgence of perspectives highlighting how structures of gender inequality shape violence perpetration and victimisation, both at the level of entire societies or communities and at the levels of relationships and families.

If we do not understand men's violence against women beyond individual violence, we will misdiagnose the problem and thus misprescribe the cure. We will fail to understand the true character of men's violence against women, we will fail to address its real causes and foundations, and we will fail in our efforts to reduce and prevent it.

I want now to extend these points, in several ways.

Individual men's use of violence is enabled by wider gender inequalities.

When an individual man hits an individual woman, or pressures her into sex, or sexually harasses her, his actions are only made possible because of a wider web of collective or structural conditions: patterns of gender inequality, structured inequalities in power, the social relations of peer groups, collective ideologies and discourses of gender and sexuality, organisational cultures, and institutional conditions (Stark, 2010).

When a man sexually coerces his girlfriend, he does so in part because his male friends think that this is okay, and some of them are doing it too. He's got close ties to abusive peers, and they're supportive of his dominating and coercive relations. He has what the research literature calls rape-supportive social relationships.

When a man sexually harasses a woman at his workplace, he does so in part because his colleagues and superiors turn a blind eye to harassment, there is no strong formal or informal commitment to a respectful workplace, and whistle-blowers and victims are ignored or punished.

Recent work by Evan Stark and others brings us back to two key insights of early feminist work: First, men's violence against women in relationships and families should be understood particularly in terms of dynamics of power and control, what Stark calls 'coercive control'. He highlights that the abuse many women suffer "typically [involves] frequent, even routine, but generally low-level assault; and [includes] a range of tactics in addition to threats or physical force" (Stark, 2010). Often,

> coercion is accompanied by a range of tactics designed to isolate, intimidate, exploit, degrade and/or control a partner in ways that violate a victim's dignity, autonomy and liberty as much as their physical integrity or security (Stark, 2010)

Second, this coercive control is made possible because of wider gender inequalities. Evan Stark emphasises that men's use of coercive control against women exploits persistent gender inequalities, and that this control both expresses and maintains gender inequality. This means that women's use of controlling behaviours against men is unlikely to work in the same way, with the same meanings or impact, as men's controlling behaviours against women. Men's use of coercive control against female partners is enabled by persistent gender inequalities (Stark, 2010). A man is more able to control his wife or partner because he can exploit her roles as a housekeeper, wife, and mother. Because she does most of the unpaid work in the house, while he is free to advance his career. Because she has been socialised to feel responsible for his emotional wellbeing, his sexual interests, and so on.

And make no mistake, a man using coercive control and abuse against his wife or partner may gain *benefits* from this. His abuse of her has a payoff for him, in terms of the emotional and material resources he gains, personal service, sexual exclusivity and access, and the reinforcement of a gender identity built on entitlement (Stark, 2010).

Men's violence itself may be practised collectively.

Not only does MVAW have collective or structural roots, but this violence itself may be practised or perpetrated collectively. Think for example of group or gang rape, of street sexual harassment, or other forms of violence against women, practised by groups of men acting together or colluding in their violence. For example, rape sometimes is practised as a means to and an expression of male bonding, as interviews among convicted rapists document (Scully, 1990).

Men's violence against women has a collective impact.

Men's violence against women has an impact not just on individual women, but on women *as a group*. Men's violence is a threat to women's mobility, self-esteem and everyday safety. This violence imposes a curfew on women. Sexual violence and other forms of violence act as a form of social control on women, limiting their autonomy, freedom and safety, and their access to paid work and political decision-making. Men's violence thus has the general social consequence of reproducing forms of men's authority over women. Men's violence against women also thus has

an impact on men as a group, in that it sustains the power and authority of men as a group.

Implications for prevention

Men's violence against women is fundamentally *collective* and *structural* in its causes, its workings, and its impact. This has some obvious implications for prevention.

To stop violence against women, we must address collective causes. We must address 'the structural conditions that perpetuate violence at the interpersonal and even societal level' (Michalski, 2004).

The state of the field

Now I want to turn our focus *inwards*, towards the field of violence prevention itself. I'll return to the theme of gender inequalities soon. But first, I want to briefly offer a stocktake of the field.

Just one historical point first. The presentation earlier today referred to White Ribbon's "ten-year history" in Australia, but in fact this is a 21-year history. The White Ribbon Campaign was first taken up in Australia in 1992, by a network of profeminist men's groups.

Good news: Some significant achievements: numbers, organisations, partnerships, policy support, community goodwill, evidence of effectiveness.

I will start by acknowledging the good news – that men's violence prevention has 'runs on the board', significant achievements. I discussed these in detail in the report released by the White Ribbon Foundation in 2010, *Where Men Stand* (Flood, 2010).

Briefly, increasing numbers of men in Australia are taking part in efforts to end violence against women. Some powerful, traditionally male-dominated organisations and workplaces have taken up the cause of preventing and reducing men's violence against women. There are now some important partnerships between women's and men's networks and organisations. Male involvement in violence

prevention has some real policy support, on state and national policy agendas. There is substantial community goodwill towards our cause. And there is a growing body of research evidence that, if they're designed and implemented well (and that's a big 'if'), violence prevention efforts among men and boys do make a difference.

More good news

There are other positive trends I've noticed.

There is increased regional and global networking. You already know this about the White Ribbon Campaign. But another aspect of this is the emergence of regional and international networks and organisations in the last decade. I'll mention two. First, MenEngage, a global alliance of NGOs and UN agencies seeking to engage boys and men to achieve gender equality, formed in 2004. MenEngage members at the national level include more than 400 NGOs from Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Asia and Europe. Second, Partners for Prevention (P4P), a UN regional joint programme for gender-based violence prevention in the Asia-Pacific, formed in 2008.

There is growing diversity in the strategies used to engage or address men in violence prevention. Much prevention activity involves either face-to-face education programs in schools and universities, or communications and social marketing strategies. These are now increasingly complemented by other strategies, including efforts to engage and mobilise communities, change organizational practices, and influence policies and legislation. In addition, within each level of the spectrum, there is increasing diversity in the strategies used. For example, at the level of community education, there is growing specialisation in the adoption of particular approaches such as bystander intervention, social norms approaches, and so on.

We are reaching men through new areas and in relation to new practices. There has been an increase in efforts to engage men in violence prevention through particular domains such as parenting. The MenCare project is the preeminent example of this. MenCare is a global campaign to promote men's involvement as equitable, responsive and non-violent fathers and caregivers. The campaign is described as having a preventative effect on men's violence against women by encouraging fathers to treat mothers with respect and care, diminishing the corporal punishment which feeds into cycles of family violence, involving fathers in preventing

sexual violence against children, and contributing to boys' adoption of peaceful and progressive masculinities and girls' empowerment (MenCare, 2010).

There is growing attention to violence prevention work with men and boys in conflict and post-conflict settings in particular. There are fledgling efforts at gender-conscious violence prevention among men and boys in conflict and post-conflict settings: in the Western Balkans, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Liberia, and Chad.

There is some evidence of an increasing orientation towards 'scaling up' – towards addressing the systemic and structural supports for men's violence. I know I know, size doesn't matter. But here, it does. Most violence prevention work with men and boys has been local in scale and limited in scope. To really transform gender inequalities, we must adopt systematic, large-scale, and coordinated efforts.

'Scaling up' here includes the need to address the social and structural determinants of gender inequalities, contribute to the development or consolidation of policies and programmes promoting gender equality and non-violence, scale up existing initiatives already being run by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other actors, and strengthen policy implementation (Flood, Peacock, Stern, Barker, & Greig, 2010).

Finally, there is an increasing emphasis on evaluation. There is a new mantra of evidence-based practice. It can be too narrow in its criteria for evidence, but it signals a valuable emphasis on the need to assess whether our efforts actually make a difference.

Much violence prevention work has not been evaluated. We don't have data regarding its effectiveness – and that's true, in fact, of most of White Ribbon's work as well.

Bad news: Some weaknesses of men's violence prevention

Just to continue this mapping of the strengths and weaknesses of men's violence prevention, I want to highlight three weaknesses.

First, much of the work engaging men and boys in violence prevention is conceptually simplistic. Much is not informed by contemporary scholarship either on interpersonal violence and its prevention or on men and masculinities. This causes a number of problems. Many interventions fall short of the elements identified

as 'best practice' in prevention (Flood, Fergus, & Heenan, 2009). Many lack a theory of change – of how the strategies they use will lead to intended effects. They do not necessarily address relevant predictors or causal factors for violence or its antecedents. Their actual activities may not generate the intended change, because they are too short, one-dimensional, or limited in other ways.

The violence prevention field's lack of engagement with scholarship on men, masculinities and gender also causes problems. In many projects boys and men are addressed as an homogenous group, all sharing the same relationships to violence against women. There has been little attention to how men's lives (like women's) are shaped by multiple forms of social difference including ethnicity, class, age and sexuality (Heppner, Neville, Smith, Kivlighan Jr, & Gershuny, 1999).

In short, too many projects are based on poor knowledge and poor strategy.

Second, the growing focus on engaging men and boys in prevention is politically delicate and, in some instances, dangerous. Mobilising men to end violence against women and gender inequalities involves mobilising members of a privileged group to dismantle that same privilege (Flood, 2005). In practice, a number of problems have been visible in violence prevention efforts focused on or led by men. In some instances, funding or resources for these have been at the expense of, or in competition with, women-only and women-focused programs. Not all 'work with men' shares a feminist-informed commitment to gender justice, and some is motivated instead by problematic understandings of men or boys as victims (Pease, 2008). 'Work with men' sometimes has ceased to be the strategy and has become the goal, perceived as an end in itself rather than as one means of pursuing violence prevention and gender equality. More widely, a focus on 'working with men' or 'male involvement' can omit or marginalise the pressing need to address unequal *relations* of gender between men and women.

Third, there is a whole lot we *don't know* about the effectiveness of violence prevention efforts among men and boys. Are some strategies more effective among some groups of men or boys than others, and why? For example, there is evidence that rape prevention efforts among men are less effective among those men at higher risk of perpetrating sexual coercion. In a US study among college men, while the intervention's impact overall was positive, this was driven by shifts among low-risk men, and in fact there was an increase in sexually coercive behaviour among high-risk men (Stephens & George, 2009).

What are the mediators of change, those factors which influence whether and how change occurs? What factors sustain men's and boys' involvement in and commitment to prevention activities? How do the contextual features and dynamics of organisations, communities, and cultures influence efforts to engage men and boys in violence prevention? How is men's and boys' participation in the prevention of violence against women shaped by the wider dynamics of gender and sexuality and other forms of social difference?

I'll turn now to my second major point.

Men's involvements in violence prevention are shaped by these same gender inequalities.

Here we are at a conference defined by its focus on men's roles in preventing violence against women. And we have to acknowledge that men's involvements in violence prevention are shaped by these same gender inequalities. To the extent that it is hard to engage men in reducing and preventing men's violence against women, it is hard above all because of gender inequalities.

I retain my firmly held hope in men's positive futures and men's abilities to change. But I also want to call for a realistic and clear-eyed examination of what we are up against. I was troubled yesterday by some of the hyperbole, the rhetoric, that White Ribbon and other efforts have created a profound change in men's and women's speaking up and taking action. I say: Show me the *data*. I think that sometimes, men are prone to 'premature congratulation'.

Yes, there are signs of positive change, but there is a long way to go. And with that in mind …

Men start in a worse place than women.

Men start in a worse place than women. It should not be news to you that men's attitudes towards violence against women are systematically worse than women's. As a national survey of community attitudes demonstrated, there is a systematic gender gap in attitudes. Men are consistently more likely than women to agree with violence-supportive myths, to justify or excuse violence in relationships and families, to blame the victim and to excuse the perpetrator. If you want

the details (or indeed the details on what data there is on the proportions of men who perpetrate violence against women), go to the White Ribbon report *Where Men Stand* (Flood, 2010).

Far fewer men than women take up the cause of preventing violence against women.

Efforts to prevent men's violence against women or more generally to build gender equality receive more support from women than men. Again, it should not surprise you that fewer men than women turn up or sign up, and it's harder to educate and inspire them than women if they do.

There is no doubt that there has been a groundswell of support among men for violence against women, and this is demonstrated for example by men's support for and involvement in the White Ribbon Campaign. There were over 460 events and 250,000 ribbons distributed in the 2012 Australian campaign. But I would like to know the answers to three questions. First, how many of the ribbons were worn by men? Second, in how many of these events did men play a significant organising role? And third, how many of the 250,000 ribbons were worn by men (a) who freely chose to wear them rather than being ordered to by a superior, and (b) whose wearing of the ribbon symbolised a substantive rather than token commitment to addressing violence against women?

Men in general are hostile to involvement in violence prevention efforts

Many men feel blamed and defensive about the issue of men's violence against women (Berkowitz, 2004). Some men perceive anti-violence campaigns as 'anti-male', and for many this reflects a wider perception of feminism as hostile to and blaming of men (Flood, 2010).

Male audiences may react to educational efforts with hostility or defensiveness.

So not many men turn up. And when we do actually get men in the room, for example running a violence prevention program in a school or university, male au-

diences may react with hostility or defensiveness. Many react with hostility and defensiveness in response to violence prevention efforts, even those which emphasise the positive roles men can play in ending violence against women. Many men see violence against women as exclusively a women's issue, one in which men have no place. Such notions produce 'cultural inoculation', in which men are immune to programs designed to engage them (Crooks, Goodall, Hughes, Jaffe, & Baker, 2007).

Now there is some good experience and insight on how to limit men's defensive reactions, which I won't go into, but this will be an ongoing challenge. And if your efforts are not producing *any* discomfort among the men in the room, then you're probably not making a difference.

Some groups of men actively campaign in defence of gender inequalities: men's rights and fathers' rights groups.

Indeed, some groups of men actively campaign in defence of gender inequalities. Men's rights and fathers' rights groups take up anti-feminist agendas, campaigning against the White Ribbon Campaign and other efforts focused on men's violence against women.

To summarise so far, men start in a worse place, and they're more resistant to change. And when men *do* get involved, they may be complicit in gender inequalities.

Those men who are involved also may be complicit in patriarchal masculinities.

There is a growing body of research on men's involvement in violence prevention advocacy – research among male activists and educators for example in campus anti-rape groups or in international violence prevention and gender equality initiatives. It documents that, on the one hand, these men undergo important processes of positive personal change. Several studies document that men who become involved in anti-violence work become strong allies to women (Mohan & Schultz, 2001) and reject dominant masculinities (Hong, 2000).

On the other hand, some men involved in this work also are complicit in patriarchal masculinities. This should not surprise us. Men in general carry an 'invis-

ible backpack' of privilege, a taken-for-granted set of unearned benefits and assets (McIntosh, 1989), and gender norms and inequalities shape patterns of male-female interaction. Men involved in violence prevention are not immune from these. To give some examples:

Men in a campus-based Men Against Violence network showed defensive homophobic responses to others' perceptions of gayness and effeminacy and espoused chivalric notions of themselves as protectors and defenders of women (Hong, 2000).

In an American women's network that recruited male volunteers as anti-violence educators, some men showed sexism, lack of empathy for survivors and stereotypical expectations of women's roles (Mohan & Schultz, 2001).

So of course, in doing this work, we must look at our own privilege and work to undermine it. (See the White Ribbon report *Men Speak Up* (2011) for ideas on how to do this.)

Gender inequality and other problems

At this point, I want to complicate the story I've told so far.

Gender is not the only story, and gender inequality is not the only problem.

Gender inequality is the problem, but it is not the only problem. Gender intersects with other forms of social difference, such as race and ethnicity, class, and sexuality. In turn, gender inequalities intersect with other forms of inequality associated with race and ethnicity, class and sexuality.

We are only just beginning to think about how to engage men from diverse cultural backgrounds, men from vastly different social and economic positions and communities, in preventing men's violence against women.

I gave a paper at a conference two weeks ago on DV in culturally and linguistically diverse or 'CaLD' communities, on engaging men from diverse backgrounds in prevention. Just to highlight some points from that talk, I noted that women in immigrant and CaLD communities and refugees face a heightened vulnerability to violence. Men's violence-supportive attitudes are shaped by gender, but also by ethnicity, class, and other factors. Experiences of immigration and resettlement

shape men's uses of violence. And I emphasised that male perpetrators are more likely to be held accountable and criminalized, and their crimes are more likely to be seen as linked to their ethnicity, if they are from minority ethnic backgrounds (Flood, 2013).

Sometimes gender is the problem.

I've said that the problem is gender inequality, but there is also a sense in which gender *itself* is the problem. Men's violence against women is sustained by rigid gender codes, the policing of manhood, and by rigid constructions of a gender binary between masculinity and femininity, men and women, and male and female. Social marketing efforts engaging men in violence prevention often rely on 'real men' who are good at performing some of the dominant codes of masculinity, e.g. as sporting heroes or corporate leaders. But we also need to affirm and promote men who *don't* fit dominant codes of masculinity: girly men, gay men, sissy men, and transgender men. In other words, part of our work should be to break down narrow constructions of manhood and powerful gender binaries.

Some questions

I've said that gender inequality is the problem, and gender equality is the solution. This poses some practical challenges. I don't have the space to explore them in depth here, but I want to at least pose some questions.

If gender inequality is the problem, how do we work or engage with organisations which themselves are characterised by gender inequality? How do we engage with male-dominated organisations – in the business and corporate worlds, for example? How do we work with institutions which historically have been anything but advocates for gender equality, such as the institutions of organised religion? Indeed, in our efforts to end violence against women, how should we work with institutions such as the military which are defined by their use of violence – not the everyday intimate violence which many women face, but the organised, government-sanctioned use of violence against other countries or military forces?

If gender equality is the solution, what do we do about governments which are not very supportive of gender equality? At this conference on Monday morning, Michael Kaufman said that the White Ribbon Campaign is "politically non-parti-

san", that these issues "have to transcend our political differences". He urged a 'big tent approach', saying that "We will speak with one voice." Later on Monday, Coalition Senator Michaelia Cash echoed this, stating that addressing violence against women is "above politics".

I disagree. A Coalition government may come in in September, and I'm not sure if what I'm about to say will make it impossible for me ever to work for them. It will depend on whether they want what Australia's public service used to call 'frank and fearless advice', or just advice which makes them 'comfortable and happy'.

If saying that ending men's violence against women is 'above politics' means that the two main political parties both will support efforts to reduce and prevent this violence, then all well and good. So perhaps saying that this issue is non-partisan, above politics, is strategically useful. But at a more substantive level, the issue is not at all above politics.

Conservative political parties and conservative political agendas do have an impact on gender, and thus on violence. In general, the political agendas of the Coalition are more likely than those of the Labor Party to maintain women's economic dependence on men, to limit women's access to political decision-making, to put children of divorced and separated parents in the hands of violent fathers, to limit women's sexual autonomy, to support narrow constructions of gender and to refrain from educational and media efforts to change them, and to entrench various forms of social disadvantage. And these then feed into a greater likelihood of men's violence against women. Equally, it's broadly true that there is greater support for gender equality among the parties to the left of the Labor Party, those more progressive political parties and groups which contest the margins of parliamentary politics.

I'm not saying something stupid here, that a vote for Tony Abbott is a vote for violence against women. That's too simple. But it is undeniable that a party which fails to address gender inequalities is a party which also risks failing to address violence against women.

So …

Our efforts have to focus on ending gender inequalities, as these are so central to men's violence against women. As well as providing services for victims and

responding to perpetrators, we must shift the social and structural inequalities which create victims and perpetrators in the first place. We must embed our efforts to end men's violence against women in wider agendas of gender justice. In short, we have to build a world of gender equality.

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