

a typical victim of domestic violence

Why violence against women and girls happens, and how to prevent it

A framework and some key strategies



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Introduction

There is a compelling, three-fold rationale for directing violence prevention efforts at children and young people. First, males' and females' adult relationships are shaped in important ways by the

norms and practices they take on in adolescence. Second, violence-supportive attitudes are already well established in adolescence, and patterns of physical and sexual violence are evident in some young people's intimate relations. Third, violence prevention education among children and youth has been shown to work.

In the following, I identify the key determinants of violence against girls and women, concentrating on the causes of intimate partner violence (between spouses or in boyfriend-girlfriend relationships). I focus on boys' and men's violence to girls and women, while acknowledging that boys and men themselves often are the victims of violence and that girls and women sometimes are the perpetrators. I then identify key populations and contexts for intervention, and strategies available to teachers and schools to prevent violence against girls and women.

The causes of physical and sexual violence against girls and women

Physical and sexual violence against girls and women is shaped by attitudes and social norms, gendered inequalities of power, and

a wide variety of other social factors. I have grouped these causes into three broad clusters.

■ Gender roles and relations

The most well-documented determinants of violence against girls and women can be found in gender norms and gender relations. Whether at individual, community, or societal levels, there are relationships between how gender is organised and violence against women. One key factor here is men's gender-role attitudes and beliefs. Men's agreement with sexist, patriarchal, or sexually hostile attitudes is an important predictor of their use of violence against women. Men who do not hold patriarchal and hostile gender norms are less likely than other men to use violence against an intimate partner.

There is a gender gap in attitudes towards intimate partner violence. In an Australian survey of 5,000 youth aged 12–20, 14 percent of young males, but only three percent of females, agreed with the statement, "It's okay for a boy to make a girl have sex with him if she has flirted with him or led him on". Males were more likely than females to agree with statements condoning violence such as, "Most physical violence occurs because a partner provoked it" (32 percent, versus 24 percent for females) and "When a guy hits a girl it's not really a big deal" (31 percent, versus 19 percent for females) (*National Crime Prevention*, 2001). Young males are less likely than young females to consider particular behaviours to be domestic violence, more likely to see them as normal conflict, less likely to rate a range of forms of violence as very serious, and more likely to agree with statements which condone violence. Findings are similar in a series of smaller Australian studies (Davis and Lee, 1996; Golding and Friedman, 1997; Xenos and Smith, 2001). Nevertheless, the majority of young men, like most young women, see violence in relationships as unacceptable.

The gender gap in attitudes towards violence against women is shaped by attitudes towards gender. Traditional gender-role attitudes, whether held by women or men, are associated with greater acceptance of violence against women, while egalitarian attitudes are associated with less acceptance of violence. Among 12 to 20-year olds, those young people who show the strongest tolerance for violence in intimate relationships (by either sex) also are significantly more likely than other youth to hold traditional views about gender roles (*National Crime Prevention*, 2001: 89–90).

Violence-supportive attitudes are grounded in wider social norms regarding gender and sexuality. In fact, in many ways, violence is part of 'normal' sexual, intimate, and family relations. This is clear from studies among youth (and adults). For example, for many young people, sexual harassment is pervasive, male aggression is

expected and normalised, there is constant pressure among boys to behave in sexually aggressive ways, girls are routinely objectified, a sexual double standard polices girls' sexual and intimate involvements, and girls are compelled to accommodate male 'needs' and desires (Hird and Jackson, 2001; Tolman et al., 2003).

Adolescents' vulnerability to violence in relationships is heightened by various factors. Peer group norms are stronger than among adults and they may exaggerate dominant definitions of masculine and feminine behaviour. This can mean that girls report force or manipulation in first sexual experiences but do not identify it as 'rape', while some boys describe situations in which they are justified in hitting their girlfriends or pressuring them into sex (Sousa, 1990). Adolescents are inexperienced at relationships and may excessively romanticise them, for example interpreting jealousy and abuse as signs of love (Levy, 1990: 4–5). Power inequalities are heightened by the typical pattern of girls dating older boys (Gamache, 1990: 74). Young people may be reluctant to confide in parents, not taken seriously by adults, and have less access than adults to legal and social services. On the other hand, adolescents also are less likely to live together or have children, factors which can bind adults into abusive relationships.

Gender roles and relations also shape intimate partner violence at the level of relationships and families. A key factor here is the power relations between partners – are they egalitarian, or dominated by one partner? Another factor is marital conflict, which interacts with the power relations of the relationship or family. When conflict occurs in an asymmetrical power structure, there is a much higher risk of violence.

Peer groups and organisational cultures are important influences too. Some men have rape-supporting social relationships, as we know from studies in sport, male residential colleges on campuses, and the military (Flood and Pease, 2006). There are higher rates of sexual violence against young women in contexts characterised by gender segregation, an ethic of male sexual conquest, strong male bonding, high alcohol consumption, use of pornography, and sexist social norms.

Violence-supportive attitudes and norms are shaped by various other social influences, including popular media. A wide range of studies have documented relationships between tolerance for physical or sexual violence and exposure to particular imagery in pornography, television, film, advertising, and electronic games (Flood and Pease, 2006). Given the Australian evidence that substantial proportions of boys are regular consumers of X-rated video pornography and Internet pornography (Flood and Hamilton, 2003), this may prove to be a significant influence on boys' adherence to violence-supportive attitudes.

■ Social norms and practices relating to violence

The second cluster of causes has to do with other social norms and practices related to violence. Violence in the community is a risk factor for intimate partner violence. Members of disadvantaged communities may learn a greater tolerance of violence through exposure to violence by their parents, delinquent peers, and others (Flood and Pease, 2006).

Young people's social networks have an impact on violence in their intimate relationships. Having friends or acquaintances who are experiencing violence in their romantic relationships is a risk factor for violence. This may normalise violence, or may represent contact with delinquent peers (Vezina and Hebert, 2007).

Childhood exposure to intimate partner violence contributes to the transmission of violence across generations. Children, and especially boys, who either witness violence or are subjected to violence themselves are more likely as adults to have violence-supportive attitudes and to perpetrate violence (Flood and Pease, 2006).

■ Access to resources and systems of support

Rates of reported domestic violence are higher in areas of economic and social disadvantage. Disadvantage may increase the risk of abuse because of factors such as crowding, hopelessness, conflict, stress, or a sense of inadequacy in some men. Social isolation is another risk factor. Among young women, rates of domestic violence are higher for those who are not involved in schools or do not experience positive parenting and supervision in their families. In adult couples, social isolation is both a cause and a consequence of wife abuse. Women with strong family and friendship networks experience lower rates of violence. Intimate partner violence is shaped also by communities' levels of poverty, unemployment, and collective efficacy – neighbours' willingness to help other neighbours or to intervene in anti-social or violent behaviour.

Particular personality characteristics are predisposing factors in men's perpetration of partner violence. Spouse abusers tend to have more psychological problems than non-violent men, including borderline, mood disorders, and depression. Adolescent delinquency – antisocial and aggressive behaviour committed during adolescence – is a predictor of men's later perpetration of sexual assault.

Men's abuse of alcohol or drugs is another risk factor. Men may use being drunk or high to minimise their own responsibility for violent behaviour. Some men may see drunk women as more sexually available, and may use alcohol as a strategy for overcoming women's resistance. There are also situational factors that increase the risk of intimate partner violence, such as

separation and divorce.

Preventing violence against girls and women

I have identified a daunting array of factors which contribute to violence against women and girls. While this review tells us just how pervasive the problem is, it also allows us to identify some key populations, settings, and strategies for violence prevention.

Among children and youth

Perhaps the most obvious rationale for 'starting young' is that adolescence is a crucial period in terms of women's and men's formation of healthy, non-violent relationships later in life (*National Campaign Against Violence and Crime*, 1998: 23). Dollars and effort put in early can save much greater expenses and trauma in adult life. Second, among youth, violence is already an issue. Younger males are particularly likely to endorse violence against women, and some gender norms among adolescents 'normalise' sexual coercion (Flood and Pease, 2006). Third, more intensive and long-term education programs in schools do produce lasting change in attitudes and behaviours (Flood, 2005–2006). There are sound reasons for also enacting interventions with children and youth in non-school settings, as I discuss below.

With boys and men

There is an increasing focus on engaging boys and men in efforts to prevent intimate partner violence. This has a three-fold rationale. First, while most males do not perpetrate intimate partner violence, intimate partner violence is perpetrated largely by males. Second, constructions of masculinity play a crucial role in shaping some men's perpetration of physical and sexual assault. Third, and more hopefully, men have a positive role to play in helping to end men's violence against women (Flood, 2005–2006). Violence is an issue of concern to women and men alike and men have a stake in ending violence against women.

With girls and women

Historically, girls and women have been the focus of primary prevention efforts addressing intimate partner violence. Girls and women are taught in school programs and elsewhere to watch out for the 'warning signs' of abuse in relationships, to avoid risky situations or respond effectively to them, to use clear and effective communication in sexual situations, and to reject violence-supportive myths and norms (Hanson and Gidycz, 1993). While such strategies have an obvious rationale, they have also been criticised for potentially exacerbating victim-blaming. They may imply that it is women's responsibility to avoid being raped or assaulted, not men's to avoid raping or assaulting. And they can result in self-blame when some women inevitably are unsuccessful at applying the skills and lessons learnt (Yeater and O'Donohue,

1999).

On the other hand, it would be problematic to focus education efforts exclusively on men. Not all men will participate in education programs, those who do are likely to have a lower potential of perpetrating violence, and even if all men participated, no intervention is 100 percent effective (Yeater and O'Donohue, 1999). Directing violence prevention efforts to women can increase women's critical understandings of intimate partner violence and build on their already-existing skills in recognising and resisting violence. In addition, educating women can change men: by shifting women's expectations of partners and intimate relations, interventions may increase the pressures on and incentives for heterosexual men to adopt non-violent practices and identities. Yes, this is unfair, but it is no more unfair or damaging than the consequences of violence itself.

Among children who have witnessed or experienced violence and in families affected by violence against women

Intervention in the intergenerational transmission of violence is vital. Physical or sexual violence against adult women often is accompanied by violence against their children. Whether children are witnesses to or direct victims of interpersonal violence, their experience can have profound and long-lasting effects on their health and well-being.

In boys' peer cultures and with young men at risk of or already using violence

Interventions among children and youth in general should be complemented by other strategies aimed at addressing intensive forms of support for violence in the peer cultures and group norms of some boys and young men, such as peer education and mentoring (Berkowitz, 2004; Flood, 2005—2006). Prevention programs should be tailored for levels of risk for intimate partner violence: briefer among general populations of males (although intensive and lengthy enough to create lasting change), more extensive among males showing risk factors, and most intensive (involving extensive psychosocial and legal interventions) among males who are already using violence).

The contribution of teachers and schools

Violence prevention efforts among children and youth can take a wide variety of forms, from face-to-face education in schools and curricula teaching media literacy, to social marketing campaigns and efforts at community development and collective mobilisation. I focus here on three clusters of violence prevention which are particularly relevant for teachers and schools:

1. Teaching practice;

2. Education programs; and

3. Campaigns such as the *White Ribbon Campaign*.

1. Teaching practice

Teachers in schools have a crucial role to play in preventing and diminishing violence against girls and women. Teachers can shape students' ability to escape violence, their choices to avoid violence, and their tolerance for violence. Schools also have a crucial role to play. The formal policies and procedures, curricula, teaching strategies, and informal cultures of schools all have an influence on violence, whether discouraging or encouraging. Violence prevention is an integral part of the general effort to improve and enhance the self esteem and abilities of young people (NCAVAC, 1998: 23—30). More generally, all members of the community have a responsibility to help end violence.

There are practical efforts any teacher can adopt which will make a difference.

- **Respond appropriately to disclosures of violence.** Show that you believe the person, and that what they are saying is important. Tell them that there is help and support available to them, and make this information available to them.
- **Help establish a culture of non-violence** as the norm at your school. Ensure that your school has strong policies and procedures to do with violence, including sex-based harassment. Make sure that disclosures of violence by students and teachers are well handled and supported.
- **Foster values of non-violence and respect in your teaching.** Encourage an ethos of non-violence in the classroom and in all aspects of the school. Give positive reinforcement to appropriate behaviour. Demonstrate that you will not condone students' aggressive behaviour, harassment, threats or put-downs. And avoid these behaviours yourself when managing the classroom or disciplining students. Put up information about violence. And introduce content on violence into your teaching materials.

Teachers also have a wider role to play in contributing to a school-wide process of education and change, as I discuss below.

2. Education programs

Teachers can invite violence prevention educators to run sessions and workshops at their school, assist in introducing and supporting existing programs on violence for students, and organise and participate in professional development programs for teachers and other staff.

Violence prevention education among young people is the primary prevention strategy which has been most extensively evaluated. The good news is that such interventions can have positive effects on participants' attitudes towards and participation in intimate

partner violence (Flood, 2005—2006). Secondary school and university students who have attended education sessions show less adherence to rape myths, express less violence-supportive attitudes, and/or report greater victim empathy than those in control groups. Existing evaluations show that not all educational interventions are effective, changes in attitudes often 'rebound' to pre-intervention levels one or two months after the intervention, and some even become worse. However, education programs which are intensive, lengthy, and use a variety of pedagogical approaches have been shown to produce positive and lasting change in attitudes and behaviours (Flood, 2005—2006). Still, more information is required regarding the effectiveness of various aspects of program delivery, such as timing, locale, and content (Cornelius and Resseguie, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006; Wolfe and Jaffe, 2003).

There is some evidence too that primary prevention programs among young women can reduce their risk of victimisation (Yeater and O'Donohue, 1999). Such programs typically help women to decrease their risk of being sexually assaulted or increase their chances of escaping from an assault. Hanson and Broom's (2005) meta-analysis finds that such programs have a small beneficial effect in reducing women's risks of subsequent victimisation.

There are other promising strategies of primary prevention among children and adolescents which take place outside school settings, although there is less evidence of their effectiveness (Whitaker et al., 2006). Prevention programs also should address adolescents who are not in school and through other means and contexts associated with increased risks of victimisation (Rosewater, 2003; Vezina and Hebert, 2007). These include homeless youth, children living in poverty or in families receiving welfare, young mothers, and girls and young women under protective services care. Relevant strategies include home visiting programs, parenting education and support. Indigenous young people are an important priority for violence prevention, given their high levels of exposure to violence. Interventions should be linked to other family healing strategies, address issues of drug and alcohol abuse, and encourage Indigenous youth's participation in education (PADV, 2003).

3. Campaigns: the *White Ribbon Campaign*

Finally, teachers and schools have a valuable role to play in involving students in campaigns of community education and social change, both based at school and in wider communities. Teachers can encourage their school to have a regular day in the school year which is focused on non-violence. Have school-wide campaigns and ceremonies which reward and celebrate peaceful and respectful ways of behaving and relating. Link up with community organisations, parents' groups and other bodies to organise a 'Week Without Violence' or to participate in national

efforts such as the *White Ribbon Campaign*.

To prevent violence against women, we must change the social norms, gender roles, and power relations which feed into violence. There is a growing consensus that strategies of community development and mobilisation are central to this project (*Family Violence Prevention Fund*, 2004), and schools can be important sites for these. We must create opportunities for individuals, including young people, to mobilise their communities through events, networks, and campaigns (Greig and Peacock, 2005). It is particularly important that we mobilise boys and men, because of many males' greater endorsement of violence-supportive attitudes, men's roles as community leaders and gatekeepers, and men's relative absence from efforts to end violence against women. One effort oriented directly to this is the *White Ribbon Campaign*.



The *White Ribbon Campaign* is the largest collective effort in the world focused on involving men in ending men's violence against women. Boys and men are encouraged to show their opposition to violence against women by purchasing and wearing a white ribbon, on and in the weeks leading up to November 25th, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Males thus pledge themselves never to commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women. In some countries, the *White Ribbon Campaign* also involves year-round educational strategies and events.

The *White Ribbon Campaign* is an ideal one for students, teachers, and schools to take up. The campaign is well established in Australia (with support staff, high-profile 'Ambassadors', a website, and a strong public profile), it is accompanied by excellent resources, and it is well suited to young people's participation. Students and schools who wish to take part can use the campaign's website (www.whiteribbonday.org.au) to get ribbons, resource kits, and flyers. Their efforts may be based at a local school or in support of other events organised by others. To see a report on a schools workshop held in Canberra in 2006, consult the website's section on 'school participation'.

Among violence prevention efforts, the *White Ribbon Campaign* (WRC) is distinctive in focusing on the positive roles which men can play in helping to end violence against women. While this focus has been diluted in some recent WRC efforts in Australia, it remains a defining element in the campaign. The campaign's focus on boys' and men's positive roles is enormously valuable. At the same time, it does mean that schools taking up the WRC should keep in mind who will be the participants, and the intended

targets, of their efforts.

Students, teachers, and schools may distribute white ribbons, invite a guest speaker, invite students to pledge their commitment by signing a giant white ribbon, have a violence awareness table in the school lobby, create or use posters or organise a project in Art class or run a school-wide competition, create a mural or banner, prepare school announcements that relate to the issue of violence against girls and women, hold a discussion group, hold a white shirt day, hold an 'In the Name of Love' dance, organise a prize draw, quiz show or film festival, and so on. People can find great ideas for and guides to action, and further resources on the UK Womankind site (www.womankind.org.uk/toolkit.html), and can purchase an *Education and Action Kit* for students and schools produced by the Canadian *White Ribbon Campaign* (www.whiteribbon.com/).

Conclusion

Violence against girls and women is pervasive, and grounded in widespread social norms and gender inequalities. Yet it can be prevented. Strategies for reducing levels of violence are increasingly well documented and tested. Preventing violence will require sustained and systematic efforts, by students, teachers, and schools, and more widely, in families, communities, and nations. Progress has been made, and there is much more to do.

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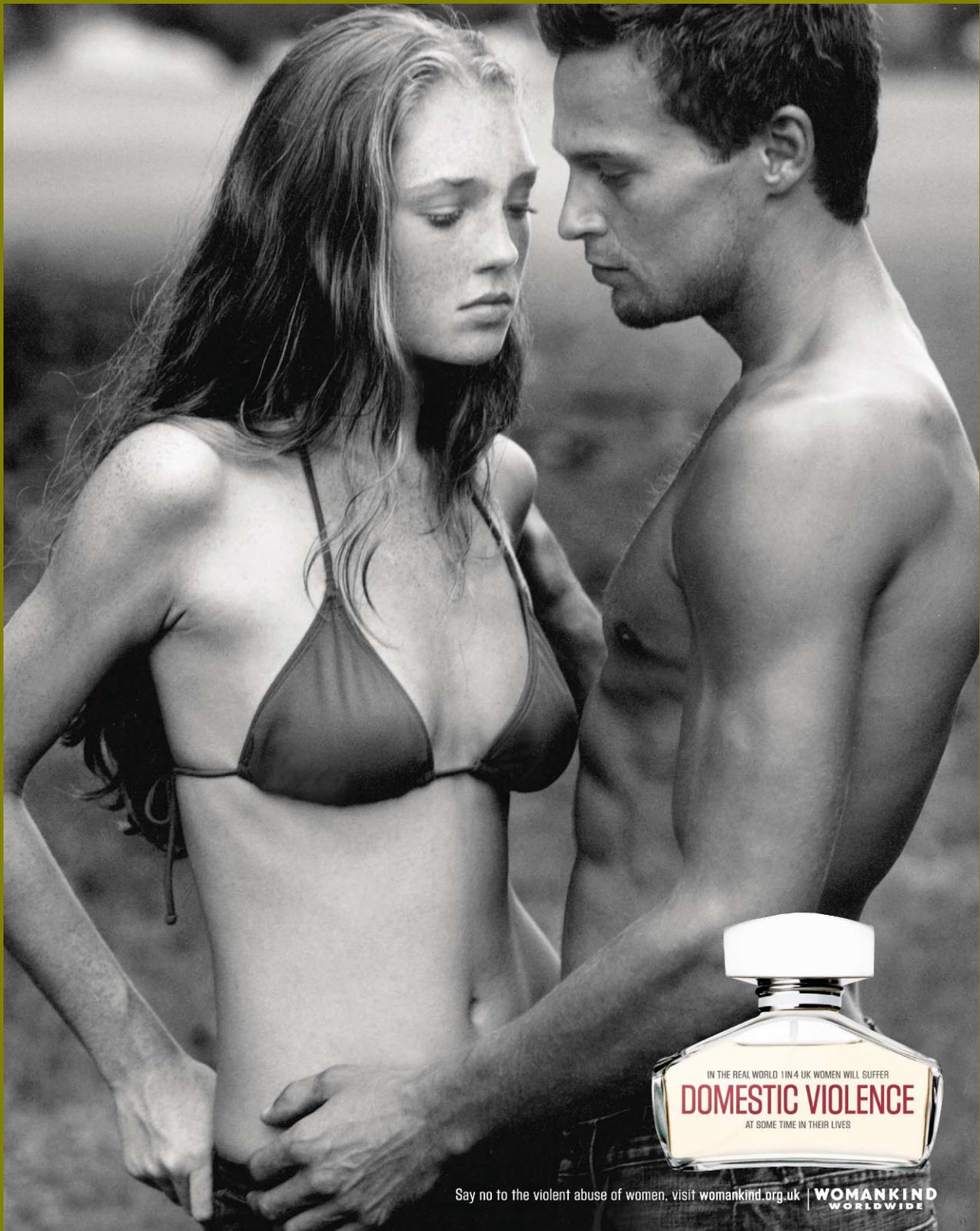
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