

# **Resistance and Backlash: Responding to and preventing resistance to violence prevention work**

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    - Michael Flood (Queensland University of Technology)
    - Molly Dragiewicz (Queensland University of Technology)
    - Bob Pease (Deakin University)
  - And a subsequent 8-page guide (VicHealth) and journal article.
- All available from: <https://xyonline.net/content/responding-backlash-and-resistance>

## Backlash & resistance: definitions

- Backlash / resistance: any form of resistance towards progressive social change
- With regard to gender, backlash / resistance maintains or reinforces gender inequalities
  - It is a *subset* of the many practices and processes which sustain gender inequality

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## Characteristics of backlash

- An inevitable response to progressive social change
  - A sign of progress?
- Both individual and collective
- Both formal or informal
- In part involves organised backlash
- Diverse, contextual, and historically specific
- More likely to come from the people who are advantaged by the status quo
  - Resistance to violence prevention and gender equality efforts is more common by men than women
- Contributes to the maintenance of inequality

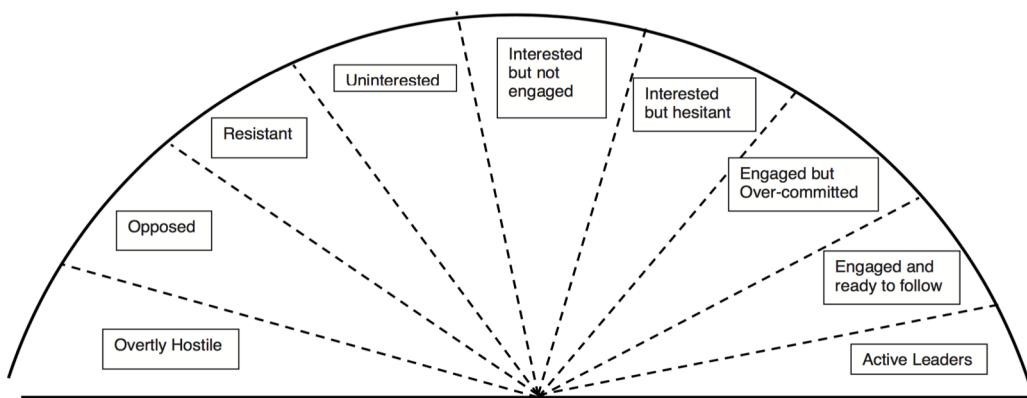
## Exercise: Experiences of backlash

- What experiences have you had of resistance and backlash?
  - What happened?
  - What was it about?
- What impacts did this resistance have?

## Forms of backlash

- *Denial*: Denial of the problem or the legitimacy of the case for change
- *Disavowal*: Refusal to recognise responsibility
- *Inaction*: Refusal to implement a change initiative
- *Appeasement*: Efforts to placate or pacify those advocating for change in order to limit its impact
- *Appropriation*: Simulating change while covertly undermining it.
- *Co-option*: Using the language of progressive frameworks and goals ('equality', 'rights', 'justice', and so on) for reactionary ends
- *Repression*: Reversing or dismantling a change initiative
- *Attack*: Aggressive attacks

## A continuum, from resistance to support



## Derailment BINGO

If You Won't Educate Me How Can I Learn	If you weren't so hostile, people would listen to you	You're Overly Sensitive	Don't You Have More Important Issues To Think About	You're Taking Things Too Personally
You're Arguing With Opinions Not Fact	You're Interrogating From The Wrong Perspective	Your Experience Is Not Representative Of Everyone	Can You Prove Your Experience Is Widespread	I Don't Think You're As Marginalised As You Claim
I Know Another Person From Your Group Who Disagrees	You Are Damaging Your Cause By Being So Aggressive		You're As Bad As We Are	But You're Not Like The Others In Your Group
If You Really Cared About This You'd Teach Me	But That Happens To Me Too	You're Just Looking For Something To Be Offered By	You're Seeing Problems Where None Exist	You're Too Emotional
I Was On Your Side But Your Anger Changed That	I Don't Find This Offensive	Stereotypes Exist 'Cause There Is Truth In Them	You Probably Just Misunderstood	I Haven't Had It Easy Either, You Know

## Denial (a common form of resistance)

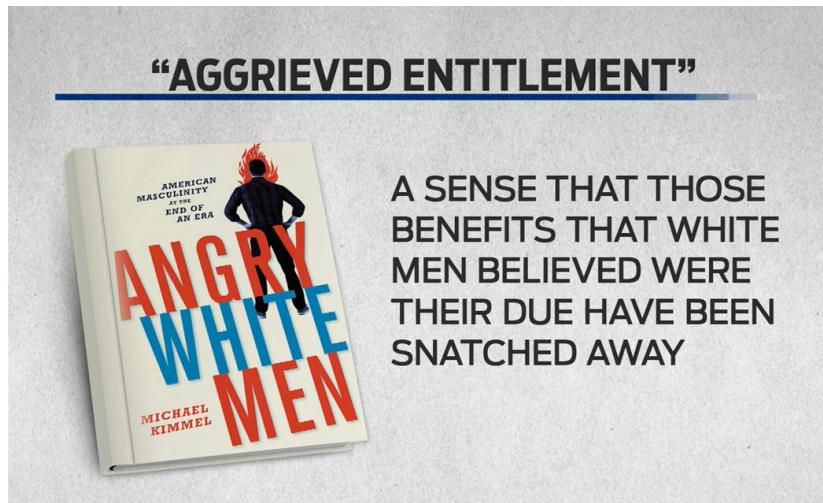
- Deny that the problem exists; minimise its extent, significance, or impact; or rename and redefine it out of existence
- Blame the problem on those who are the victims of it
- Deny the credibility of the message
- Attack the credibility of the messengers of change
- Reverse the problem, adopting a victim position, claiming reverse discrimination, etc.

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## Sources of backlash and resistance

- Inertia and fear of change
- Sexist and violence-supportive attitudes. Socialised sexism
  - Particularly among men, but also women
  - Men's recognition of sexism and attitudes towards DV are poorer than women's
- The defence of privilege
  - Men's aggrieved entitlement
- 'Post-feminist' and neoliberal norms:
  - Simplistic notions of 'equality'
  - 'Post-feminism'
  - Neoliberalism (an emphasis on individual rights and market solutions)

## Aggrieved entitlement



A SENSE THAT THOSE  
BENEFITS THAT WHITE  
MEN BELIEVED WERE  
THEIR DUE HAVE BEEN  
SNATCHED AWAY

## Responding to, and preventing, resistance

- *Organisational / institutional strategies:* How to involve individuals, institutions, and organisational policies, processes, and structures in the initiative
- *Framing strategies:* How to articulate, represent, or frame the initiative
- *Teaching and learning strategies:* How to teach about the initiative and engage people in coming to understand and support it

## Organisational strategies

- Find allies
- Build relationships and networks with people in the community
- Secure strong community buy-in and representation
- Organisational support is critical in reducing and preventing resistance.
  - Resistance is more likely when there is little institutional support.
  - So...

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## Organisational strategies *cont'd*

- Secure support from key stakeholders in positions of power
- Address efforts specifically to those individuals and groups who are most likely to be resistant
- Form strategic partnerships and allies
- Plan for resistance

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## Exercise: Responding to resistance

How would you respond to statements like these?

1. Sure, violence against women is a problem, but what's it got to do with me?
2. What about women's violence against men?
3. This is just male-bashing.

## Framing strategies

- Articulate the rationale and benefits
- Use positive, strengths-based messages
- Frame the initiative or strategy in terms of shared principles and goals
- Emphasise that men will benefit
  - Gender equality is 'win-win'.
  - Although men will lose unfair privileges.
- Address claims about male disadvantage
- Critique organised anti-feminist backlash

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## E.g., regarding gender and violence

- Acknowledge that, yes, men are routinely the victims of violence, and their perpetrators overwhelmingly are other men;
- Provide accessible critiques of inaccurate claims about female perpetration and male victimisation, including;
  - Accounts of the data on actual gender asymmetries in domestic or intimate partner violence, and
  - Critiques of the conceptual assumptions and methods in literature used to claim gender symmetry

## Gender and DV: Key points

- The problem of domestic / family / intimate partner violence is largely a problem of violence by men, against women and children.
- Comparing men's violence against female partners & ex-partners and women's violence against male partners & ex-partners, men's violence:
  - Is far more common
  - Has much worse impacts
  - Is far less likely to be in self-defence
- If we only 'count violent acts', males look like 1 in 3 or 4 of victims. But as soon as we look at impact, meaning, context, & history, we find profound gender contrasts.
- Resource: <http://www.xyonline.net/content/domestic-violence-and-gender-xy-collection>

## Critique anti-feminist backlash

1. Offer alternative analyses of the issues on which they focus
  - Speak to men's pain.
  - Men's rights and fathers' rights advocates misdiagnose men's pain and thus misprescribe the cure
  - Examples: violence against men, men's health, suicide, etc.
2. Critique and discredit the backlash
  - It is a hostile and misogynist reassertion of patriarchal power
  - It offers a profoundly inaccurate account of gender
  - Its strategies and solutions are both dangerous for women and children and limiting for men themselves.

## Critique anti-feminist backlash cont'd

3. Show that the backlash is harmful for men themselves
  - Men's rights and fathers' rights groups:
    - Neglect the forms of disadvantage or pain which men actually experience;
    - Blame the wrong target (women and feminism, not unhealthy and destructive models of manhood);
    - Do not generate appropriate services for men and antagonise potential supporters;
    - Taint as backlash the need to address genuine aspects of men's experience.

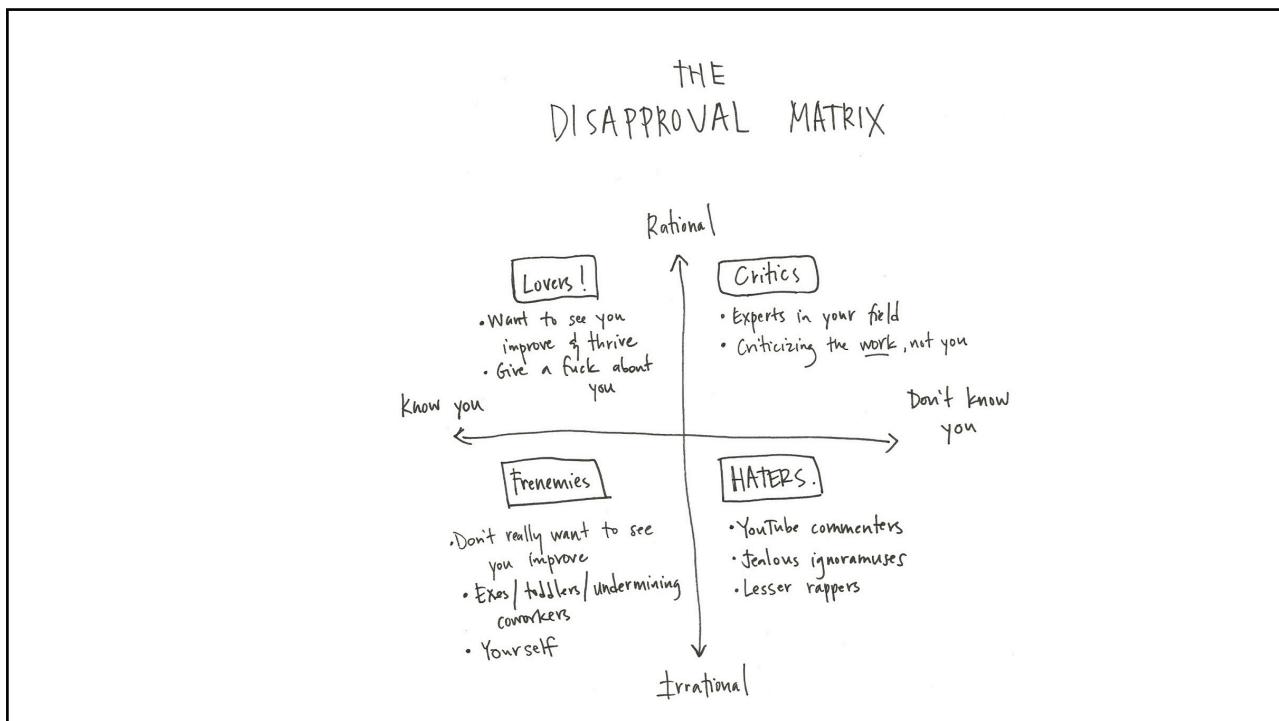
## Dealing with men's rights activists

- Should we engage MRAs in direct debate?
- What are the potential benefits?
- What are the potential risks?



## Dealing with men's rights activists

- Engagement and debate?
  - Ann Friedman's "Disapproval Matrix"
    - Lovers. Critics. Frenemies. Haters
  - "No, I will not debate you," says Laurie Penny
    - Do not engage with bad-faith opponents
  - My own experiences: often politically unproductive, personally toxic, and dangerous
- Benefits and dangers of direct engagement?



## Direct engagement with men's rights activists (MRAs)?

- Potential benefits
  - To take up public space offering a profeminist perspective
  - To challenge anti-feminist advocates and their supporters
  - To show to others that there are alternatives
  - To learn something of the experiences and perspectives that bring men to MRA, for its strategic value
- Potential dangers
  - Wasting time and energy on individuals and constituencies who are immovable
  - Having our own convictions and motivations undermined
  - Lending credibility
  - Spending time away from the tasks that will make a real difference

## Teaching and learning strategies

- Provide people with a balance of challenge and support:
  - Challenges to privilege
  - Support to foster personal and collective readiness to make change
- Build a safe educational climate
- Build rapport
- Provide well organised training
- Give opportunities for feedback
- Discuss common resistant reactions

## Teaching and learning strategies *cont'd*

- Affirm dominant group members' positive self-concepts and values
- Acknowledge feelings, experiences, and views
- Use knowledgeable, credible, and compassionate educators
- Foster privileged group members' critical awareness of their privilege and their role in challenging it
- Be practised at rebutting resistant arguments
  - 'Not all men'
  - 'Why focus on violence against women rather than addressing all violence?'

## Teaching and learning strategies *cont'd*

- Respond well to resistance in the room
  - What is driving it?
  - Acknowledge feelings or perspective
  - Contain the behaviour
  - Deflect. Disengage
  - Etc.
- Use effective teaching strategies: participatory, interactive

## Exercise: Developing a community of practice

- What steps can you take in the next 4 weeks to be better prepared to prevent and respond to resistance and backlash?
  - Practical strategies or actions?
- What resources, supports, or structural measures will better enable practitioners to achieve/use these strategies and actions?

## **Self-care: Taking care of yourself and each other**

- Build:
  - sustainable and healthy forms of advocacy
  - personal habits that nurture and sustain us and our loved ones
- Self-care:
  - Take time out. Nurture relationships. Have boundaries around your personal life. Celebrate every success. Include fun and pleasure in your activism
  - A measured optimism. A realist and pragmatic but also positive worldview. Patience, courage, and humility
- Healthy organisations:
  - Well-functioning groups that are empowering, inclusive, and nurture a sense of belonging
  - Healthy and equitable processes
  - Foster solidarity, play, and community

## **Conclusion**

- There are effective ways to respond to, and indeed prevent, backlash and resistance.

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## Online resources

- Responding to backlash and resistance:  
<https://xyonline.net/content/responding-backlash-and-resistance>
- Engaging men in building gender equality:  
<https://xyonline.net/category/article-content/working-boys-and-men>
- Men building gender equality in the workplace:  
<https://xyonline.net/content/men-building-gender-equality-workplace>
- Critiques of men's rights and fathers' rights:  
<http://www.xyonline.net/category/article-content/mens-fathers-rights>
- References on engaging men in building gender equality:  
<https://xyonline.net/books/bibliography/bibliography-26>