

Herald Sun

Opinion

Men must stand up to stop the violence

- by: David Penberthy
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Michael Flood recommends this.

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Catherine Smith in a scene from the *Australian Story* profile on her case.

Source: The Sunday Telegraph

EVERY bloke has a mother. Many of us also have sisters and daughters. Some of us have all three.

When it comes to the question of violence towards women, our default position is that if anyone laid a finger on our mum, our sister, our daughter or our own partner, we'd probably want to kill them.

There is a gap, however, between this zero-tolerance rhetoric on violence towards women in the immediate personal setting and instances of violence towards women in the more distant context of friends and acquaintances, neighbours and colleagues.

One of the most powerful and moving programs of 2011 was the *Australian Story* profile on Catherine Smith, who over the course of 30 years was raped, bashed and tortured by her husband, Kevin Smith. He choked her with power cables, attacked her with a cattle prod and a fire poker and sexually assaulted her at gunpoint.

Australian Story first profiled Catherine Smith in 2008 when she had been charged with the attempted

shooting murder of her husband. He treated the trial as a joke, even holding a sign outside court which read "God Bless the Missus who misses". To its enduring credit the jury took 25 minutes to acquit Catherine Smith of attempted murder.

This year, justice was done when Kevin Smith was found guilty of 17 charges, three of attempted murder, and numerous charges of assault, sex without consent and imprisonment. As Catherine Smith read her victim impact statement to the court, her cowardly former husband said: "I can't listen to this muck, this garbage. I will turn my back, your honour."

The program was almost unwatchably sad. One of the saddest moments came on the day of his guilty verdicts, when Catherine went home and removed surveillance cameras she had installed throughout her house lest her former husband visit violence upon her again. "I'm free now," she said.

This heartbreaking image aside, the most tragic aspect of the story is how many people would have been on the periphery of Catherine and Kevin Smith's 30-year union who knew something disgusting and criminal was going on, but who for whatever reason did nothing about it.

In this case, those people included the police, who in the setting of a small town decided not to act because they knew Kevin Smith and also because they presumably regarded whatever was happening as a private matter.

Smith's case is one of the worst instances of protracted and unchallenged domestic violence Australia has seen.

The depressing reality is that there are thousands of other cases involving lower degrees of violence which still go unchecked.

As part of White Ribbon Day on Friday, the movement against violence towards women, new research will be released by a cluey and decent bloke from the University of Wollongong, Michael Flood, who is interested in the obstacles that prevent guys speaking up and acting about violence towards women.

I spoke to Dr Flood last week and he is no way some politically correct hand-wringer, some self-loathing bloke who thinks we're all beasts and bastards.

There are two things about his take on this issue which are refreshing and optimistic.

FIRST, men are becoming much more active in challenging attitudes and actions that endorse violence towards women.

Second, none of this is about making blokes feel bad about themselves because of the actions of a violent male minority, but good about themselves for doing the right thing by women as part of the decent male majority.

Dr Flood released a paper last year examining the reasons men remained silent on instances of domestic violence. In plain language, he says many men overestimate the level of comfort other men have with violence towards women and fear they might be regarded as effeminate if they do something.

"There's a fear that you will be seen as less than a man if you question the way women are treated, that the reaction will be, 'What are you, a poofter?' when the reality is that most men have their hearts in the right place and are totally on side," he says.

There is also a view - shared across the gender divide - that domestic violence is still somehow a private matter and that it's best not to rock the boat by getting involved.

The research, which Dr Flood will release on Friday, is more of a call to action, in that it looks at the types of things blokes can do to speak up and act against violence. It is important and interesting work. And it's

something that made an impression on me when I was lucky enough to attend a White Ribbon dinner in Sydney, where I talked to several men who have signed on as White Ribbon ambassadors and taken the pledge to speak out against violence towards women.

For some of these men their decision to do so seemed almost cathartic. In private conversations, when asked what had motivated them to get involved, some talked about how their mothers had endured abusive relationships and how they felt a nagging sense of guilt that as children they were unable to stop the violence.

Obviously, none of them should feel any guilt for their inability to act when they were scared little kids. But as grown men, the ability and willingness to act are things we should all regard as an important part of what it means to be a bloke.

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