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# II. Building men's commitment to ending sexual violence against women

## Michael Flood

School of Social Sciences, Media and Communications, Faculty of
Arts, University of Wollongong, Australia

Efforts to prevent sexual violence against women and girls now increasingly take as given that they must engage men and boys. The theatre-based intervention described in the previous issue of *Feminism & Psychology* (Rich, 2010) is one of a wave of programmes and strategies focused on males. Using that intervention as a spring-board, this article asks: why should we engage men and boys in preventing violence against women, what strategies are under way and do they work? Educational interventions among males often invite them to become active or pro-social bystanders, taking action to stop the perpetration of specific incidents of violence, reduce the risks of violence escalating and strengthen the conditions that work against violence occurring (Powell, 2010: 6–7). However, engaging men in challenging rape-supportive norms and behaviours is hard work. This article concludes by discussing the barriers to, and supports for, men's bystander interventions.

There is a compelling rationale for addressing men in ending violence against women, with three key elements. First, while most men do not use violence against women, particularly in its bluntest forms, when violence occurs it is perpetrated overwhelmingly by men. Second, constructions of masculinity play a crucial role in shaping men's perpetration of violence against women. This is true in terms of individual men's attitudes, gender inequalities in families and relationships, and the gendered organization of communities and entire societies (Flood, in press). Third, men themselves must change, taking both personal and collective action, if men's violence against women is to be eliminated.

There are growing efforts to involve boys and men in various capacities associated with the prevention of violence against women: as participants in education programmes, as targets of social marketing campaigns, as policy makers and gate-keepers, and as activists and advocates. A 'spectrum' of prevention strategies have

**Corresponding author:**
Michael Flood, School of Social Sciences, Media and Communications, Faculty of Arts, University of
Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia
Email: mflood@uow.edu.au

been adopted, operating at multiple levels of the social order: promoting community education, educating providers, strengthening and mobilizing communities, changing organizational practices, and influencing laws and policies. The most common interventions aimed at boys and men are face-to-face educational strategies, based in schools and universities (Flood, in press). Interactive theatre-based interventions such as that described by Rich (2010) sit at this level, although they are less common than didactic education programmes, discussion groups, and other local strategies including social norms campaigns and bystander interventions.

There is a steadily increasing body of experience and knowledge regarding effective violence prevention practice among boys and men, often grounded in wider efforts to involve males in building gender equality. Senn (this issue) argues that very few programmes among men have demonstrated impacts on attitudes or behaviours. While there are certainly substantial limits to existing efforts, there is also an increasing body of evidence that well-designed interventions can make a difference to males' violence-related attitudes and behaviours (Flood, 2010: 32–3). For example, community education programmes have lessened males' adherence to rape-supportive attitudes, increased their victim empathy, reduced their reported likelihood to rape, and even reduced men's actual perpetration of sexual and physical aggression. Existing evaluations show that not all educational interventions are effective, the magnitude of change in attitudes often is small, changes often 'rebound' to pre-intervention levels one or two months after the intervention and some even become worse, and improvements in men's violence-supportive attitudes do not necessarily lead to reductions in their perpetration of violence. Nevertheless, some interventions demonstrate that it is possible to produce lasting change in men's attitudes and behaviours related to sexual violence (Flood, 2010: 32–3).

None of this means that efforts to prevent sexual violence against women and girls must prioritize work among males over work among females. It would be problematic to focus education efforts exclusively on men. Not all men will participate in education programmes, those who do are likely to have a lower potential of perpetrating intimate partner violence, and even if all men participated, no intervention is 100 per cent effective (Yeater and O'Donohue, 1999). Failing to direct violence prevention efforts to women would be to miss the opportunity to increase women's critical understandings of violence and to build on women's already-existing skills in recognizing, resisting and rejecting 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. Interventions can harness men's motivations to be accepted and liked by women by encouraging women's unwillingness to associate with sexist and aggressive men (Adams-Curtis and Forbes, 2004). Yes, this may seem unfair, but it is no more unfair or damaging than the consequences of current gender relations. Women's and men's education programmes should complement each other, to create synergistic effects that will accelerate shifts in social norms and gender relations.

There is no doubt that involving men in the work of preventing violence against women involves potential dangers: the dilution of a feminist agenda, the lessening of resources for the victims and survivors of this violence, and the marginalization of women's voices and leadership. These dangers overlap with those associated with involving men in gender-related programming and policy in general (Flood, 2007). At the same time, there is also a compelling feminist rationale for addressing men.

Both interventions described in detail by Senn and Rich have important strengths as forms of education. A recent review of violence prevention education identifies five features of effective practice: (1) a 'whole of institution' approach; (2) a well-developed programme framework and logic; (3) effective forms of curriculum delivery; (4) inclusive, relevant and culturally sensitive practice; and (5) substantive impact evaluation (Flood et al., 2009). Both interventions are able to make strong claims against at least some of these criteria. In relation to the third criterion in particular, both interACT theatre and the Enhanced AAA (Assess, Acknowledge, Act) programme involve teaching and learning methods that are interactive, participatory and skills-building.

InterACT theatre (Rich, 2010) invites men to develop personal and public commitments to non-violence, and there are obvious challenges here. For a start, a significant minority of men use sexual and physical violence against women, although data on this is limited (Flood, 2010: 12–14). Recent Australian data find that while most men do not condone violence against women, a significant minority excuse or justify violence in various circumstances, and this is particularly true for sexual violence (Flood, 2010: 15–22). Most males report that they are willing to intervene in situations of domestic violence or sexual coercion, although their interventions may not be helpful and some will support the perpetrator instead (Flood, 2010: 23–4).

Men's involvements in preventing men's sexual violence against women can be thought of in terms of a continuum, from 'changing men' to 'men changing'. 'Changing men' refers to programmes and policies that engage and change men as the 'targets' or 'objects' of intervention. 'Men changing' highlights a more active role in which men themselves act to reduce or prevent sexual violence. There are three forms of action men can take: (1) avoiding the personal use of violence against women, or to put this more positively, practising non-violence; (2) intervening in the violence of other men; and (3) addressing the social and cultural causes of violence (Berkowitz, 2004: 1).

In the first form of action, men 'put their own house in order', taking responsibility for violent behaviour and attitudes and striving to build respectful relations with the women and girls (and other men and boys) in their lives. In the second, men act as positive 'bystanders', taking steps to reduce or prevent violence against women. This may mean intervening in incidents of violence or their precursors, supporting victims, challenging perpetrators, or other actions (Flood, 2010: 35). It overlaps with the third form of action. Here, men contribute particularly to the primary prevention of violence against women by challenging the attitudes and norms, behaviours and inequalities that feed into violence against women.

Rich (2010) highlights the ways in which interactive theatre can be used to build men's (and women's) commitments to and skills in bystander intervention. For such work to be effective, it must address and overcome significant barriers to bystander intervention. In other words, there are significant barriers to ordinary men's participation in everyday actions that interrupt or challenge violence and violence-supportive behaviours.

One key factor is support for sexist and violence-supportive attitudes and norms. The same factors that shape some men's *use* of violence against women, and other men's *tolerance* for violence against women, also shape men's lack of involvement in efforts to address this violence. Violence-supportive norms are buttressed by common norms of gender in which male sexual aggression and female vulnerability is taken for granted.

Another influential factor is that men routinely overestimate the extent to which their peers agree with violence and sexism. Men overestimate each others' comfort with sexist, coercive and derogatory comments about and behaviour towards women, as several studies show (Flood, 2010: 36). Men's misperceptions of other men's tolerance for violence and sexism can feed into 'pluralistic ignorance' or 'false consensus'. In the first, men may go along with violence-supportive behaviours because they believe mistakenly that they are in the minority in opposing them. In the second, men who use violent and violence-supportive behaviours continue to do so because they believe falsely that they are in the majority, incorrectly interpreting other men's silence as approval. A significant predictor of men's willingness to intervene in behaviours that could lead to sexual assault is their perception of *other* men's willingness to intervene and, again, men underestimate this.

Men's apathy towards men's violence against women is shaped also by fear of others' reactions. Particularly when faced with actual incidents of violence, men may fear a violent response by the perpetrator (Coulter, 2003: 141–2). Men also may fear that their masculinity will be called into question, as a US study documented (Carlson, 2008: 14). Men's inaction is informed also by homophobia, and homophobic slurs and harassment are routine means for boys and men to police each others' performances of gender (Flood and Hamilton, 2008). Men and boys who engage in violence prevention may be ridiculed or harassed for lack of conformity to dominant masculine norms (Crooks et al., 2007: 231). More generally, men may avoid pro-social action because of their investment in managing others' impressions of them or their desire to preserve friendly relations (Powell, 2010: 17).

Some men's inaction is shaped by negative perceptions of violence prevention efforts themselves. In the context of widespread male defensiveness about men's violence against women, 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 2005–06).

There are other, more general factors that shape men's capacity to take action to end violence against women, including the absence of knowledge of how to

intervene, skills in intervening and the perceived self-efficacy to act. Finally, some men avoid taking part in violence prevention efforts because of a fear of not being welcome, lack of prioritization, helplessness and defensiveness (Crooks et al., 2007: 219).

While there are significant barriers to men's involvement in efforts to end violence against women, there are also important sources of inspiration. Men are 'sensitized' to the issue of violence against women through hearing women's disclosures of violence, their love for and loyalties to particular women, their political and ethical commitments to justice and equality, and related experiences. Research among those men who have joined the struggle to end violence against women finds that men's involvements have been nurtured by tangible opportunities to participate, and sustained by a sense of a mandate for action, a deeper understanding of the issues, and the support of peers and a community (Flood, 2010: 33–35).

Each of these barriers to intervention has solutions. If men overestimate other men's acceptance of violence and sexism, then respond by documenting the levels of men's actual adherence to sexism and using this to shift peer beliefs. If men do not know how to get from vague good intentions to a more substantial personal involvement in preventing violence against women, give them small steps and specific actions, designed to build their awareness of violence and gender inequalities, rather than assuming that they will walk through the door having already completed a thorough personal reconstruction (Crooks et al., 2007: 223–4). If men fear reactions to their positive interventions as bystanders, build their skills in bystander intervention. Offer men a language for articulating their involvement in preventing violence against women, one that negates homophobia and anti-feminist stereotyping. Provide positive reinforcement for men's engagement in violence prevention, including such intrinsic rewards as the benefits of participating in groups and friendship circles with positive identities (Crooks et al., 2007: 234). These are just some of the strategies that can help forge men's positive and lasting involvements in reducing and preventing men's violence against women.

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**Michael Flood** is a sociologist at the University of Wollongong, Australia. His research focuses on the primary prevention of violence against women, men and gender, and young men's heterosexual relations. He is the lead editor of the *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*, and the author of a wide variety of academic papers on men and masculinities, violence against women and violence prevention, male heterosexuality, fathering, and pornography. Dr Flood also is a trainer and community educator with a long involvement in community advocacy and education work focused on men's violence against women.