# The White Ribbon Campaign: Achievements, obstacles, and ways forward

Speech by Dr Michael Flood, Adelaide White Ribbon Breakfast, Adelaide Festival Centre, Friday November 25th, 2011.

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## Summary

This talk offers a stocktake of the White Ribbon Campaign in Australia: what it has achieved so far, the obstacles it faces, and the ways forward. I begin with an inspiring and accessible overview of the campaign: its character, its components, and its significance. I describe the campaign’s real achievements, its contributions to positive social change in community attitudes, relationships, and policy. I highlight the obstacles which the campaign faces. And I end by spelling out the key steps which can be taken – by ordinary men and women, policy-makers, managers, sporting bodies, and others – to make a difference. I urge that we use the F-word – feminism – to guide our efforts.

## Introduction

I have four messages today.

1. We know a fair amount about men’s violence against women.
2. We’ve made real progress in reducing and preventing it.
3. We face real challenges.
4. There are particular strategies which will make a difference.

## 1. We know a fair amount about men’s violence against women.

The phrase ‘men’s violence against women’ refers to a wide range of forms of violence, abuse, and coercion perpetrated by men against women. Forty years of scholarship and activism have generated a series of insights regarding the key features of this violence.

First, by listening to women’s experiences, feminists have documented a wide range of male behaviours which women perceive as threatening, violent or sexually harassing. This work has broadened what can be named as violence. It’s generated new terms for forms of violence and abuse which had been invisible or normalised.

Related to this, feminist work has identified a *continuum* of violence experienced by women, from seemingly extreme events like intimate murders to the daily dripping tap of sexual harassment. The idea of a continuum highlights the range of abusive and coercive behaviours women experience, the links between seemingly diverse behaviours and events (links in terms of their impact, dynamics, and causes), and the overlaps between violence and everyday forms of social and sexual interaction between men and women.

Third, when it comes to men’s violence against female partners or ex-partners, often we are talking about a *pattern* of behaviours, linked by *power and control*. Domestic violence or intimate partner abuse can be best understood as chronic behaviour that is characterized not by the episodes of physical violence which punctuate the relationship but by the emotional and psychological abuse that the perpetrator uses to maintain control over his partner.

Fourth, men’s violence against women has *social* causes. These can be grouped into three clusters. First, men’s violence against women is shaped above all by *gender inequalities*. Gender inequalities are linked to violence at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels, and there are strong associations between violence against women and gender roles, gender norms, and gender relations. Second, there are links between violence against women and the acceptance and perpetration of *other* forms of violence. Third, violence against women is shaped by the material and social resources available to individuals and communities, including patterns of disadvantage.

In short, men’s violence against women comprises a diverse range of violent, coercive, or controlling behaviours and strategies. These may or may not involve physical violence. They often take place between men and women who know each other. They may or may not be illegal and criminal. And they may be seen as ‘normal’ or acceptable by community members.

## 2. We’ve made real progress in reducing and preventing men’s violence against women.

We’re on a winning trend. Rates of violence against women in Australia have *declined*. Smaller proportions of women experienced physical or sexual violence in the last 12 months than ten years ago. I hasten to add though: the other side of this is that over 440,000 women experienced violence in the last year.

Violence against women is not random. It is shaped by wider social patterns. Given this, why might rates of violence have declined? One factor is that community attitudes towards men’s violence against women have improved. Another factor may be growing gender equality in relationships and families, reducing men’s willingness or ability to enforce their dominance through violence and abuse. Another factor is represented by the women and men right here in this room. The presence and influence of domestic violence services has played a role, in allowing women to leave violent relationships and leave them earlier. And it has led to greater intervention in violent men’s behaviour.

On the other hand, there are other trends which worsen violence against women. These include shifts in family law which have exposed women and children to ongoing contact with violent ex-husbands and fathers, increases in poverty and inequality, and increased exposure to sexist and violence-supportive media in pornography and elsewhere. Indeed, community attitudes show mixed trends, with attitudes to some issues worsening over the past decade.

### Primary prevention has become a focus.

Another part of the progress that’s been made is that, in the last decade and a half, prevention has become a central focus of community and government efforts to address violence against women. This reflects the recognition that we must not only respond to the victims and perpetrators of men’s violence, but also work to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. We must address the underlying causes of violence, in order to reduce rates of violence and ultimately to eliminate it altogether.

Prevention work has only become possible because of years of hard work and dedication by survivors, advocates, educators, and others. Primary prevention efforts complement work with victims and survivors, but do not replace or take priority over it.

### Violence prevention work among and/or by men has runs on the board:

Men’s violence prevention has ‘runs on the board’ – significant achievements. Briefly;

#### Putting men’s positive roles in ending violence against women on the agenda.

The growing emphasis on involving men in violence prevention represents one of a number of significant shifts in this field. And we should not underestimate what a profound achievement this is. Yes, there are dangers and downsides, but on the whole this is a very valuable achievement. It locates the problem of violence against women firmly with men: men’s attitudes, behaviours, and relations.

The White Ribbon Campaign is perhaps the best Australian example of this. It has achieved very substantial institutional presence and support, distributed over 200,000 ribbons in each of the last five years, and generated significant media coverage and community awareness. There are over 1500 Ambassadors – men who have signed up to play a public role in ending men’s violence against women. There are over 200 events taking place around Australia today. Yesterday, over 18,000 individuals had ‘sworn’ on the White Ribbon website, and this will climb to perhaps 25,000 today.

#### Mobilising men in groups, networks, and campaigns

Another significant achievement is the mobilisation of men in groups, networks and campaigns. I had the pleasure of speaking last night at an event organised by the Coalition for Men Supporting Non-Violence, and this is an inspiring example of the grassroots men’s groups and networks which have sprung up.

#### Involving, and shifting, powerful masculine organisations and workplaces

Another significant achievement is the involvement and support of powerful masculine organisations and workplaces in violence prevention. These include the AFL, trucking companies, and other organisations.

#### Forging partnerships between women’s and men’s networks and organisations

There are important examples of productive collaborations between men’s and women’s groups and networks, in local communities, and nationally. There’s a substantial collaboration between UNIFEM and various men / masculine organisations in the White Ribbon campaign.

There are some other signs of progress.

#### Building the evidence base for violence prevention among men: Our work can make a difference.

There’s a research base. There is now a substantial body of evidence that violence prevention programs among men can make a difference. That, done well, education programs can shift the attitudes among boys and men that lead to physical and sexual violence, that they can shift behaviours – that they can lessen males’ actual perpetration of violence.

### There is significant political support. Male involvement in violence prevention is now on state and national policy agendas.

This is true e.g. of the Federal Government’s *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*, and some state prevention plans.

### There is enormous goodwill towards our cause.

There’s enormous goodwill towards our cause. Particularly when men do it.

In fact, I think that the bar is set very low, too low. But it is heartening to know that there is such goodwill, such support, out there.

## 3. We face real challenges.

My third point is that this work involves real challenges. We need a realistic, clear-eyed accounting of what we are up against.

### Men’s violence against women is rooted in gender inequalities, and these are hard to change.

Men’s violence against women is rooted in entrenched gender inequalities and in powerful social and cultural norms. Changing these is hard.

We will only make progress in preventing violence against women if we can erode the cultural and collective supports for violence found among many men and boys, and replace them with norms of consent, sexual respect and gender equality. And if we can foster just and respectful gender relations in relationships, families, and communities.

### Men’s violence prevention is limited:

#### Few men are involved.

Relatively few men are advocates for the prevention of men’s violence against women.

#### Efforts are small, scattered, and under-developed.

Existing efforts to mobilise men as activists and organisers in grassroots anti-violence groups have been small and scattered. Face-to-face education programs directed at boys and young men are scattered and under-developed, and few have been well evaluated. However, both of these are changing.

#### Efforts sometimes are tokenistic.

Some men’s support for the White Ribbon Campaign is tokenistic. They wear the ribbon, but they do little else to help address men’s violence against women.

#### A focus on men sometimes has been diluted.

The WRC, and ‘White Ribbon Day’ (as it’s been termed in Australia), in some ways has come to overshadow the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (IDEVAW). I think that the White Ribbon Campaign must be defined by a specific focus on the role *men* can play in ending men’s violence against women. White Ribbon thus is one, key component of violence prevention, not the field overall.

### There is a substantial and organised backlash, particularly by anti-feminist men’s groups.

There is a significant backlash against efforts to name and prevent men’s violence against women, by anti-feminist ‘men’s rights’ and ‘fathers’ rights’ groups. These groups do not have the institutional presence (e.g. in the form of a national network) or the political support shown for example by the White Ribbon Campaign. However, they are energetic campaigners against the White Ribbon Campaign and other efforts focused on men’s violence against women, and their efforts have had some effect on both community perceptions and policy frameworks.

I’m relieved that this year we haven’t seen the organised attack on White Ribbon that we have in previous years. Though I’m conscious that it’s here in South Australia that we saw a concerted, and in some ways, successful effort to undermine the “Don’t Cross the Line” social marketing campaign.

## 4. There are particular strategies which will make a difference.

Won’t try to map an entire plan for how to prevent and reduce men’s violence against women. But want to give weight to some particular strategies which are vital.

### Extend the work on primary prevention.

Preventing men’s violence against women will require sustained and systematic efforts at the levels of families and relationships, communities, institutions, and societies. We need to step this up at every level of intervention, from community education in schools, to mobilisations among activist networks and movements, to organisational and institutional change.

### Ensure that it’s based on evaluation and evidence.

We just can’t get away with implementing interventions with no evidence of their effectiveness. FACHSIA engaged in third round of funding of respectful relationships education in schools and among young people. And yet no signs so far of any kind of robust evaluation. When we do this, we’re doing little more than ‘deliver and hope’.

### Scale up work with men.

Most violence prevention work with men and boys has been local in scale and limited in scope. To be effective at the societal level – to transform violence against women and girls and the pervasive gender inequalities with which it is associated – work with men and boys will need to be scaled up. To truly transform gender inequalities, we must adopt systematic, large-scale, and coordinated efforts.

I’m going to focus now on strategies which are an important part of the spectrum of strategies available to us: first, to do with educating providers and professionals, and second to do with changing organisational practices. Both are important, for example given the evidence that male-dominated and homosocially-focused sub-cultures in some sports, workplaces, and informal social groups involve elevated risks of violence against women.

### Engaging workplaces in primary prevention [Educating Providers (and other professionals)]

Organisational and workforce strategies for the primary prevention of violence against women are scattered and underdeveloped. But workplace strategies are promising ones. We know for example that workplace training can improve attitudes towards sexual harassment.

Workplace strategies often involve working with *men*, given that police, law, and medical institutions typically are dominated by men. However, very little primary prevention work has been conducted with men in workplaces in gender-sensitive ways. At the same time, there are some inspiring and promising instances of such work internationally, e.g. with coaches and with police.

#### And organisational or institutional cultures

Some contexts and cultures are particularly dangerous for women, particularly hostile to women. Violence-supportive attitudes are institutionalised in the cultures of particular organisations and contexts, especially in male-dominated and homosocially-focused male university colleges, sporting clubs, workplaces, and military institutions. We need intensive interventions in such contexts to address their violence-supportive local cultures.

There are some powerful examples of sporting institutions taking action to address violence against women among professional male athletes. In Australia, the professional sporting codes of National Rugby League (NRL) and the Australian Football League (AFL) are developing education programs for their players, codes of conduct, and other measures in response to a series of alleged sexual assaults by players.

### Ensure that it focuses squarely on ending gender inequalities.

I have argued that there are particular strategies which will make a difference. To bring this back to the White Ribbon Campaign… The White Ribbon Campaign encourages men to *swear* – to swear that they will not commit, excuse, or remain silent about men’s violence against women. When it comes to swearing, I want to end by urging that we use the F-word. The policy-makers in the room may think I mean ‘funding’. But no, I mean perhaps an even scarier word for some, *feminism*.

In Australia, there has been a watering-down of feminist policy-making and political influence. In government policy-making, feminist and politicized frameworks for understanding violence against women have given way to some degree to more welfare-oriented and therapeutic models. There’s been a shift towards an exclusive focus on meeting the individual needs of victims, and away from also challenging the social and structural inequalities which create victims and perpetrators in the first place. More generally, we’ve seen the systematic winding back of agencies and policies aimed at women’s equality.

Ending gender inequalities is vital to ending men’s violence against women. Governments can support this by including women in the policy process, funding women’s civil society organisations, relying on feminist rather than non-feminist women, and drawing on feminist frameworks.

Why do I say this? It is feminist activism that placed violence against women on community and policy agendas. Perhaps more importantly, it is feminist scholarship, feminist research, that provides the most comprehensive and credible account of the causes and consequences of relationship and family violence.

A feminist approach to violence prevention does not require a single-minded or exclusive focus on gender and gendered power relations. Contemporary feminist scholarship on physical and sexual violence recognises a wide variety of other factors that also shape violence. Look for example at VicHealth’s recent violence prevention framework. Feminist approaches address causes of family and relationship violence at multiple levels of the social order, while taking as given that gender and gender inequalities are central across these.

In short, it is *feminist* agendas and frameworks which hold most hope for ending violence against women, and political leadership is necessary to advance them.

So, to remind you of where we’ve gone:

1. We know a fair amount about men’s violence against women.
2. We’ve made real progress in reducing and preventing it.
3. We face real challenges.
4. There are particular strategies which will make a difference, and above all, it is only by ending gender inequalities that we will end men’s violence against women.