

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

Dr Michael Flood  
Queensland University of Technology  
[m.flood@qut.edu.au](mailto:m.flood@qut.edu.au)  
@MichaelGLFlood

Citation: Flood, M. (2020). Resistance and Backlash: Responding to and preventing resistance to violence prevention work, Workshop, 20th Annual Diverse Voices Family Violence Conference, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, November 12-13, 2020.

## Acknowledgement

- This talk is based on:
  - An evidence review, commissioned by VicHealth, and authored by:
    - 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

@MichaelGLFlood

## 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

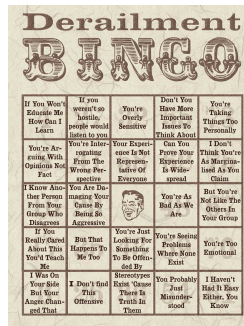
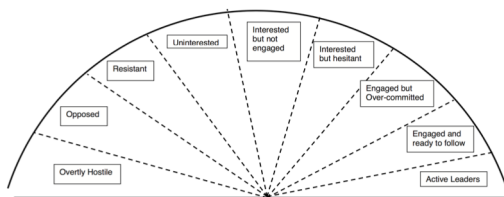
### Exercise: Experiences of backlash

- 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



### Denial (a common form of resistance)

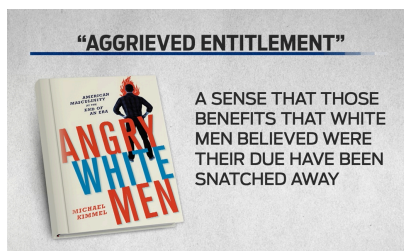
- Deny that the problem exists; minimise its extent, significance, or impact; or rename and redefine it out of existence
- Blame the problem on those who are the victims of it
- Deny the credibility of the message
- Attack the credibility of the messengers of change
- Reverse the problem, adopting a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

@MichaelGLFlood

### 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



### 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...

@MichaelGLFlood

### 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

@MichaelGLFlood

### 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

- Frame violence prevention within a robust feminist framework. Recognise that:
  - Gender is personal, interpersonal, and structural;
  - Gender is embedded in wider structures, institutions, and social arrangements;
  - Gender involves unequal relations of power and a pervasive pattern of male dominance;
  - Gender intersects with other forms of social difference and inequality.
- Agenda: reduce gender inequalities and build gender justice

@MichaelGLFlood

### Framing strategies *cont'd*

- 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

@MichaelGLFlood

### 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.

### **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.

@MichaelGLFlood

### 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\\_](https://xyonline.net/books/bibliography/bibliography-26_)