

# Putting perpetrators in the picture: Mapping the extent and character of violence perpetration in Australia

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## Introduction

It is time to reframe the problems of domestic and sexual violence in Australia. To frame domestic violence as the perpetrators' problem. In today's presentation, I will argue that we need to change the ways that the community, policy-makers, and violence prevention advocates and educators ourselves talk about domestic violence. And I will describe a new project intended to contribute to the reduction and prevention of domestic violence in Australia.

My talk today is co-authored with Lula Dembele. Lula is a pioneering violence prevention and survivor advocate and the founder of the Accountability Matters Project.

## The problem

We all agree that domestic and sexual violence are serious problems in Australia. (Note that while this is a conference focused on domestic violence, I refer to domestic *and sexual* violence. I want us to move beyond the silos. Sexual violence also is a serious problem, often co-occurs with domestic violence, and our prevention efforts should address these and other forms of violence and abuse.)

So, domestic and sexual violence are serious problems. And, there are limitations to:

- 1) How domestic violence is described or framed;
- 2) The data we have on domestic violence;
- 3) And how prevention and reduction efforts are guided.

### *How domestic violence is described or framed*

Domestic and family violence often is framed in ways that make the perpetrator disappear, as if the victim or survivor was attacked by an unseen force. We see this in media accounts, community views, and even in the violence prevention field itself.

Let's take the bluntest example: a man kills his female intimate partner or ex-partner. What happened? "A man killed a woman". This becomes, "A woman was killed by a man" becomes "A woman was killed". Likewise, "John raped Mary", becomes "Mary was raped by John," becomes, "Mary was raped" [1]. This language is passive and perpetrator-free. And by this point, the perpetrator, his actions, his role have disappeared.

Even in the phrase "violence against women" this violence 'just happens', and the agents of this violence are invisible. Although the phrase "*men's* violence against women" is better in naming the people, men, who are the vast majority of perpetrators of this violence.

The language used in violence prevention shows the same problem. Again we use passive language, speaking of 'preventing violence before it occurs', of preventing violence 'before it happens'. Yet violence involves agency: a person uses violence against someone else.

### Assessment: Why it matters

Not naming the agents of violence matters in three ways.

*Perpetrator accountability:* First, this language removes perpetrators' accountability. Perpetrators' actions and agency become invisible.

I am *not* saying that we should now stop listening to victims, stop centering victims, and listen and work only with perpetrators. A 'victim lens' is valuable, in centering victims' experience and in maintaining our accountability to victims and survivors. We need to understand the impact of violence on victims, and what this means for society. It's integral we continue to prioritise women's and children's safety, working with those affected by men's violence to develop and implement effective solutions.

But, if we frame domestic and sexual violence only in terms of victims, only as something that happens 'to victims', this can hide perpetrators' accountability and perpetuate the belief that domestic and sexual violence is a victim's problem. As my co-author Lula Dembele has put it, violence is a problem for victims, but not a victim's problem. Instead, domestic and sexual violence is the perpetrators' problem.

From a policy perspective, framing domestic and sexual violence as a victim's problem influences, and may limit, effective programmatic outcomes for reducing men's use of violence as we are focused on interventions after harm is done. Are the victims of violence the 'problem' we are trying to solve? Do women who have been abused need to be 'fixed'?

*Community responsibility:* Second, a passive framing removes responsibility from the communities surrounding these individuals [2].

So, we lose the opportunity to ask questions about why the man chose to behave this way. Or indeed how other people could have intervened.

*Drivers of perpetration:* Third, the language or framings I have described lessen attention to the drivers of perpetration. They mean that we are less likely to ask questions about the social conditions that drive people's perpetration of violence.

Think of it this way. Perpetrators are *made*, not born. People are not born ready to assault, abuse, and control others. Instead, perpetrators are made. In families. In schools. Through peer groups. Through media and culture. Through wider inequalities.

When an individual man assaults a woman, in many ways this is the unsurprising outcome of widespread social conditions. His use of violence is the predictable result of the lessons about manhood he and other boys absorb as they grow up, the sexist peer cultures in which he participated, and the gender inequalities which are woven into his and other men's everyday lives.

So if we want to stop making perpetrators, we have to change the social conditions and settings which produce them. That's what primary prevention is: changing the social and structural conditions which drive violence.

So when it comes to language, what can we do?

Keep the perpetrator and the perpetrator's accountability in view, naming their active use of violence. "When a man killed a woman." "When Rowan Baxter killed Hannah Clarke and her three children." "When Jaymes Todd raped and murdered Eurydice Dixon."

There is growing support for this approach. Our Watch's guidelines on media reporting of violence against women recommend, "Keep the perpetrator in view. *Do:* Use active language to emphasise that someone perpetrated this violence against a victim" [3] Campaigns such as Jane Gilmore's "Fixed It" correct media portrayals to achieve the same effect [4].

And when we talk about prevention, use the active voice. Preventing the perpetration of

domestic violence. Preventing harm before it is perpetrated [2].

### *How domestic violence is measured*

There is also a problem with how domestic and sexual violence are measured.

- We report on how many women were assaulted last year, not on how many men assaulted women last year [2].
- We report on how many women were raped last year, not on how many men raped women last year.

Again, our language moves the focus away from those who actually commit the offence, from the perpetrator, from those actually responsible for the behaviour [2].

We know that in Australia about 1 in 6 women (17%, or 1.6 million) and 1 in 16 men (6.1%, or 548,000) has experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a current or previous cohabiting partner since the age of 15 [5].

We could say this using a more perpetrator-focused language. Men and women perpetrated violence against 1.6 million women and 548,000 men since the age (the victims' age) of 15.

But what we don't know is *how many* men, or indeed women, perpetrated violence. Existing data on domestic and family violence focuses on victimisation – on how many women, men, and children have suffered violence and the kinds of violence they have experienced. While this is vital information, it is equally important to know about perpetration. What proportion of men, and women, have used violence against an intimate partner or family member? When, how, and why have people in Australia perpetrated domestic and family violence and sexual violence? We simply don't know.

So, there are problems, first, in how domestic violence is described or framed, and second, in the data, in how domestic violence is measured. And this means there are also problems, third, in how prevention and reduction efforts are guided.

### *How domestic violence is prevented and reduced*

If we don't know how many people are perpetrating domestic and sexual violence and how they are perpetrating it, how can we prevent it? If we don't know the conditions, contexts, and drivers for the perpetration of violence, how can we prevent it?

The lack of perpetration specific data focused on the actor inhibits our ability as a nation to make meaningful impact on stopping the incidence of domestic and sexual violence. We don't know enough to target effectively those people at risk of perpetrating, those people who are beginning to use violence, and who, without intervention, may continue to perpetrate and to escalate their use.

## **Mapping perpetration**

So how can we put perpetrators in the picture? One key way is to map perpetration – to gather data on violence perpetration.

The Perpetration Project is a national research project on the perpetration of violence in intimate, domestic and family settings in Australia. It is intended to contribute to the reduction and prevention of domestic and sexual violence in Australia.

The project includes an Australia-wide Perpetration Survey that will measure the extent, character, and drivers of violence perpetration. It will also draw on an analysis and synthesis of existing survey and criminal justice data and an analysis of forms of 'big' data. The Perpetration

Project is being coordinated by people from the Equality Institute, the Accountability Matters Project, and the Queensland University of Technology.

### *What we do and don't know about perpetration*

So what do we know already about violence perpetration?

There is a growing body of international scholarship focused what proportions of men, and sometimes women, use violence. Including major multi-country studies, and many smaller scale studies, often among American university and school samples, of the perpetration of sexual violence and dating violence.

It is encouraging to report that there are effective and ethical ways to do this. There is growing experience in measuring perpetration, and there are established protocols for conducting this research safely and ethically.

There is a growing body of knowledge about domestic and sexual violence perpetrators themselves. We know a fair amount about typical risk factors for perpetration – the factors at the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels that make perpetration more likely.

More criminal data collection is focusing on perpetrators of violence. For the first time the ABS has begun to collate the perpetration of family violence by gender. What this data tells us, again, is that family violence is a gendered issue and in the majority perpetrated by men.

We know that there are contrasts in men's and women's perpetration of domestic violence. Among male and female perpetrators, men's partner violence is more likely than women's to be motivated by power and control, and women's partner violence is more likely than men's to be motivated by self-defence [6]. Male perpetrators are more likely than female perpetrators to use coercive and controlling strategies [7], and far more likely to use sexual violence.

But there is a lot we don't know.

We don't know much about the risks for perpetration of different forms of violence. And we know less about female perpetrators and same-sex perpetrators [8].

There is no national or state data on the extent of violence perpetration in Australia. We know very little about what proportions of men or women use violence against partners or ex-partners or others, the kinds of violence they use, why they use violence, and so on.

### *The Perpetration Project*

This is where the Perpetration Project comes in. One of its key components is a national survey, to measure the extent, character, and drivers of violence perpetration.

The Perpetration Project's findings will make four key contributions.

- First, it will provide vital knowledge of domestic and sexual violence, mapping who uses violence, why, when, how, and where.
- Second, it will help change how domestic and sexual violence are framed in policy, media, and community understandings
- Third, it will guide prevention and reduction efforts, including by highlighting the agents of, contexts for, and drivers of violence perpetration.
- Fourth, it will provide a benchmark for progress, by tracking the use of violence over time.

## Final reflections: Putting perpetrators in the picture

I will finish with some wider reflections. As part of naming oppression and injustice, it is important to name those who are privileged, not just those who are disadvantaged. As part of naming violence and abuse, it is important to name those who perpetrate the violence, not just those who are its victims.

If we do not put perpetrators and perpetration in the picture, we miss the opportunity to describe what is actually taking place, to hold the perpetrator accountable, to examine the social conditions that make that use of violence possible, and to address these.

Our framing of domestic violence as only a victim's problem may reflect a societal discomfort with talking about the people who perpetrate. Perhaps it is easier to think about how we might support victims, than how we might challenge and change perpetrators. Indeed, a focus on the victim can sit neatly with patriarchal, paternalistic views where our role, men's role in particular, is to protect virtuous women from those 'other' nasty men.

It may also be confronting to realise just how many men among us have behaved in violent, abusive, or coercive ways. Part of the difficulty of looking at who uses violence is the complexity of the relationships we have with these men. A 'good men' versus 'bad men' narrative may be comforting, but it is false. As Lula Dembele has written, "It is the men we know, like and love who use abuse and violence." This makes it complex and hard for each of us to confront in our lives.

Reframing domestic violence as the perpetrator's problem is not a cure-all. And there are risks in doing so. But framing violence as a perpetrator's problem does help us to see the problem more clearly, to address the *what* of the problem. But dealing with the *who* of the problem is possibly where the hard work really begins.

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