

Submission to the Second Action Plan (National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032)

Scope: Effective practice in violence prevention with men and boys

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Executive summary

This submission addresses Priority Area 2: Prevention and Early Intervention of the Second Action Plan and focuses on strengthening Australia's efforts to engage men and boys in the primary prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence.

Australia has seen substantial growth in violence prevention initiatives involving men and boys. The quality and effectiveness of existing initiatives vary considerably. Many programs remain short-term, small-scale, or insufficiently informed by evidence regarding the drivers of violence and the characteristics of effective prevention.

The international evidence shows that well-designed interventions can produce meaningful and lasting change in violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours, although the Australian evidence base is limited. There is an urgent need to strengthen standards for practice, broaden prevention strategies, and scale up approaches capable of producing population-level change.

The submission argues that violence prevention work with men and boys should continue to be guided by a gender-transformative framework that addresses gender inequality and other factors. Emerging interest in men's health approaches presents valuable opportunities to reach new audiences, address relevant risk factors, and reduce resistance to prevention messages. However, improving men's health alone will not prevent violence unless interventions also address gendered power relations, entitlement, and the structural drivers of domestic, family and sexual violence. Men's health approaches should therefore complement, not replace, existing gender-transformative approaches.

The submission makes four recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the quality of violence prevention programming aimed at men and boys.

Government should embed evidence-informed standards for effective practice into funding and commissioning processes, support workforce development and professional learning, promote knowledge exchange, and build the capacity of practitioners and organisations to deliver high-quality prevention initiatives.

Recommendation 2: Expand the range of prevention strategies used with men and boys. Investment should extend beyond school-based education to include workplaces, sporting organisations, online environments, faith and community settings, social marketing, community leadership, and initiatives addressing online misogyny and the manosphere. Prevention should also strengthen protective factors that foster non-violent and gender-equitable identities, relationships, and communities.

Recommendation 3: Scale up prevention efforts to achieve population-level impact. The Australian Government should invest in comprehensive, community-wide and structural prevention strategies, including social norms campaigns, community mobilisation, regulatory responses to harmful online content and violent pornography, and policy measures that address the broader institutional and structural conditions contributing to violence against women and children.

Recommendation 4: Maintain a gender-transformative framework while integrating appropriate insights from men's health and other fields. Collaboration across sectors should be encouraged, but government-funded initiatives should remain grounded in gender equality, victim-survivor safety, perpetrator accountability, and evidence-based primary prevention. Men's health approaches should be incorporated where they strengthen prevention, without displacing the central goal of ending violence against women and children.

A more detailed version of each recommendation, with supporting discussion, can be found below.

Taken together, these recommendations seek to strengthen Australia's capacity to engage men and boys in effective, evidence-informed primary prevention while ensuring that this work remains firmly focused on preventing violence.

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Introduction and biography

I am a researcher in the field of violence prevention whose research over the past three decades has focused on the prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence, with particular expertise in primary prevention, engaging men and boys, and respectful relationships education. My work has sought to strengthen the evidence base for preventing violence against women and children and to translate research into practical policy, programs and organisational practice.

My research has contributed to the development of national and state violence prevention policy and has informed prevention frameworks, implementation strategies, educational initiatives and community-based interventions across Australia. I was a contributing author to the evidence review underpinning *Change the Story*, the national framework for the primary prevention of violence against women, and previously co-authored *Preventing Violence Before It Occurs*, an influential framework that helped shape prevention policy in Australia. My research has also informed government inquiries, including the Royal Commission into Family Violence, and I have provided expert advice to governments, statutory bodies and national organisations on violence prevention policy and practice. A significant focus of my work has been understanding how to engage men and boys as part of the primary prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence.

My scholarship and advocacy have driven and shaped the national and international development of efforts to engage men and boys in violence prevention. My research, including in my book *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention* and numerous other publications, has examined the social and cultural drivers of men's violence against women and explored evidence-informed approaches to involving men and boys in prevention. This work has informed prevention initiatives undertaken by governments, community organisations and international agencies, and has been translated into practical guidance for policy makers and practitioners.

Across my research, I have sought to bridge academic scholarship and policy implementation, with a strong emphasis on developing interventions that are evidence-informed, capable of scale, and subject to robust evaluation.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Second Action Plan. My submission draws on the Australian and international evidence regarding the primary prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence, with particular attention to enhancing Australia's capacity to engage men and boys in support of gender equality and the prevention of violence.

Priority Area 2: Prevention and early intervention

There is now a significant stream of violence prevention activity focused on men and boys in Australia. I first offer a brief snapshot of this work, focusing on primary prevention, before commenting on productive ways forward.

The state of primary prevention work with men and boys

Largely in schools: Much of the primary prevention activity aimed at boys and men and/or addressing masculinities takes place in schools. This includes content on masculinities that is part of wider curricula in respectful relationships education, as well as standalone programs often delivered by external organisations. Alongside violence prevention education for boys and young men in schools, there are also scattered efforts in Australia to involve men as advocates (e.g. by White Ribbon Australia), to engage men in workplaces to address workplace domestic violence (e.g. by Champions of Change), social marketing initiatives aimed at shifting social norms related to men and masculinities (e.g. Our Watch's "The Line" campaign), and prevention efforts using social media for boys and young men (e.g. the "Ask a Mate" initiative by Beyond DV).

Of varying quality: Violence prevention initiatives aimed at men and boys are of varying quality. As I documented for example in a stocktake of community-based healthy masculinities programs in Victoria [1];

- Many programs are small-scale and short-term

- Many programs rely on one-off and short sessions
- There is diversity in programs' approaches to gender, masculinity, and violence, and some pay little attention to the factors known to be key risk factors for domestic or sexual violence.

Given this, some of these programs are unlikely to make substantial and sustained change. Above all, some simply lack the duration and intensity necessary to make change [2]. Other programs fail to address the drivers of domestic or sexual violence. Indeed, some initiatives may even do harm.

Growing fast: The field of work with men and boys for violence prevention is growing. The number of programs and initiatives is accelerating, as are national initiatives such Federal Government funding for the "Healthy Masculinities Trial and Evaluation (Healthy MaTE)" projects (2024-) and Our Watch's Men and Masculinities in Primary Prevention project (2023-2027).

Overlapping with this, there is also growing policy support for engaging men and boys in violence prevention. In Australia's national prevention frameworks and policies, there has been an increased focus on challenging harmful forms of masculinity and engaging men and boys in prevention. This is visible in the second edition of the national violence prevention framework *Change The Story* [3] and the Federal Government's second *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032*. In the latter, under prevention, one of the four pillars in the national plan, a focus on men and boys is one of the eight focus areas for action: "Support men and boys in developing healthy masculinities and positive, supportive relationships with their male peers" [4].

Based on more data: Violence prevention work with men and boys has been boosted in Australia by new bodies of data. This includes data on men's and people's attitudes towards masculinity, from a series of reports by Jesuit Social Services' Men's Project [5-7] and work by VicHealth, [8]. This will be further supported by the findings of the State of Australian Men survey, with its findings due in February – March 2027.

Prevalence data on perpetration – on what proportions of men (and women and others) have used domestic and sexual violence and the risk factors associated with this – will be greatly extended by the findings of the Perpetration Project, including through a prevalence survey in New South Wales and likely then a national survey.

In expanding domains: There has also been an expansion in the fields or domains in which violence prevention work with men and boys work takes place, to fields such as parenting [9], online spaces [10, 11], and violent extremism [12].

Supported by a national network: Violence prevention work with men and boys will be boosted by the establishment of a national network, MenEngage Australia, intended to promote the role of men and boys in efforts to build gender justice, end men's violence and abuse, and foster human flourishing for all. This network will include practitioners and organisations addressing a range of forms of work with men and boys, from violence prevention to men's health, fathering, education, and other areas. MenEngage Australia currently is being formed, in part through a partnership between Jesuit Social Services and Our Watch, and it will be affiliated to the global MenEngage Alliance.

Guided by international evidence and standards: Violence prevention work with men and boys in Australia can make use of a substantial and growing body of international evidence on effective practice. This body of research is large enough that there have been six systematic reviews or meta-analyses of violence prevention interventions focused on men and/or boys [13-18], as well as other reviews [19-24], and reviews focused on overlapping areas such as sexual and reproductive health [25].

On the other hand, at this point no primary prevention programs aimed at men and/or boys in Australia have been subject to any kind of quasi-experimental or experimental evaluation, and there are only a small number of evaluations based only on post-intervention data [2]. However, more robust evaluations are likely to emerge soon, including from the DSS-funded Healthy Masculinities Trial and Evaluation (Healthy MaTE) projects.

The international evidence base for violence prevention education with boys and young men tells a broadly similar story to that for violence prevention more generally:

- There is evidence that well-designed programs can make change: they can shift the attitudes and behaviours associated with or involved in domestic and/or sexual violence, producing significant and lasting change
- The evidence base also is limited by lack of or limited evaluation. Most violence prevention initiatives have not been evaluated, and existing evaluations often are methodologically limited.

Prevention initiatives aimed at men and boys also can take advantage of a growing body of work identifying the principles or standards that should guide this work [2, 26-30]. I have contributed to various articulations of such standards, including:

- The Canadian “Guidelines For Funding Programs that Engage and Mobilize Men and Boys in Violence Prevention” [26]
- The Working with Men and Boys for Social Justice Assessment Tool [28]
- The Warwick Principles, developed in Fiji and intended for use across the Pacific [27]
- Standards for violence prevention education with boys and young men [2].

However, some programs and initiatives among boys and men fall far short of established standards for effective practice, including some initiatives prominent in Australia.

I turn now to productive ways forward for primary prevention work with men and boys.

Effective ways forward

There are four productive ways forward for primary prevention work with men and boys in Australia.

There is significant community appetite for prevention programs with boys and men, and ‘healthy’ or ‘positive masculinities’ programs have proliferated. However, these initiatives are not necessarily guided by standards for effective practice.

Standards for practice

Violence prevention programming aimed at men and boys, like any form of prevention activity, should be held up against what is known about effective practice. A growing body of scholarship and practitioner expertise identifies key elements of the programming most likely to generate positive change [2, 26, 27, 29, 30]. Both practitioners and policymakers should work to move programming closer to these standards. Respectful relationships education provides a model of precisely this progress, in which the promotion of standards for practice has led to widespread and significant improvements in programming quality.

Recommendation (1): Strengthen the quality of violence prevention programming aimed at men and boys, by:

- Embedding established standards for effective practice into funded frameworks, such that initiatives must meet or perform well against such standards;
- Disseminating and promoting guidance on standards for effective practice [31];
- Building the capacity of prevention initiatives to meet or approach established standards, through professional development, resources, and other measures;
- Supporting professional development initiatives aimed at increasing professionals’ and practitioners’ capacity to work effectively with men and boys, including through university partnerships and the development for example of online, asynchronous courses, modelled for example on my university’s [Graduate Certificate in Domestic Violence Responses](#), and informed by Our Watch’s work on building capacity to engage men in violence prevention [32];

- Supporting knowledge sharing on violence prevention work with men and boys, including through such mechanisms as communities of practice (such as that run by Our Watch), learning exchanges, and consultations and events, the translation of research evidence into practice, and the development of materials intended to guide or improve practice. Do not reinvent the wheel; draw on existing collections on practice and scholarship (such as [this one](#) on the website XY).

Expanding the strategies used

Violence prevention work with men and boys in Australia often comprises educating boys and young men in schools about respectful relationships and sexual consent. Yes, this is vital. Ideally, it is part of respectful relationships education curricula that are mandated across states and territories and a routine part of the schooling experience of Australia's children and young people, rather than occurring only through ad hoc programs delivered by external agencies [33]. However, violence prevention work with men and boys also should comprise:

- Building egalitarian cultures in workplaces and sports
- Using communications and social marketing to shift norms of masculine entitlement
- Involving male community and religious leaders
- Mobilising men alongside women in advocacy networks
- Addressing misogynist radicalisation among men and boys online
- Holding male policymakers and male-dominated institutions and governments to account.

In short, we need a wider range of strategies, engaging a greater diversity of men and boys, in a greater range of settings, and at more macro levels of the spectrum of prevention.

In some instances, effective violence prevention activity with men and boys is best implemented not through new, standalone initiatives aimed exclusively at men and boys, but through the extension of existing violence prevention and gender equity initiatives in mixed-gender settings and among mixed-gender audiences such that they include messaging and strategies aimed at men and boys in particular.

Recommendation (2): Expand the range of violence prevention strategies used among men and boys, by:

- Supporting violence prevention initiatives aimed at men and boys in settings such as workplaces [34], sports, and online;
- Supporting violence prevention initiatives aimed at male community, faith, and workplace leaders;
- Promoting intensive intervention into the settings and contexts that foster violence-supportive and gender-equitable norms, such as the 'manosphere' (the online network of anti-women and male supremacist online communities, influencers, and platforms) [31, 35];
- Supporting the development of novel strategies for reaching and educating boys and men via social media, such as the '[Ask a Mate](#)' initiative aimed at boys and young men;
- Including and encouraging in violence prevention work an attention not only to risk factors but to protective factors, those factors that feed into non-violent and gender-equitable identities, behaviours and relations among boys and men.

Scaling up

Community-level strategies are a vital next step in the prevention of domestic, family, and sexual violence [36-39]. Much prevention activity has addressed risk and protective factors at the individual and relationship levels, but community-level strategies move to more macro levels of society. They target modifiable characteristics of the community – structural, economic, political, cultural, or environmental –

to reduce the risk for violence perpetration and victimisation. Community-level strategies have a compelling rationale: they address the social norms, social relations, and social inequalities known to underpin domestic, family, and sexual violence [37].

There is growing encouragement for the prevention field to move away from the use only of strategies at the smallest levels of the ecological model [36, 40, 41]. This requires a paradigm shift, away from low-dose education-only programming and toward investment in the development and rigorous evaluation of more comprehensive, multi-level strategies aimed at a wider range of populations [38].

Violence prevention activities aimed at men and boys in Australia often have comprised only face-to-face education and training, whereas there is rich potential to build healthier, non-violent lives for men and boys also by addressing *institutional* and *structural* influences. Men's and boys' lives and relations, including their treatment of women and girls, are shaped – whether in positive or negative ways – by their and women's patterns of employment and economic wellbeing, the social norms of their communities, the formal and informal relations of their workplaces and leisure settings, the forms of media they consume, and other factors. To give one example, the widespread consumption of violent pornography particularly by boys and men is an important risk factor for sexual violence perpetration, as documented in both meta-analyses [42] and in longitudinal studies on the effects of pornography consumption on later perpetration of sexual violence [43-48].

Prevention strategies therefore can and should address these same institutional and structural forces among men and boys. They may aim to reduce risk factors for domestic, family and sexual violence or to strengthen protective factors. For example;

- Large-scale social norms campaigns can shift the cultural climates in which violence is excused and normalised;
- Initiatives aimed at fostering women's economic empowerment and autonomy can lessen economic dependency on men and financial insecurity, well-documented risk factors for violence victimisation;
- Environmental or situational approaches can alter the environments in which violence takes place, by reducing opportunities for and increasing the risks of perpetration and tackling context-related risk factors such as alcohol availability;
- Policies regarding a wide range of areas – housing, employment, immigration, corrections, media, and so on – all can influence macro-level risk and protective factors related to domestic, family, and sexual violence.

Recommendation (3): Scale up violence prevention efforts with men and boys and more generally, by:

- Funding programs of prevention activity focused on under-utilised but vital prevention strategies including community development and community mobilisation;
- Supporting community-wide or nationwide social norms campaigns intended to address violence-supportive norms tied to notions of manhood (such as the norms of male sexual entitlement that undermine some men's sexual violence against women and girls) and to foster positive social norms;
- Intensifying the regulation of forms of media known to increase the risks of sexual violence victimisation, namely violent pornography, to lessen both children's and adults' exposure to this media and to hold the pornography industry to account;
- Supporting strategies among young people and particularly boys and young men to minimise the harms of pornography exposure, such as the integration into schools or other settings of age-appropriate educational materials on pornography [49];

- Adopting regulatory and legislative strategies to address violence-supportive and pro-patriarchal online content, platforms and communities [31];
- Recognising how policy measures addressing institutional and structural areas (employment, wages, housing, media, and so on) shape men's and boys' lives, and deliberately using these to prevent and reduce domestic, family and sexual violence.

Maintaining a focus on ending violence and transforming gender inequalities

There are various articulations of the principles that should guide violence prevention work with men and boys [19, 26, 29, 30], complemented by guides to engaging men and boys in general [22, 23, 50-53].

Although there is diversity here, most accounts share three emphases: a concern with sexism and gender inequalities, a concern with men's and boys' own wellbeing, and attention to differences and inequalities among men and boys themselves.

We can think of these therefore in terms of three key principles: 1) gender-transformative: intended to transform gender inequalities; 2) committed to enhancing boys' and men's lives; and 3) intersectional: addressing diversities and inequalities. I offer a more detailed account of these principles in the Appendix.

Most primary prevention work with men and boys in Australia is guided at least to some extent by these three principles. Most initiatives and campaigns:

- Pay attention to issues of gender and power, drawing on the very well-documented insights that men's violence against women and girls is shaped in particular by gender-related risk factors, to do with gendered and violence-supportive attitudes, gender-inequitable relations in relationships and families, and wider gender inequalities [54];
- Prioritise issues of victim-survivors' safety and wellbeing and emphasise perpetrators' accountability for their harmful behaviour;
- Are conducted in collaboration with or by women's and domestic, family and sexual violence organisations, and have a spirit of collaboration or accountability;
- Are positive and strengths-based in their approach to men and boys: they recognise the good in what men and boys do and are, seek to build on their existing commitments to and practices of non-violence, and model or promote positive forms of manhood and selfhood;
- Acknowledge diversities and inequalities among men and boys, tailoring work to specific contexts and communities, although there are also limits to the intersectional approaches they adopt [55, 56].

The field of violence prevention work with men and boys is dynamic. Positive trends in Australia in recent years include increased:

- Examination of how to prevent and reduce resistance and backlash [57-59];
- Examination of bystander intervention strategies in workplaces and elsewhere [60, 61];
- Exploration of effective messaging in social marketing, communications, and other strategies [8, 62];
- Attention to specific cohorts of men and boys such as gay, bisexual and trans people;
- Dialogue between different domains of work with men and boys, including fathering, men's health, violent extremism, and other areas.

One of the most important developments in the past 5-10 years has been the growing presence of men's health-focused approaches and organisations in violence prevention work with men and boys. Some organisations that had previously focused on boys' and men's wellbeing, particularly their mental and emotional health, now also frame their work as contributing to violence prevention. Similarly, some

practitioners and advocates in the men's health field now argue that a men's health approach is a vital one for violence prevention.

This development presents both opportunities and risks.

Some aspects of a men's health approach are very familiar in the violence prevention field and already part of its practice. To put it plainly, they are nothing new. Elements of men's health approaches that already are established in violence prevention work with men and boys include the following:

- *Appeals to benefit:* Violence prevention work with men and boys already routinely addresses men and boys as stakeholders and beneficiaries in change, emphasising how men and boys will benefit from progress towards non-violence and gender equity [19, 63]. Men's health approaches could extend this, framing violence prevention as a matter of improving men's own wellbeing and thus further motivating program participation and behaviour change.
- *Attention to masculine norms:* The violence prevention field emphasises the role of norms of masculinity and gender in violence perpetration [64], and this is similar to men's health's emphasis on the role of masculine social norms in men's health and help-seeking.
- *Addressing male victimisation:* Violence prevention work with men and boys routinely emphasises that men and boys too are the victims of violence, including violence by women. A men's health approach could extend this, highlighting the fact that many victims of interpersonal violence in general are men and boys [65].

Some aspects of a men's health approach are more novel for the violence prevention field and can contribute to or extend violence prevention in valuable ways. Drawing on men's health approaches may assist violence prevention work with men and boys in:

- *Reaching men:* Health services and systems are a potential vehicle for reaching men (as are other settings and services, including education, fathering, sport, work, faith settings, and so on). For instance, workplace mental health initiatives could incorporate discussions about healthy relationships and gender norms. In this way, a men's health approach could expand the entry points for intervention.
- *Addressing risk factors:* A men's health approach may emphasise risk factors for the perpetration of domestic or sexual violence that are worthy of attention, such as trauma, mental ill-health, emotional restriction, and violence victimisation. The violence prevention field already pays attention to some of these, with very extensive attention for example to childhood exposure to domestic violence. A men's health approach may connect violence to other men's health issues, such as substance abuse, depression and suicide, highlighting shared determinants and allowing integrated prevention and intervention strategies.
- *Reducing backlash:* Positioning violence as a health issue may reduce men's defensive or hostile responses to violence prevention efforts, and may encourage men to seek support or help, whether for perpetration, victimisation or related challenges.

However, a men's health approach to the prevention of violence against women and girls also has significant limitations and risks, as follows:

- *Displacing the central goals of violence prevention:* In efforts to address men's violence against women and girls, the overarching goal of work with men and boys is not to foster their health but to foster non-violence and gender equity. Indeed, there may be men who are relatively 'healthy' on standard measures of health and wellbeing who are also perpetrators of domestic or sexual violence against women.
 - To put it bluntly, men's health does not equate to women's safety. Women's safety should remain central to violence prevention, not repositioned as "a spin-off benefit of better male health" [66].

- *Ignorance of and inexperience in domestic, family and sexual violence:* Men's health approaches have shown little attention to domestic or sexual violence or other forms of violence. Men's health practitioners and advocates typically lack subject matter expertise regarding domestic violence and sexual violence.
- *Neglect of gender, power and harm:* Men's health approaches may not involve the understandings of gender and power that are relevant in addressing domestic, family and sexual violence. Men's health approaches may see men and boys only as victims and focus only on their needs and wellbeing, and not also on the harms that some men and boys cause to others.
- *Neglect of power and entitlement:* Framing violence prevention *only* as a matter of improving men's own wellbeing would push aside questions of patriarchal power, what the men who use violence gain from this violence and what they will have to give up. That is, it would miss important dimensions of domestic, family and sexual violence, rather than addressing them as a key element in change.
- *Depoliticising and individualising violence:* A men's health approach may depoliticise violence, individualising the issue and diverting attention from systemic gender inequality as a key driver of violence. Health-oriented framings of perpetrators and perpetration may focus only on psychological or medical factors rather than recognising the structural, cultural, and gendered roots of violence.
- *Focus on individual and psychological factors:* Men's health approaches may focus on individual and psychological factors, neglecting social and structural ones. In turn, men's health strategies may focus on individual change and health system responses, rather than other means of social change.
 - (However, *critical* health approaches show greater emphasis on social and structural determinants of health and greater attention to addressing social injustice [67]. A critical and intersectional men's health approach can highlight how overlapping systems of oppression harm both men's health and women's safety. It could provide purchase in addressing structural inequalities, including their interrelationships with dominant constructions of masculinity. Men's health approaches that are gender-transformative and intersectional are more likely to contribute to significant positive change.)
- *Avoiding male discomfort:* Men's health approaches may assume that any approach that causes men and boys discomfort or resentment necessarily is an ineffective approach and should be abandoned, but some such approaches are necessary in challenging patriarchal attitudes and behaviours (although approaches that cause only strong resistance are unlikely to make positive change). Our overriding criteria for what language, messages and so on to use in engaging men and boys should not be what makes men and boys feel comfortable or good, but what makes positive change.
- *Neglect of safety and accountability:* Men's health approaches are not necessarily informed by the principles of safety and accountability that are central to the violence prevention field, nor by a spirit of partnership with women and women's services and organisations.
- *Reinforcing a focus on men:* A men's health lens might shift attention away from women and children, who make up the majority of victims of domestic, family and sexual violence, and downplay the urgent need for survivor-centred responses.
- *Marginalising women's voices:* Prioritising men's health could inadvertently recenter men's experiences and marginalise women's and victim-survivors' voices in a movement historically led by women's advocacy.
- *Limited evidence of effectiveness:* Few rigorously evaluated programs among men and boys exist to confirm that health-focused strategies reduce violence. It cannot be assumed that better mental

health among men or boys, for example, will lead to lower levels of support for or perpetration of violence against women and girls.

- *Enabling anti-feminist advocacy*: The men's health field includes some anti-feminist groups and agendas. This is one area of work with men and boys where anti-women 'men's rights' ideologies have established some seeming legitimacy [68], and they are antithetical to informed, safe, and effective prevention work.

Some of these limitations have been visible in inaccurate or naïve commentary by some men's health practitioners on the violence prevention field in Australia, including:

- Misrepresentations of work with men and boys as characterised in general by blaming and shaming approaches; and
- Divisive and inaccurate accounts of the violence prevention field e.g. as focused only on gender-related drivers of domestic, family and sexual violence or as focused only on attitudes.

An issue that has been a focus of men's health advocates' recent commentary on engaging men and boys is trauma. Yes, it is vital that we address trauma in men's and boys' lives. This is recognised in the 'engaging men' field, including by key international organisations focused on engaging men such as Equimundo [69]. However, there are simplistic assumptions that we should avoid:

- Trauma (such as childhood exposure to violence) is an important risk factor for men's perpetration of domestic violence, but it is certainly not the only risk factor nor the primary one [64]. Nor is violence perpetration always the result of trauma.
- Misogyny (anti-women hostility) has a range of drivers and supports, including widespread cultural norms of sexism. Yes, it is shaped by childhood trauma, but it would be mistaken to assume that trauma is the only or primary driver of misogynist attitudes among boys and men.

Further, there are instances where accounts or assessments of violence prevention to some extents have lost sight of questions of evidence and impact. For example, the Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches (2024) refers to "a range of successful healthy masculinities models" [70], but here includes some interventions that have no evidence of effectiveness and that in some ways fall short of established standards of practice (because of their delivery model, short duration, and/or curriculum content), while omitting other interventions that come closer to established standards of practice.

The language of 'healthy masculinities' itself can be unhelpful here:

- This language may suggest that the primary goal of prevention work addressing violence against women and girls and engaging men and boys is to promote male health and wellbeing. It is not. The primary goal is to reduce and prevent this violence – by reducing men's and boys' own perpetration, reducing their condoning of other men's violence, lessening their violence-supportive attitudes, building on and encouraging their adoption of positive roles as pro-social bystanders and advocates, and promoting non-violent and gender-equitable identities, behaviours and relations. (The goal of male health and wellbeing is, however, more important in violence prevention work addressing other forms of domestic, family and sexual violence, given that men and boys are also the victims of this violence [65].)
- A more accurate goal, therefore, would be 'non-violent masculinities', or even more specifically, 'non-violent men'. At the very least, if the term 'healthy masculinities' continues to frame policies, it should not be understood primarily in terms of wellbeing but in terms of non-violence and gender equity. Strategies and interventions should address power, privilege, entitlement and gender inequality, rather than simply promoting emotional literacy or resilience.
- Our goals should include not only encouraging new, respectful and equitable forms of masculinity but also diminishing the importance given to gender categories and the degree of males' investment in being seen as 'real' men [71]. That is, sometimes our work should involve

encouraging non-violent forms of selfhood rather than of masculinity in particular.

- At the same time, as I have argued elsewhere [72], violence prevention work with men also should draw on and mobilise models of healthy, equitable, and non-violent masculinities. That is, I see the promotion of positive and aspirational models of manhood as one important strategy in this work.

In short, I support the continued use of notions of healthy or positive masculinities, while urging that these be understood in the violence prevention field in terms of non-violence and gender equity.

Returning to a men's health approach, it would be dangerous for governments' or others' approaches to violence prevention work with men and boys to shift to the wholesale adoption of such an approach. Doing so would risk superficial solutions that leave the drivers of violence intact. Domestic, family and sexual violence cannot be treated as solely or primarily driven by poor mental health or emotional difficulties. Improving men's and boys' wellbeing alone is unlikely to reduce violence unless gender attitudes, entitlement and power are also addressed.

Instead, the distinct insights and opportunities that men's health approaches and strategies offer should be *integrated* into and *extend* a broader, gender-transformative approach to violence prevention work with men and boys. A men's health lens offers some distinctive and valuable insights and emphases and pragmatic entry points for engagement. But these do not deserve and should not prompt a comprehensive revision of frameworks for and strategies within violence prevention work with men and boys. Instead, they must be embedded within broader efforts to transform gendered power structures, norms and relations and other contributors to domestic, family and sexual violence.

Putting this the other way around, frameworks and strategies for violence prevention work should draw, where appropriate, on the insights and advantages of other fields, whether men's health, or countering violent extremism, or fathering. Along these lines, there are growing signs of collaboration internationally between violence prevention and such areas as suicide prevention [73], mental health [74], and health equity [75]. Violence prevention policy and programming in Australia should draw on men's health and other fields, to the extent that these insights and strategies:

- Advance the cause of preventing and reducing domestic, family and sexual violence;
- Are compatible with violence prevention's defining emphases on victim-survivor safety and perpetrator accountability;
- Are informed by scholarship on violence, gender, power, and masculinity;
- Are guided by emerging standards for effective practice;
- Are supported by evidence.

Elements of men's health approaches have value, but they should be integrated into and remain accountable to a gender-transformative violence prevention framework.

Recommendation (4): Maintain a gender-transformative framework for engaging men and boys while integrating appropriate insights from other fields, by:

- Reaffirming that government investment in work with men and boys is guided by the principles of gender equality, victim-survivor safety, perpetrator accountability, and intersectionality;
- Supporting collaboration between the violence prevention and other sectors including men's health, while ensuring that programs engaging men and boys are informed by expertise in domestic, family and sexual violence;
- Encouraging prevention initiatives to draw on men's health approaches where these strengthen engagement, access to services, and wellbeing, without losing an explicit focus on gendered power relations and the structural drivers of violence;
- Requiring that government-funded programs engaging men and boys show alignment with

evidence-based standards for primary prevention.

Appendix: Principles and standards for violence prevention in general and work with men and boys in particular

There are general principles that should guide the work of primary prevention. National and international research and experience have generated an increasing consensus on the elements of good practice in violence prevention. The following four features receive consistent emphasis in the literature: violence prevention should be (1) informed; (2) comprehensive; (3) engaging; and (4) relevant.

- 1) *Informed*: Violence prevention interventions must be based on a sound understanding of both the problem – the workings and causes of violence – and of how it can be changed. In other words, they must incorporate both an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding violence and a theory of change [33, 41, 76-78]. As a key part of this, they must aim to transform gendered norms, structures and practices for a more equitable society [76, 78-80]
- 2) *Comprehensive*: Effective interventions are likely to be comprehensive: they use multiple strategies, in multiple settings, and at multiple levels [41, 81]. For example, they incorporate strategies addressing individuals, peer groups, and communities and have multiple strategies addressing the same outcome [41, 77]. They must work across the ecological model [76], targeting structural and underlying causes of social problems [41].
- 3) *Engaging*: Violence prevention programs should involve effective forms of delivery which engage participants. More effective interventions will have appropriate content (in their educational curricula, their social marketing materials, and so on), be implemented in well-designed and organised ways, and involve skilled personnel (whether educators, advocates, or others) [33, 76-78, 80, 81].
- 4) *Relevant and intersectional*: Good practice programs are relevant to the communities and contexts in which they are delivered. They are informed by knowledge of their target group or population and their local contexts [33, 41, 76, 78, 79, 81].

Three principles for violence prevention work with men and boys

Efforts to engage men and boys in particular should seek to live up to the principles above, but they must also be guided by further principles.

(1) Gender-transformative: intended to transform gender inequalities

Violence prevention efforts among men and boys must be gender-transformative. They should be grounded in principles of gender justice, recognise the systemic gender inequalities that structure society, and seek to transform oppressive gender structures, norms, and practices. A feminist approach should be foundational to the work's aims and agendas, its content and processes, and its structures. There is a growing emphasis in the 'engaging men' field on the need for interventions to be 'gender-transformative' – to transform gender inequalities and generate more gender-equitable relations [13, 15, 26, 82]. Although the term is used in varying ways, in general it seems synonymous with the term 'feminist' [83].

Effective violence prevention efforts among men and boys will have *content* addressing the gender-related factors known to drive violence perpetration. Educational programs should include content on power and patriarchal gender inequalities. Prevention efforts among men and boys also require gender-transformative *processes*. They should involve boys and men in critical reflection on masculinities and gender and seek to foster their support for gender equality and non-violence [19].

Finally, work with men and boys requires feminist *structures*: it must be done in partnership with, and be accountable to, women and women's groups [19]. Accountability is a key strategy to minimise the risks, first, in *working with* a group, men or boys, who are privileged or advantaged in certain ways, and the risks, second, in *work by* men. Accountability is intended to reduce the risks of reinforcing gender inequalities, colluding with violence, or taking away resources and legitimacy from women's rights efforts. The principle of accountability is emphasised among men's anti-violence advocates [84] and in standards for this work [26, 85, 86].

(2) Committed to enhancing boys' and men's lives

The second principle comprises a commitment to enhancing boys' and men's lives: to address men's and boys' distinct needs, recognise them as stakeholders and beneficiaries, and use strengths-based or positive approaches in engaging them.

While men and boys are the recipients of various forms of unearned privilege in the patriarchal gender order that characterises contemporary societies, they also pay important costs. Men and boys who conform to traditional constructions of masculinity may show poorer mental health, greater risk-taking, and lower help-seeking [5], and boys and men are subject to gendered and homophobic policing and abuse particularly by other males [87]. Prevention efforts among boys and men must be attentive to their distinct needs, including the challenges they may face in accessing and using support services [88].

Men and boys themselves have a stake in progress towards gender equality and non-violence. In violence prevention work with men, and in the wider 'engaging men' field, there is a consensus that men and boys will *benefit*, in terms of their own lives, their relations with women, children, and other men, and their workplaces and communities [19]. There are also caveats: with progress towards a society free of violence against women, men who can no longer perpetrate such violence lose the perceived benefits associated with this, and men in general will lose unfair privileges [19].

Strengths-based or positive approaches are widely seen as more effective in prevention work with men and boys. Efforts should acknowledge and build on men's and boys' existing commitments to and involvements in non-violence and equality, in particular to minimise the likelihood of defensive or hostile responses [19].

(3) Intersectional: addressing diversities and inequalities

The third principle is to be intersectional: to acknowledge and respond to diversities and inequalities among men and boys [26, 88, 89]. An intersectional feminist approach recognises that gender intersects with other forms of social difference and inequality, and hence that men in different social locations have differential access to social resources and status. An intersectional approach highlights that men's attitudes towards violence, men's use of violence, and how male perpetrators are viewed and treated all are structured by multiple relations of disadvantage and privilege tied to ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nation.

This has three implications for work with men and boys. First, with any population of men or boys, we must engage with their specific cultural and material conditions, including both local cultures of gender and sexuality and material and structural inequalities. In contexts particularly of disadvantage, efforts should seek to improve the social and economic conditions of men and communities. Second, we must address culturally specific risk and protective factors, including challenging cultural supports for violence, and building on local resources, texts, and norms in promoting non-violence and gender equality. Third, prevention work should be developed in collaboration with the communities in which it is being delivered, to help ensure that it is as relevant for participants as possible [90].

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