

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS ALWAYS A MEN'S ISSUE

BY MICHAEL FLOOD

www.whiteribboncampaign.co.uk



Many British Fire Service staff were involved in commemorating the International Day to Eradicate Violence against Women, part of the White Ribbon Campaign.

Violence against women remains at epidemic levels. Most men are not violent, and most treat the women in their lives with respect and care, says Michael Flood, a leading Australian researcher on violence prevention, men and gender, fathering, and sexual and reproductive health. Yet most men, Flood says, "have done little to challenge the violence perpetrated by a minority of men. Men have a crucial role to play in joining with women to end this violence and helping to build a culture based on non-violence and gender equality."

Most men know that domestic violence and sexual assault are wrong, but we have done little to reduce this violence in our lives, families and communities. Too many men believe common myths about violence, have ignored women's fears and concerns about their safety, and have stayed silent in the face of other men's violence-supportive attitudes and behaviors. The good news: a growing number of men are taking public action to help end violence against women.

Where I live, in Australia, physical and sexual assault and abuse are the experience of substantial numbers of girls and women. The most recent Australian data, in 2006, come from a national survey of 16,500 adults by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The Personal Safety Survey reveals there are still unacceptably high levels of violence against women. In the last 12 months, one in 20 women were victims of physical or sexual violence—this represents more than 440,000 women. Women are most at risk in the home, and from men they know. Since the age of 15,

more than three million women—40 percent of all women—have experienced violence. Close to one in three women (29 percent) have experienced physical assault, and close to one in five women (17 percent) have experienced sexual assault.

Similar findings come from an earlier national survey by the Australian Institute of Criminology. It found that over their lifetime, 57 percent of women reported experiencing at least one incident of physical or sexual violence. We know too that young women are at greater risk than older women, especially of sexual assault, and that indigenous women face particularly high risks of assault and homicide.

We know too that this violence has a profound and damaging impact on its victims and on the community as a whole. When women are physically assaulted by male partners or ex-partners, or forced into sex, or constantly threatened and abused, it leaves deep physical, and psychological, scars.

Violence against women is shaped by a wide variety of social factors, at personal, situational, and social levels. But we know that this violence is more likely in contexts where manhood is defined as about dominance, toughness, or male honor. Most men don't ever use violence against their wives or girlfriends. But those men who do are more likely to have sexist, rigid, and hostile gender-role attitudes. There are higher rates of domestic violence in cultures and contexts where violence is seen as a normal way to settle conflicts, men feel entitled to power over women, family gender relations are male-dominated, husband-wife relations are seen as private, and women are socially isolated. Sexual violence is shaped

by norms of a sexual double standard, victim-blaming, and the myth of an uncontrollable male sexuality. Poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, and mental illness all are further risk factors. And violence against women also is shaped by race, class, sexuality, and other social divisions.

Of course, males too are the victims of violence. While boys and men are the large majority of perpetrators of violence, boys and men often are also the victims. Males are beaten up, bullied and sexually assaulted. Boys and men are most at risk of violence from other boys and men. Ending violence to girls and women and ending violence to boys and men is part of the same struggle—to create a world based on equality, justice and non-violence.

MEN'S POSITIVE ROLES

Men have a crucial role to play in preventing the physical and sexual violence that so many women suffer, and men have much to gain from doing so. To end this violence, men themselves need to take part. While a minority of men use violence against women, too many men condone this violence, ignoring, trivializing, or even laughing about it.

There are simple, positive steps any man can take to be part of the solution. Educate yourself. Find out about the violence that many women experience. Don't condone the view that the victim is to blame. Check out how men treat the women around us. Speak out when friends, relatives, or others use violence or abuse. Be a good role model, whether you're a dad, a boss, a teacher or a coach. And, beyond these individual actions, take part in public actions and campaigns such as the White Ribbon Campaign (www.whiteribbon.ca). The White Ribbon Campaign focuses on the positive roles that men can play in helping to stop violence against women. It is built on a fundamental hope and optimism for both women's and men's lives, and a fundamental belief that both women and men have a stake in ending violence against women.

IT REALLY IS A MEN'S ISSUE

Violence against women is actually a "men's issue" because it is men's wives, partners, mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends whose lives are limited by violence and abuse. It's a men's issue because, as community leaders and decision-makers, men can play a key role in helping stop violence against women. It's a men's issue because men can speak out and step in when male friends and relatives insult or attack women. And it's a men's issue because a minority of men treat women and girls with contempt and violence,

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and it is up to the majority of men who don't help create a culture in which such behavior is unacceptable.

While most men treat women with care and respect, violence against women *is* men's problem. Some men's violence gives all men a bad name. For example, if I am walking down the street at night and there is a woman walking in front of me, she is likely to think, "Is he following me? Is he about to assault me?" Some men's violence makes all men seem a potential threat, makes all men seem dangerous.

Violence against women is men's problem because many men find themselves dealing with the impact of *other* men's violence on the women and children that we love. Men struggle to respond to the emotional and psychological scars borne by our partners, wives, female friends and others, the damaging results of earlier experiences of abuse by other men.

Violence is men's problem because sometimes we are the bystanders to other men's violence. We make the choice: do we stay silent and look the other way when our male friends and relatives insult or attack women, or do we speak up? And of course, violence is men's problem because sometimes we have used violence ourselves.

I've come to realize that violence against women is a deeply personal issue for men, just as it is for women. I've been saddened to realize how many of the women I know have had to deal with childhood abuse, forced

sex, or controlling boyfriends. I've felt shock and despair in hearing about the harassment, threats, and humiliations that women experience far too often. I've felt angry at the victim-blaming I've sometimes heard from male colleagues and acquaintances. And I've been humbled and shamed in realizing my own ignorance and in reflecting on times when I may have been coercive or abusive.

At the same time, I've also felt inspired by the strength and courage of women who've lived through violence. I've found hope and energy in participating in a growing network of women and men who've taken on the challenge of working to stop violence against women. In making personal changes and taking collective action, I've found joy and delight in the enriching of my friendships with women and men and my relationships with women.

A BETTER WORLD

Men have a personal stake in ending violence against women. Men will benefit from a world free of violence against women, a world based on gender equality. In our relations with women, instead of experiencing distrust and disconnection we will find closeness and connection. We will be able to take up a healthier, emotionally in-touch and proud masculinity. Men's sexual lives will be more mutual and pleasurable, rather than obsessive and predatory. And boys and men will be free from the threat of other men's violence.

In campaigning against sexual and physical assault, it is important to remind ourselves of what we are *for*: friendships and relationships that are respectful and empowering; sexual lives based on consent, safety, and mutual pleasure; communities that are just and peaceful.

To really stop violence against women, we'll need to change the social norms and power inequalities that feed into violence. More men must join with women to encourage norms of consent, respect, and gender equality; to challenge the unfair power relations that promote violence; and, finally, to promote gender roles based on non-violence and gender justice.



Dr. Michael Flood is a Research Fellow at Australia's La Trobe University, funded by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth). He has published research on best practices in primary prevention, how to engage men in violence prevention, factors shaping violence-supportive attitudes, young people's experiences of violence in their relationships and families, and other issues. Dr. Flood also is a trainer and community educator with a long involvement in community advocacy and education work focused on men's violence against women.



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