CULTURAL CHALLENGES FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION: WORKING TOWARDS AN ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SUSTAINABLE INTERVENTIONS

Rochelle Braaf and Gargi Ganguly

18 – 22 February 2002, University of Sydney, Australia

CULTURAL CHALLENGES FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION: WORKING TOWARDS AN ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SUSTAINABLE INTERVENTIONS

Rochelle Braaf

Policy Officer

NSW Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women

& Gargi Ganguly

Regional Violence Prevention Specialist

NSW Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women

Abstract

As culture frames our beliefs and values, our ways of thinking and behaviour, considerations of culture are central to understandings of violent behaviour and the development of successful, sustainable forms of prevention.[1] In Australia, existing postcolonial and multicultural social relations necessitate that those working in the field of preventing violence against women recognise cultural differences in the ways that violence is manifested, how women seek and access support, and outcomes which women desire. The paper discusses issues arising from prevention work which seeks to address (conflicting) goals of bridging cultural difference, celebrating cultural diversity and ensuring cultural sustainability - and considers implications for women from diverse cultural groups. The paper draws on examples of prevention practice in NSW to explore these issues. An argument is made for consideration of ethical dimensions of practice in order to inform prevention's engagement with cultural issues; that is, to work towards appropriate and effective prevention strategies, which support women from diverse cultural groups to create futures free of violence.

---

[1] The term 'prevention' is used throughout the paper to refer to a broad range of interventions. It encompasses primary, secondary and tertiary responses, in recognition that, for example, domestic violence is not a singular event and in recognition that intervention after violence has occurred may prevent further violence from occurring.

Cultural framings of violence and prevention

Culture frames our beliefs and values, our ways of thinking and behaviour. Considerations of culture, therefore, are central to understandings of violent behaviour and the development of successful and sustainable forms of prevention. In Australia mainstream prevention's recognition of "other" women's experiences (those of foreign, migrant and indigenous women) has fostered a broadening of ways of working with women, men and communities. It has facilitated the development of a more flexible approach to prevention work; for example, in seeking to engage women and communities through their own languages, drawing on culturally relevant stories and symbols to discuss violence, gaining support of community role models and promoting a unified response to violence within culturally identified groups.

However, despite this broadening of understandings and prevention practice, women from diverse cultural groups continue to suffer violence with little or no criminal justice intervention, health and counselling support, or social and community supports. Recognising these gaps, issues of concern for this paper surround the engagement of violence prevention with (conflicting) issues of bridging cultural difference, celebrating cultural diversity and ensuring cultural sustainability, and the subsequent implications for women.

The genesis for this paper lies with the authors' involvement in the Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women. The Strategy forms the NSW Government's prevention response to violence against women. It operates within a broad definition of violence, acknowledging physical, verbal, sexual, financial and emotional abuse, stalking, intimidation and harassment as forms of violence. Although the Strategy works to prevent violence against all women in NSW, it recognises that women may experience different forms of violence and that some women have particular difficulty in accessing assistance and support.

In working with the Strategy we have become increasingly concerned with how certain framings of violence have distanced prevention strategies from some groups of women. We are also concerned that some seemingly positive responses to postcolonial and multicultural contexts may actually disadvantage women in terms of their access to justice.

The paper's underlying philosophy is based on western feminist theories but is also informed by our own personal experiences, the experiences of women we encounter through our work and the views of our peers and colleagues. Writings by "women of colour" and migrant women have also helped to shape to these ideas and understandings. The interest with these issues lies with a desire to improve our, and the Strategy's, prevention practice.

Bridging cultural difference

A significant challenge to prevention work is a widespread perception that violence is confined to "other", as opposed to mainstream, cultural groups. This perception is reflected in men's responses to a community education campaign run last year by the Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women (NSW Attorney General's Department, 2001). It was also evident last year in media representations of gang-related sexual assaults in Sydney, as ethnic-based, rather than gender-based, attacks on women.[2] Such inaccurate and inappropriate perceptions are not unexpected in a largely uninformed public. However, it is disturbing to find they are also prevalent amongst some services and individuals working in the field of prevention.

To illustrate, a number of reports released in Australia in the last few years have alerted to the extremely high rates of reported violence against Aboriginal women (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence, 2000; Memmott et al., 2001). Yet it is routinely acknowledged that Aboriginal women's experiences of violence receive an inadequate police and criminal justice response (see, for instance, Australian Law Reform Commission, 1994 pp 31-32; NSW Department for Women, 1996; Australian Domestic And Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2001). For example, Kelly's investigation of the policing of Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs)[3] found:

> All of the Indigenous women interviewed had experienced condescending attitudes from police…. for the majority of these women, police response have led to such frustration that they would no longer contact the police to report AVO breaches. Reasons given included "why bother" when "they don't

[2] For example, Alan Jones, broadcaster on 2UE Radio, was reported as saying on 13th September 2001 that the recent gang rapes in south-western Sydney might be "the first signs of an Islamic hatred toward the community". Mr Jones asked the question: "Have we now, because of multi-culturalism, created an Islamic community in Australia that's more aligned with Islam than it is with Australia?", as reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14th September, 2001.

[3] AVO is the term for protection or restraining orders in NSW.

> believe you"; "they don't care; "they're smart arses"; "police don't follow through with it". Other comments included "It's no use ringing the police because they'll just run you down" and "I'm still in fear but I won't go to the police again because they won't believe me" (Kelly, 2000).

In this case the inadequate and clearly racist police response referred to is firmly embedded in perceptions of low moral behaviour as a normalised part of Aboriginal culture. The article goes on to discuss police references to Aboriginal women lying, couples constantly fighting and women's behaviour as unreliable following the issuing of AVOs. The implication of these perceptions, regardless of their accuracy, is that the behaviours of this cultural group negate the necessity for or effectiveness of mainstream interventions.

Similarly, research for the *Heroines of Fortitude* report, which examined the experiences in court of women victim's of sexual assault, found that:

> Questions about alcohol, victims' compensation and promiscuity are regularly asked in relation to the credit [sic] of Aboriginal women. Myths and stereotypes of Aboriginal women as unsophisticated, vengeful, and morally corrupt are also evident in the court room (1996 p 4).

The authors of the report linked this type of questioning to low conviction rates for sexual assault of Aboriginal women. The prevention efforts in these instances were clearly inadequate. The question is how the underlying assumptions and biases might be challenged to provide a response which better protects and supports women.

Based on feminist analyses which position violence against women as located in the gendered power relations between men and women and based on substantial international evidence, we conclude that violence against women pervades *all* cultures, although it may be manifested in different ways. Recognising this explicitly can create informed spaces allowing women to speak openly about the violence in their lives, without fear of being stigmatised.

Prevention workers can also pay heed to the socio-cultural contexts surrounding women, to better understand their experience of violence. For example, reports on the extent and severity of violence experienced by Aboriginal women have typically recognised the impacts of colonisation – such as Aboriginal dispossession, familial and community separation, experience of ongoing racism, high unemployment, incarceration and poor health - in contributing to and supporting high levels of violence (see, for example, Lucashenko, 1997; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's

Task Force on Violence, 2000; Memmott et al.; 2001). Similarly, the NSW *Quarter Way to Equal* report provided some insight into factors affecting the settlement process for migrant women, in order to improve their access to legal services (Women's Legal Resources Centre, 1994 p 12). Some factors identified were lack of language proficiency, employment status, employment opportunities, isolation, dislocation and shifting family roles. Racist attitudes and behaviour exacerbate the impact of other factors. The argument made here is that acknowledging contextual issues for women's experience can foster empathy for victims of violence and a compassionate response to their needs.

Stereotyping of any cultural group is offensive but also, in the cases described, diminishes women's human rights to safety and justice and men's responsibility for perpetrating violence. It would be valuable, therefore, recognise that prevention is founded on values which overarch all cultural perspectives: for example, that all people have a right to live free from violence. These values include freedom, self-determination, human dignity, equity and social justice.[4] Embodiment of these values in an ethical prevention practice frees practitioners to conduct their work in ways that are uncomplicated by judgements of women as to their worthiness for assistance.

To illustrate what we consider to be an example of ethical practice, the Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women is conducting a project designed to enhance the access of Aboriginal women to mainstream services. The project is focussed on the perceptions, policies and practices of the services themselves rather than aiming to change the behaviour of Aboriginal women experiencing violence. It is based on the principle that mainstream services have a duty to provide services to all women, regardless of their cultural background and that Aboriginal women have a right to services. The project will seek to:

- promote empathy and understanding for Aboriginal women through cross-cultural training for service staff;
- review services' policies to ensure that Aboriginal women's rights are supported alongside other women's rights;

---

[4] See, for example, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its references to the rights of women.

- review services' practice to encourage proper implementation of policy; and,
- facilitate network building between key Aboriginal women's groups and services to foster mutual understandings about access issues and to jointly identify possible solutions.

Celebrating cultural diversity

Prevention work also contends with the ways in which many men and women normalise violent behaviour within their own cultural groups. Such violent behaviour is often seen as part of culture when it is perceived as an extension of gender role divisions and gender hierarchies, embedded in social relations. The authors recognise that there are differing views which see violence either as part of culture itself or as oppressive behaviours, supported by particular socio-cultural traditions.[5]

Depending on one's viewpoint the following challenges arise: At what point does intervening to undermine those oppressive practices become cultural imperialism? Conversely, in supporting notions of cultural diversity, at what point does the prevention worker become complicit in abuse?

The view taken by Almeida and Dolan-Delvecchio (1999) is instructive. They draw a distinction between culture and oppressive practices, arguing:

> …within the interior walls of all cultures exist many oppressive practices. Therefore there must be a distinction made between these oppressive patterns, which range from actual torture to subtle dehumanizing practices, and cultural definitions of norms.

They go on to name oppressive practices (such as wife burning) not as culture but as patriarchal customs. They define culture as:

> …the positive transmission of rituals, celebrations, and stories that makes familiar the general ordering of life for members of a particular group.

From this viewpoint there is a role for prevention to assist women from different cultural groups to undermine oppressive practices. But both questions asked here have continuing relevance in practice.

The suggestion made here is that the task for prevention work is to engage with communities and individuals in ways that respect cultural diversity but

---

[5] However, it could well be argued that this occurs to some degree in all cultural groups.

reject notions of cultural legitimacy of abuse. This argument reinforces the value in establishing overarching social values (of freedom, social justice, equity, etc.) as the basis of an ethical prevention practice. Lucashenko reflects on this point from an Aboriginal perspective:

> Some Aboriginal men, charged with murders, bashings, and rapes have claimed traditional law as a defense in court, with mixed success. Many Aboriginal women are skeptical [sic] about their claims… however, it is perhaps less important to focus on the detail of traditional mechanisms than on the issue of human rights… Should a convincing argument be made that pre-contact Aboriginal life was as patriarchal and oppressive as the first anthropologists argued…, there is still no reason that Aboriginal women should continue to be subject to the violence they are suffering at the hands of Aboriginal men (1997 pp 152-153).

There is also scope for prevention to assist women to draw on their own cultural values and beliefs which support their rights to safety, and which reject traditions and customs supporting violent behaviour (this position is advocated by Kavanagh & Kaur, 1996). Research findings from a study conducted for the Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women support this approach. In the study Australian men and women were questioned about their attitudes to domestic violence:

> [Indigenous] participants cited traditional cultural values and practices of respect and communication through out all levels of communities, which if re-claimed would oppose the presence of family violence within the community (Cultural Perspectives, 1999 p 63).

> [Participants from culturally and linguistically diverse communities] cited many community values, particularly religious values, which existed that were seen to oppose the presence of domestic violence within the community (Cultural Perspectives, 1999 p 101).

Participants from the general community echoed the influence of values on deterring violence. The study's findings suggest that there are likely to be cultural values which themselves form the basis of prevention. These can be drawn on as a point of connection to open up a dialogue with different cultural groups.

It is useful to also consider that all cultures contain a plurality of views, which allow for conflicting positions on acceptable behaviour. A number of writers have pointed out that that real cultures contain powerful and silent voices, tradition and subversion. Furthermore, people are not uniform in the way they uphold culture – they are more and less informed, may be frightened to make changes they wish; can and do find ways to subvert culture (Nussbaum, 1999).

So whose voices are heard and whose are silent in cultural determinations of men and women's roles? Prevention work can give women space and opportunity to be heard. In this regard the Strategy has supported and worked with organisations like the Immigrant Women's Speakout to provide opportunities for migrant women to discuss domestic violence situations, their fears and concerns, hopes and aspirations for themselves and their communities (such as the *Women, Migration and Domestic Violence* Forum, held in Sydney, 23 October 2000).

Supporting cultural sustainability

A further issue for prevention concerns the delivery of initiatives in ways designed to ensure or support cultural sustainability. This is of particular significance for people from cultural groups undergoing rapid change. Prevention efforts to sustain cultural integrity in this context are important and welcomed. The challenge lies in ensuring interventions adequately protect women from violence.

To illustrate, there is a strengthening push from within and outside of the NSW government to explore alternative means of dispensing justice for Aboriginal people, in ways that are more culturally appropriate than mainstream interventions. In one example of such efforts the NSW Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council is conducting a two-year pilot in the rural town of Nowra. In the trial Aboriginal offenders who have pleaded guilty or been found guilty by a local court can have their matter dealt with by "circle sentencing". With support from the local Aboriginal community, a circle court is convened and the matter dealt with by community members and a Magistrate. They sit together to discuss the background and effects of the offence and to develop a sentence appropriate for that offender. Circle sentencing involves victims of offences as well as offender's families and other respected community people. If the community deems it appropriate, the trial may hear crimes of violence against women.

It is unclear at this stage how power dynamics in a circle sentencing environment between women victims of violence and offenders will be managed or how victim's rights and safety will be protected. It is also unclear how comfortably this approach sits in a context where the group no longer functions as a traditional Aboriginal community. That is, in terms of being a

clearly defined community, with clear social demarcation for elders and others, which upholds traditional law and which can enforce community imposed sanctions. The trial in Nowra reflects a desire to dispense justice in an environment more traditionally familiar to Aboriginal people, given their position in a rapidly changing (and changed) social, political and economic context. Issues requiring careful consideration in the trial are whether this approach is sufficiently supportive of Aboriginal women and whether their rights to safety and justice are being upheld as paramount.

Many migrant groups share dilemmas facing Aboriginal people with regard to their desires to retain cultural integrity within a broadly white, Anglo-Australian culture. Some migrant women experience anxiety of expatriation and the process of finding their identities is a matter of intense struggle (Easteal, 1994; Sharma, 2001; Yick, 2001; Yoshihama, 2001). The concern, particularly for workers raised in a white, western feminist tradition, is what can prevention offer women experiencing cultural change? Is mainstream Australian culture any more or less violent and oppressive than "other" cultures?

A good starting point would be to again acknowledge that no one culture has a monopoly on non-violence - *all* cultures manifest elements of violence against women. Prevention workers can also recognise that cultures are not static but dynamic and fluid; in constant transition across time and space. Migrant groups are undergoing a process of locating their cultural identities in shifting perceptions of self, tradition and new contexts. For Aboriginal people their "traditional" cultures are undergoing disjointed and rapid change. Mainstream Australian culture (however that might be defined) also experiences constant flux and change, influenced by its culturally diverse communities, its regional and international positioning and through processes of self-reflection.

Accepting that all cultures contain violence and all cultures experience change, we suggest that opportunities for prevention lie with informing women about issues to do with violence and fostering their capacities to make their own choices. That is, to make choices about which cultural values, traditions and practices positively support their human rights and allow them to flourish (Nussbaum, 1999) and which oppressive traditions and practices impose on their corporeal and emotional well-being. Of course, this needs to be done in a respectful manner, working with women and communities and respecting women's choices.

In practical terms workers may support the capacities and opportunities for (any or all) women to make choices for themselves by:

- providing information about violence, women's rights and assistance available;
- engaging in healing activities;
- fostering self-esteem through skills building;
- forming women's support groups;
- providing opportunities for women to tell their stories;
- supporting women to remove violence from their lives (e.g. through housing options, financial support, criminal justice interventions and literacy skills delivery) (Nussbaum, 1999; Sharma, 2001);

and in many other ways.

For many women these efforts will mean the end of living under oppressive traditions and discovery of their own identity, authority and voice (Abraham, 1999). This includes negotiating new relationships with men, negotiating power and using it, and (re)creating new cultures.

Progressing an ethical approach in prevention practice

The political need for women to challenge the legitimacy of violence in their lives is great, if they are to fully participate in social, cultural and political activity. In a society that has the ability to question and shape social policy and control social systems, governments in particular have the opportunity to challenge violent behaviour at its roots through prevention (Miediam, 1995). With this responsibility comes an obligation to assess the way in which prevention is delivered and its impact. The examples referred to in this paper are offered as a way of exploring some themes around prevention's engagement with issues of violence amongst different cultures.

The suggestions proposed in the paper are:

- reflection on one's personal cultural perspectives and prejudices and their effects on personal prevention practice;

- acknowledgment that all cultures manifest elements of violence, thus allowing women of different cultures to speak of their experience without stigmatisation;
- consideration of cultural context as a means of empathising with others and fostering a compassionate response;
- embodiment of women's human rights as a basis for prevention practice;
- assistance to women to draw on cultural values and beliefs which support their rights and to reject (oppressive) customs and traditions which diminish those rights;
- recognition that cultures contain plurality and creating opportunities for women's voices to be heard regarding their notions of self, tradition and violence;
- acknowledgment that cultures are dynamic and fluid, and assisting women through capacity building to make choices that eliminate violence from their lives.

These ideas are just a starting point and not a prescriptive list of actions to employ as a prevention worker. They require more analysis and consideration of their application in the real world. This paper is offered as part of a discussion about violence prevention and culture and we invite comments and critique about the ideas posed.

References

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence (2000). *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence Report*, Queensland: Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development.

Abraham, M. (1999). 'Sexual abuse in South Asian immigrant marriages'. *Violence Against Women*, 5(6): 591-618.

Almeida, R. V.; & Dolan-Delvecchio, K. (1999). 'Addressing culture in batterers' intervention: The Asian Indian community as an illustrative example'. *Violence Against Women*, 5(6): 654-683.

Australian Domestic And Family Violence Clearinghouse (2001). *Pathways to safety: An interview about Indigenous family violence with Pam Greer, Indigenous Training and Development Consultant*, Issues Paper 5.

Australian Law Reform Commission (1994). *Equality before the law: Women's access to the legal system* (Interim report number 67). Sydney: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Cultural Perspectives (1999). *Domestic Violence Community Awareness Strategy Research, Final Research Report*. Sydney: Office of the Status of Women (unpublished).

Easteal, P. (1994). 'Sexual intimate homicides involving overseas born in Australia: The tip of the domestic violence iceberg?'. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 29(3): 219-239.

Kavanagh, D.; & Kaur, R. (1996). *Women say no to violence: A manual for conducting anti-violence campaigns with non-English speaking background communities*. Sydney: Fairfield Immigrant and Refugee Women's Network.

Kelly, L. (2000). 'Indigenous women's stories speak for themselves: The policing of Apprehended Violence Orders', *Indigenous Law Bulletin,* 25(4): 4-7.

Lucashenko, M. (1997). 'Violence against indigenous women: Public and private dimensions'. In Cook S. & Bessant, J. (Eds), *Women's encounters with violence: Australian experiences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pp 147-158.

Memmott, P.; Stacy, R.; Chambers, C.; & Keys, C. (2001). *Violence in indigenous communities: Report to the Crime Prevention Branch of the Attorney General's Department*. Canberra: Crime Prevention Branch of the Attorney General's Department.

Miediam, M. (1995). 'Learning to be Violent'. In Peled, E., Jaffe, P. & Edleson, J. L. (Eds), *Ending the cycle of violence: Community responses to children of battered women*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp 10-24.

NSW Attorney General's Department (2001). *Executive Summary, Statewide Campaign Evaluation*. Sydney: NSW Attorney General's Department.

NSW Department for Women (1996). *Heroines of fortitude: The experiences of women in court as victims of sexual assault*. Sydney: NSW Department for Women.

Nussbaum, M. (1999). *Sex and social justice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sharma, A. (2001). 'Healing the wounds of domestic abuse: Improving the effectiveness of feminist therapeutic interventions with immigrant and racially visible women who have been abused'. *Violence Against Women*, 7(12): 1405-1428.

Women's Legal Resources Centre (1994). *Quarter way to equal*. Sydney: Women's Legal Resources Centre.

Yick, A. G. (2001). 'Feminist theory and status inconsistency theory'. *Violence Against Women*, 7(5): 545-562.

Yoshihama, M. (2001). 'Immigrants-in-context framework: Understanding the interactive influence of socio-cultural contexts'. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 24(3): 307-318.