

Secrets and Lies: Responding to attacks on domestic violence campaigns

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Contemporary campaigns and programs addressing men's violence against women are under sustained attack. They are subject to hostile criticism by anti-feminist men and men's networks. Anti-feminist men's and fathers' rights campaigners claim that domestic violence is in fact gender-equal, and domestic violence efforts should reflect this. More broadly, they claim that men are being vilified and discriminated against by a self-serving domestic violence 'industry'. Anti-feminist men claim that domestic violence efforts use excessively broad definitions of violence and inflate the evidence of violence against women, assume that only men can be violent and only women can be victims, and focus too much on gendered causes of domestic violence.

The most recent version of such claims appears in a document titled 'Dishonesty in the Domestic Violence Industry', circulated by Michael Woods. Woods' document is prompted in particular by the White Ribbon Campaign. Woods mistakenly describes the White Ribbon Campaign as: '[t]he major national campaign sponsored by the Federal Government', perhaps confusing it with the Government's advertising effort, 'Violence Against Women, Australia Says NO'. The White Ribbon Campaign (WRC) in Australia is organised by a national group of men and women from a variety of organisations, businesses, and workplaces. It is self-funding and run almost entirely by volunteers.

Defining and measuring violence against women

One of the standard criticisms offered by anti-feminist advocates is that domestic violence campaigns use inflated and abnormal definitions of violence. Woods criticises the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS), of which the Australian component was released in 2004 by the Australian Institute of Criminology. He claims that the survey 'includes as violence anything that can leave a woman feeling 'put down''. This misrepresents the IVAWS's treatment of psychological forms of violence.

The survey does define violence in terms of three forms: physical, sexual, and psychological, in line with definitions specified by the United Nations and affirmed by other international agencies. But it does not include psychological violence in its calculations of the prevalence of men's violence against women. For example, in stating that 57% of all women have experienced violence at some point in their lives, the report makes clear that this refers only to physical or sexual violence. At the same time, they tend to co-occur: women who experienced controlling behaviours from an intimate partner were also more likely to have experienced physical or sexual violence at his hands (Mouzos and Makkai 2004, pp. 48-49).

Woods also criticises the use of lifetime estimates of violence in White Ribbon Campaign materials, claiming that such measures are rare and inappropriate. He is mistaken. In the field of interpersonal violence, lifetime estimates of violence are a standard inclusion in survey data.

This is in part because experiences of abuse can have long-lasting effects on people's health and wellbeing. Thus, we do not want to know only how many people were assaulted in the past 12 months, but how many have ever been assaulted. The surveys on which the WRC has drawn, both the IVAWS and the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey (PSS), cover both. More generally, lifetime estimates of a particular disease or condition are standard in epidemiology and other disciplines.

'Normal' definitions

Woods comments that anti-violence efforts such as the White Ribbon Campaign give an inflated sense of the extent of violence against women, because 'normal' understandings of violence refer to severe harm and anti-violence efforts do not acknowledge their broader definitions. I have five points in response.

While it is not clear what Woods means by 'normal', perhaps it refers to 'commonsense' definitions held by lay members of the population. Certainly it is true that community understandings of 'violence' or 'domestic violence' centre on severe physical aggression and harm, and these are narrower than the definitions enshrined in the law, used by scholars, and advocated by service providers. Community definitions are shaped by social stereotypes and gender norms. For example, the stereotype is that rape takes place in dark alleys and parks, is committed by strangers and psychopaths, involves weapons, and causes injuries. The reality is that most sexual assaults take place in the home of the victim or the assailant, and most are by people known to the victim. Weapons are rarely used, and coercion is often psychological rather than physical.

Second, Woods is incorrect in suggesting that anti-violence advocates do not acknowledge their 'unusual' – broader and more inclusive – definitions of violence. In fact, most advocates actively encourage such definitions. For example, information regarding the different forms of domestic violence is a routine inclusion in educational materials. Yes, social marketing materials such as television advertisements may not spell out the definitions on which given statistics are based. This is not practical. Nor would it be desirable to construct statistics only for those incidents or acts which do fit community perceptions. This would simply cement narrow understandings of what counts as violence and would under-report the extent of violence in our communities.

Third, such definitions are standard and credible elements in international scholarship. The definitions used in the IVAWS are standard in international scholarship, and the IVAWS is part of an international effort involving two United Nations criminal justice agencies.

Fourth, in assessing the extent of violence against women (or men), relying on narrower 'normal' definitions would be highly problematic. We would fail to count as 'violence' the experiences of women raped by men known to them, women who did not suffer physical injuries, women raped by men without weapons, men raped by women, and so on. When a woman is forced or pressured into sex by a male partner or ex-partner, she may not identify this as 'rape' because it does not meet narrow community definitions, even although it meets legal definitions of sexual assault.

There are good reasons for including these different forms of abusive and harmful behaviour in assessments of violence. Above all, these various behaviours do harm, physical, emotional and/or psychological, to the victim. Naming them as violence is accurate. And it also communicates to the community that such behaviours are both harmful and unacceptable.

Fifth, yes, anti-violence advocates must use methodologically sound and transparent definitions of violence. The PSS provides a useful object lesson in this. It tells us that in the last year, 73,800 adult women experienced at least one incident of physical assault by a current or previous male partner (ABS 2006: 30). But to the extent that we use the term 'domestic violence' to refer to women's experience of chronic abuse and strategies of power and control by a partner or ex-partner, we cannot claim that every woman here is a 'victim of domestic violence'. Some, perhaps many, of these 73,800 women have lived in fear of violent, controlling men. But for others, the physical aggression they experienced was isolated, did not escalate, did not involve injuries, was not accompanied by other strategies of control, or was even reciprocal.

Violence by women and against children

Woods criticises the IVAWS for failing to address violence by women. This is informed by the broader concern that domestic violence efforts focus only on violence by men and neglect violence by women. However, the White Ribbon Campaign is typical of domestic violence efforts in recognising that both men and women can be perpetrators, and both men and women can be victims, of violence.

Feminist scholarship has long recognised women's violence. This began with scholarship on and service responses to violence in lesbian relationships, and it has been extended in feminist work on women's abuse of children, the sexual assault of males, and women's violence against intimate male partners. It is simply false for anyone to claim that feminist or women's efforts

regarding domestic violence assume that only men can be violent and only women can be victims. To give a scholarly example, the feminist journal *Violence Against Women* has had three special issues on women's use of violence. To give a community example, feminist and women's organisations have pioneered services for male survivors of sexual assault.

Like many other forms of men's anti-violence activism, the White Ribbon Campaign focuses on the positive role that men can play in helping to stop men's violence against women. Because of its focus on men's roles in ending violence against women, and its recognition that women are most at risk of violence from men, the WRC focuses on the positive steps that men can take.

Supporters of the WRC would agree with Woods that violence against children is perpetrated by both men and women, although not necessarily that they are equally likely to do so. The PSS described by Woods as 'the 'gold standard' of research on interpersonal violence in Australia', does not support his claim of gender symmetry in assaults on children. Of people who experienced physical abuse before the age of 15, 55.6% were abused by a father or step-father and 25.9% by a mother or step-mother. For people who experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15, fathers, step-fathers and other male relatives made up 43.7% of the perpetrators and mothers and other female relatives made up only 1.7%. In any case, violence against children is not the focus of the WRC.

Violence against males

Woods' document is one of a series of recent commentaries which draw on the PSS to argue that domestic violence against men is almost as common or as serious as domestic violence against women. I have critiqued such claims elsewhere (Flood, in press). Here, I critique the notion that those who focus their efforts on men's violence against women necessarily are declaring that other forms of violence are acceptable or non-existent.

The organisers of the White Ribbon Campaign share Woods' concern about the high rates of violence inflicted on males. As the 2006 Resource Kit states:

Males too are often 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 bashed up, bullied and sexually assaulted... Ending violence to girls and women and ending violence to boys and men are part of the same struggle — to create a world based on equality, justice and non-violence.

We would be thrilled to see a major public campaign in Australia addressing the violence that men experience. This would be an invaluable complement to campaigns such as the WRC. A campaign focused on violence to males would start with the recognition that males are most at risk of violence from other males. Of the 485,400 men in Australia who were physically assaulted in the last 12 months, 89% were assaulted by other males (ABS 2006).

The WRC focuses on men's violence against women because men's violence against women is an important social problem that deserves attention. There are important reasons to have a campaign focused on men's violence against women, rather than having a general campaign addressing all violence.

First, men's violence against women has specific dynamics that should be the focus of specific attention. For example, while the violence that men experience often occurs in public and by perpetrators who are unknown to them, the violence that women experience from men often occurs in relationships and families and by perpetrators known to them.

Second, men's violence against women has specific causes that should be the focus of specific attention. For example, men's violence against women is sustained in part by cultural beliefs (held by a minority) that men have the right to physically punish their female partners, males should be dominant in households, and some women 'ask' to be raped. Similarly, men's violence against other men is sustained in part by cultural beliefs that if a man's honour or status is challenged, he must respond with violence, and violence between males is legitimate and exciting.

If we had a campaign that lumped together these different forms of violence, we would be unable to address their specific features. And our campaign would be ineffective as a result. (For the same reason, campaigns focused on other social problems such as tobacco smoking or drink-driving often focus on specific populations and/or specific forms of this behaviour, as well as giving out the general message that such behaviours are unhealthy or wrong.) The White Ribbon Campaign is compatible with, and would complement, campaigns focused on other forms of violence.

The Personal Safety Survey

Woods' document includes a series of tables he has constructed using the PSS, but some figures are incorrect or misleading. His table 'Perpetrators of physical violence' draws on percentage figures given on page 30 of the PSS, but Woods appears to have misunderstood these figures. For example, using Woods' own table, it would appear that, among men physically assaulted in the last 12 months, 27% were assaulted by a female current or previous partner and 16% by a female stranger. This is incorrect. Instead, these figures refer to assaults as a proportion of all assaults by a female perpetrator. Of men physically assaulted by a female perpetrator, the assailant was a current or previous partner in 27% of incidents. The percentage figures Woods quotes refer to perpetration by a specific sex of perpetrator, not all perpetrators.

If we calculate these figures correctly, to give the breakdown of all perpetrators for physical assaults against men and against women, we arrive at the following:

Perpetrator of physical assault in previous 12 months	Male stranger	Female stranger	Male current or previous partner	Female current or previous partner
Male victims	65%	*3%	—	*4%
Female victims	15%	9%	30%	—

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Personal Safety Survey Australia, ABS, Canberra
 *estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.

Thus, of all males physically assaulted in the previous 12 months, only 3% were assaulted by a female stranger, and only 4% by a current or previous female partner.

Gender isn't everything

Another criticism often offered by anti-feminist advocates is that domestic violence efforts focus too much on gendered causes of violence. Again, this representation is ill-informed. Addressing contextual factors which contribute to relationship violence such as alcohol and substance abuse and poverty is a routine element in contemporary policies and interventions regarding domestic and family violence in Australia. Feminist scholarship on men's violence against women takes it as given that gender alone does not and cannot account for violence, and that explanations and interventions must address the intersections of class, race and ethnicity, and other social divisions and factors (Russo 2001).

The White Ribbon Campaign (WRC) reflects this understanding. As the 2006 Resource Kit states: 'Violence against women also is shaped by poverty and community disintegration, alcoholism and drug abuse, and mental illness.' Other White Ribbon materials, such as the leaflet are too brief to go into the complexity of the causes of men's violence against women, but we do recognise that these causes are multifaceted. At the same time, aspects of traditional male roles, sexist beliefs, and power inequalities are central in explaining violence against women.

Because the WRC is defined by a focus on the positive roles that men can play in helping to stop men's violence against women, it highlights gender, without assuming that gender alone explains this violence. Indeed, if men's violence against women were the simple outcome of maleness, then the central premise of the WRC – that most men are not violent and that most can play a positive role in ending violence – would be void.

We see the WRC as a complement to policies and initiatives addressing other social factors which sustain violence against women, such as poverty and substance abuse. And we encourage people to adopt the campaign to suit their local communities and contexts. For example, members of particular ethnic or spiritual communities who support the WRC have spoken out about the forms of tolerance for violence against women which are specific to, or more common in, their communities.

A 'domestic violence industry'

Finally, Woods offers a hostile and inaccurate slur on those working on the problem of domestic violence. He writes of a 'domestic violence industry', implying that the individuals and organisations working in the field of domestic violence are motivated by financial self-interest rather than a desire to respond to and prevent domestic violence.

The White Ribbon Campaign is self-funding and run almost entirely by volunteers. Those of us involved are committing our own time in the interests of changing what is a significant social problem. More generally, individuals and organisations tackling domestic violence work in a field which is under-resourced and cannot meet demand. For example, refuges for women and children escaping domestic violence routinely are forced to turn victims away every day because their beds are full.

Woods also claims that 'sections of this industry are engaging in the use of dishonesty to further the interests of organisational growth', using 'falsely inflated figures' to this end. Instead, advocates on domestic violence draw on nationally and internationally credible statistics, giving voice to the very real experiences of physical and sexual harm inflicted on thousands of women and men around Australia. Of course our definitions and measurements of violence must be methodologically rigorous, transparent, and informed by contemporary scholarship. The definitions and measurements of violence on which the WRC and other efforts draw meet these criteria.

Woods' piece offers an inaccurate and ill-informed account of the White Ribbon Campaign and the surveys on which it and other domestic violence campaigns draw. His document is a distraction from the very real and urgent work of addressing the violence which women, and men, suffer.

References

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