

Explaining, and preventing, intimate partner violence

Women's Domestic Violence Court Assistance Program (Legal Aid Commission) – Ten year anniversary celebration, Sydney, 8 March 2007.

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10 minutes

Summary

Dr Michael Flood will describe the causes of men's violence against women, and the most effective ways to prevent it.

Introduction

Thank you to the organisers of this Conference for inviting me to speak here. I want to start by acknowledging that the work done by the Women's Domestic Violence Court Assistance Program is really at the frontline of domestic violence work. I have the utmost respect for your work, and I feel both humbled and privileged to be in this forum with you.

Intimate partner violence

I want to start by offering some good news. As far as we can tell, rates of violence against women in Australia have *declined*. Comparing the 2006 survey by the ABS and the last national survey in 1996, smaller proportions of women experienced physical or sexual violence in the last 12 months than in the survey ten years ago. I hasten to add though: the other side of this is that over 440,000 women experienced violence in the last year.

Why might rates of violence have declined? One factor is that community attitudes towards men's violence against women have improved. Another factor may be growing gender equality in relationships and families, reducing men's willingness or ability to enforce their dominance through violence and abuse.

Another factor is represented by the women right here in this room. The presence and influence of domestic violence services has played a role, in allowing women to leave violent relationships and leave them earlier.

On the other hand, there are other social trends which worsen violence against women. These include shifts in family law which are exposing women and children to ongoing contact with violent ex-husbands and fathers, increases in poverty and inequality, and increased exposure to sexist and violence-supportive media in pornography and elsewhere.

Causes and context

So, what do we know about the causes of men's violence against women? I'll focus here on intimate partner violence, as I've written a review of the determinants of intimate partner violence for the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

Knowing about the causes of men's violence against women is essential. If we don't know what's causing it, we can't prevent it.

Three decades of research have identified key determinants of intimate partner violence, including at individual and relational, community and organisational, and societal levels. I will group these causes into three broad clusters.

Gender roles and relations

The most well-documented determinants of men's violence against women can be found in gender norms and gender relations. Whether at individual, community, or societal levels, there are relationships between how gender is organised and violence against women.

Individual gendered attitudes and beliefs

First, men's gender-role attitudes and beliefs. A wide variety of studies have found that men's agreement with sexist, patriarchal, and/or sexually hostile attitudes is an important predictor of their use of violence against women.

Putting this another way, some men are less likely to use violence than other men. Men who *do not* hold patriarchal and hostile gender norms are *less* likely than other men to use physical or sexual violence against an intimate partner.

There is a gender gap in attitudes towards intimate partner violence, and this is shaped by attitudes towards gender. Traditional gender-role attitudes, whether held by women or men, are associated with greater acceptance of violence against women, while egalitarian attitudes are associated with less acceptance of violence.

Violence-supportive attitudes and beliefs are grounded in wider social norms regarding gender and sexuality. In fact, in many ways, violence is part of 'normal' sexual, intimate, and family relations. For example, for many young people, sexual harassment is pervasive, male aggression is expected and normalised, there is constant pressure among boys to behave in sexually aggressive ways, girls are routinely objectified, a sexual double standard polices girls' sexual and intimate involvements, and girls are compelled to accommodate male 'needs' and desires.

Relationships and families

There are important determinants of intimate partner violence in relationships and families. A key factor here is the power relations between partners – are they egalitarian, or dominated by one partner? Cross-culturally, male economic and decision-making dominance in the family is one of the strongest predictors of societies showing high levels of violence against women. Men raised in patriarchal families are more likely to batter their intimate partners than men raised in egalitarian homes.

Another factor at the level of intimate relationships and families is marital conflict. This conflict interacts with the power structure of the family. When conflict occurs in an asymmetrical power structure, there is a much higher risk of violence.

Peer and organisational cultures

Peer groups and organisational cultures are important influences too. Some men have 'rape-supporting social relationships', and this feeds into their use of violence against women. We know this from studies in sport, male residential colleges on campuses, and the military.

For example, you'll get higher rates of sexual violence against young women in contexts characterised by gender segregation, an ethic of male sexual conquest, strong male bonding, high alcohol consumption, use of pornography, and sexist social norms.

Communities, cultures, and nations

There is also international evidence that the gender roles and norms of entire cultures have an influence on intimate partner violence. Rates of men's violence against women are higher in cultures emphasising traditional gender codes, male dominance in families, male honour, and female chastity.

Social Norms and Practices Relating to Violence / Violence Against Women

What about other social norms and practices related to violence?

Domestic violence resources

There is US evidence that when domestic violence resources – refuges, legal advocacy programs, hotlines, and so on – are available in a community and city, women are less vulnerable to intimate partner violence.

Violence in the community

Violence in the community appears to be a risk factor for intimate partner violence. Members of disadvantaged communities may learn a greater tolerance of violence through exposure to violence by their parents, delinquent peers, and others.

Childhood exposure to intimate partner violence

Childhood exposure to intimate partner violence contributes to the transmission of violence across generations. Children, and especially boys, who either witness violence or are subjected to violence themselves are more likely as adults to have violence-supportive attitudes and to perpetrate violence.

And, individuals who grow up in families characterised by unskilled parenting and poor family functioning have are more likely to use violence.

Access to resources and systems of support

There is consistent evidence that women's and men's access to resources and systems of support shapes intimate partner violence.

Low socioeconomic status, poverty, and unemployment

Rates of reported domestic violence are higher in areas of economic and social disadvantage. Disadvantage may increase the risk of abuse because of the other variables which accompany this, such as crowding, hopelessness, conflict, stress, or a sense of inadequacy in some men.

Attitudes play a role here too. One study found that when women are employed, this increases the risk of male partner aggression if their husbands are unemployed, *but only if* the husband held traditional beliefs about his role as provider.

Lack of social connections and social capital, social isolation

Social isolation is another risk factor for intimate partner violence. Among young women, rates of domestic violence are higher for those who aren't involved in schools or don't experience positive parenting and supervision in their families. In adult couples, social isolation is both a cause and a consequence of wife abuse. Women with strong family and friendship networks experience lower rates of violence.

Neighbourhood and community characteristics

There is growing evidence that intimate partner violence is shaped also by neighbourhoods and communities: by levels of poverty and unemployment, and collective efficacy, that is, neighbours' willingness to help other neighbours or to intervene in anti-social or violent behaviour.

In Australia's indigenous communities, interpersonal violence is shaped by histories of colonisation and the disintegration of family and community

Personality characteristics (and antisocial behaviour and peers)

Particular personality characteristics are predisposing factors in men's perpetration of partner violence. Rapists are more likely to have antisocial personality traits, impulsivity, low empathy, and poor social skills. Spouse abusers tend to have more psychological problems than nonviolent men, including borderline, mood disorders, and depression.

Adolescent delinquency – antisocial and aggressive behaviour committed during adolescence – is a predictor of men's later perpetration of sexual assault.

Alcohol and substance abuse

Men's abuse of alcohol or drugs is a risk factor for intimate partner violence. Men may use being drunk or high to minimise their own responsibility for violent and anti-social behaviour. Some men may see drunk women as more sexually available, and may use alcohol as a strategy for overcoming women's resistance.

Situational factors: separation

There are also situational factors that increase the risk of intimate partner violence. For example, there is evidence that women are at risk of increasingly severe violence when separating from violent partners.

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Prevention strategies

Given that intimate partner violence is the outcome of a complex interplay of individual, relationship, social, and cultural factors, violence prevention too must work at multiple levels. There is a spectrum of primary prevention strategies;

- Strengthening Individual Knowledge and Skills;
- Promoting Community Education;
- Educating Providers;
- Fostering Coalitions and Networks;
- Changing Organizational Practices;
- Influencing Policies and Legislation.

Evaluations of primary prevention efforts are sparse. But we do know that some strategies work, and that a wide range of other strategies are promising.

We know that education programs among children and youth in schools and universities can have a positive and lasting impact on their attitudes and behaviours, especially if they are substantial and well-designed. We need other strategies for vulnerable youth, who are homeless, poor, or pregnant.

We know that communications and social marketing campaigns can change attitudes and behaviours, and we should complement these with strategies of bystander intervention and media advocacy.

We know that educating providers can change professional responses to victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence, and we need to complement this with approaches oriented towards primary prevention.

We need strategies targeted at particular groups and sub-cultures: violence-supportive peer groups among young men, sporting sub-cultures, and so on. We need strategies targeted at particular forms of violence, such as sexual coercion in young people's dating relationships and rape in marriage. We need to engage non-violent men in violence prevention, promoting gender-just constructions of masculinity and identity.

We need legal and policy reform, including national and state plans of action to end violence against women and funding to match.

Perhaps most importantly of all, we need strategies of community engagement and community mobilisation. We must build local communities' capacity to respond effectively to violence and mobilise grassroots groups and networks to adopt forms of primary prevention.

Finally, of course, these primary prevention efforts must be complemented by strategies of intervention and by the kinds of inspiring coalface work represented here.

Thank you.