

# **From Violence to Coercive Control: Renaming Men's Abuse of Women**

**A report by Stephen Fisher  
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**White Ribbon**



The White Ribbon Campaign is the largest global male-led movement to stop men's violence against women. It engages and enables men and boys to lead this social change. In Australia, White Ribbon is an organisation that works to prevent violence by changing attitudes and behaviours. The prevention work is driven through social marketing, Ambassadors and initiatives with communities, schools, universities, sporting codes and workplaces.

The White Ribbon Policy Research Series is intended to:

- Present Contemporary evidence on violence against women and its prevention;
- Investigate and report on new developments in prevention locally, nationally and internationally; and
- Identify policy and programming issues and provide options for improved prevention strategies and services.

The White Ribbon Policy Research Series is directed by an expert reference group comprising academic, policy and service experts. At least two reports will be published each year and available from the White Ribbon website at [www.whiteribbon.org.au](http://www.whiteribbon.org.au)

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**Social problems are understood and responded to in terms of how they are named. This naming has direct consequences for those experiencing the issue and those responsible for finding a solution. Naming an issue includes the words that are used to describe a particular social problem; in this case men's violence against women.**

The choice of words is always a political, value-laden decision and based on theoretical premises. There are a number of troubling consequences of this naming process. For example, issues can be named in a way that:

- a) minimises the seriousness of the problem;
- b) makes the issue fit the solution already decided upon;
- c) allows some action on the issue but avoids doing anything that might challenge the benefits of power holders;
- d) makes it appear abstract so that it is hard to know exactly what one is for or against; or
- e) provides equal weight to conflicting views, thereby invoking doubt in the public about what is actually happening.<sup>1</sup>

For any organisation that places emphasis on awareness raising it is crucial that there is a clear sense of awareness *of what* and awareness *to what ends*. When we are told that men should 'end their silence', and start 'speaking out' what exactly should they be talking about in terms of violence prevention?

In the emotional and contested area of men's violence against women there has been a long, complex and often covert struggle over how to name this issue. To name men's violence against women in a way that reflects the complex nature and dynamics of the violence, including the relationship and social context in which a man perpetrates this violence, there are a number of key points that men involved in men's violence prevention should understand. These include the following:

- a) violence is gendered
- b) violence is primarily a social and structural problem, not an individual or medical one
- c) violence involves processes of coercive control rather than only acts causing physical injury
- d) men's physical violence against women is a crime
- e) perpetrators act in dynamic and strategic ways.

Each of these points can be best addressed by taking a profeminist stance on men's violence against women. Such a stance "... acknowledges the gendered nature of this violence; addresses the complex nature of power, status and inequality between women and men in our society; and is committed to eliminating both this violence and its impact to improve the lives of women and children." (Costello 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway.

## Gendering Violence

Most terms used to describe the types of violence women experience hide the everyday reality for many women throughout the world that the perpetrators of this violence against women, and indeed even against other men, *are men*. Gender-neutral language is continually used; for example, family violence, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, violence in the home, sexual assault, and community-based violence. Each of these terms masks the reality that the overwhelming majority of these forms of violence are gendered, that is, they are perpetrated by men upon women. Even when the issue is gendered by referring to *violence against women*, the gender of the perpetrator is often omitted. However, there is also a 'slippage' that occurs sometimes when men's violence against women is named. While men's violence against women is named, there is often a more general call to oppose all forms of violence, whoever is the victim or perpetrator, thereby undermining gendered understandings. For example men speaking out publicly have been heard to say, "I am against violence against women. I believe all women, *and indeed all students, deserve the right to feel safe and secure* on university campuses and move about freely without the threat of violence." This is not to argue against challenging all forms of violence. However, we need to be conscious that in emphasising all forms of violence, we unintentionally may undermine our focus on men's violence against women.

Such a slippage occurs because there is a reluctance to recognise that men's violence against women happens because individual men are supported to perpetrate this violence by the social context of gendered inequalities in a patriarchal society. Ignoring these inequalities is both a symptom and outcome of seeing men's violence against women primarily as a medical or individual issue.

## Medicalising or individualising violence

Many of the ways that men's violence against women is commonly presented either implicitly or explicitly reinforce the idea that there is *something wrong* with the perpetrator (and sometimes the family or even the victim) that needs addressing. It is said that he may have a problem with anger, alcohol, communication skills, conflict resolution, childhood trauma, or even have 'sexist attitudes'.

This way of naming the problem results in solutions that diagnose these perpetrators with some kind of 'disorder' or 'problem' and then devise a therapeutic intervention to 'fix' them. Thus we now have a whole service system dedicated to providing 'behaviour change' programs for men to work on their issues. In this way, strangely, violent male perpetrators become equal clients of the government's service system as their female victims; which explains why we can see publications that refer to 'the needs of those affected by family violence'.

While we do need to shift and challenge the sexist beliefs of men, simply suggesting that we could one by one retrain each Australian man to think differently keeps the focus on individuals. Rather, we must recognise that such attitudes are supported and reinforced in two important ways. Firstly our dominant culture and everyday social norms support men's superiority and women's inferiority. Secondly it is not necessarily the case that men are merely ill-informed. There are distinct advantages for men to continue to hold and act on these beliefs, not the least of which is control over women. So while violence may be perpetrated by individuals this is done within the context of wider social norms.

## Violence as Criminal

Naming men's violence as an individual problem can ignore the fact that much of men's violence against women involves criminal acts. While it is true that there are a range of controlling strategies used by men against women that are not strictly illegal, it is still the case that many are – for example assault, sexual assault, stalking, and breaches of intervention orders. Too often our justice or service system, and community members, disregard the criminal nature of these actions. Imagine the community outrage likely if other types of crime were addressed in the same way as male violence against women, in this hypothetical adaptation of a men's violence against women promotional brochure:

*“Rod's change of behaviour after participating in the program has encouraged him and the local bottle shop manager (a former victim of a hold up where Rod used a sawn-off shotgun) to undertake the trust skills program together as they feel it also will help them move on.*

*Rod was referred to the program when he called crimhelp mensline which provides advice to men on a range of felonies including armed robbery, drug trafficking and car theft.”*

I have only changed the type of crime here and even though men's violence against women is far more dangerous and damaging, most of us would be outraged to consider the idea of supporting armed robbers in such a way which denies the criminality of their violence. However, this approach is commonplace in Australia today. It is partly the denial of such violence as a crime that helps maintain the abuse and degradation of women and supports men who feel safe in the knowledge that they are more than likely going to get away with it.

Even programs and campaigns attempting to reduce men's violence against women often do not recognise its criminality, and instead refer to it as merely 'unacceptable'.

While it is important that men's physical violence against women is appropriately responded to as a crime, this approach on its own has a number of shortcomings. Focussing only on isolated incidents of assault does not help reduce the abuse and degradation experienced by women.

## Avoiding the narrow focus on physical incidents

Another key problem has arisen through the imprecise use of the term 'violence' to describe men's abuse of women. While there has been some recognition that the term encompasses more than physical harmful acts and may refer to things such as emotional, sexual, financial and spiritual violence, the problem is that whenever people say “violence against women” the risk is that they are primarily referring to physical acts that cause bodily injury.

There are two immediate issues with focussing only on the physical forms of violence. First, it has allowed an argument of gender symmetry: that is the argument that women are just as likely to hit men as the reverse. There is now a website devoted to promoting this view in Australia. While there is evidence of women using physical violence, often this can be understood in terms of self-defence. But to argue over the facts about who uses physical violence against whom most often misses the key issue of the way that women experience violence from men as a tool of control or entrapment.

Second, the focus on physical acts allows a distinction to be made between good and bad men. For example, some people may say that most well-meaning men do not perpetrate physical or sexual violence against women. This allows men to believe that if they are not hitting women, then they are not violent and are not the target of violence prevention efforts. In fact many women victims report that they feel most trapped and fearful when the frequency of physical violence *decreases*.

People who work with both victims and perpetrators are aware that violence is one tool among many that the perpetrator uses to gain greater power in the relationship in order to deter or require specific actions from women, win arguments, or demonstrate their dominance. The term *coercive control* usefully describes a whole pattern of strategies employed by a man against a woman. Such strategies occur in an ongoing, even relentless pattern including isolation, intimidation, belittling, humiliation, threats, withholding of necessary resources such as money or transportation, and abuse of the children, other relatives, or even pets. The result for most women is an experience of *entrapment*, of having every aspect of their life controlled. Evan Stark (2009) argues that men's violence against women is best understood as analogous to a form of hostage taking rather than an assault incident.

When violence is understood within this way, even relatively minor acts of physical abuse, for example, a slap on the knee or an arm pinch, can have the impact of reinforcing the woman's trapped state. In fact, rather mundane types of harm are often employed routinely and strategically by perpetrators as they are less likely to be detected by onlookers, authorities, friends and family and make it harder for the woman to seek help or escape.

Focussing only on physical acts of violence also obscures the main means men use to establish control by the micro regulation of everyday behaviours associated with stereotypic female roles, such as how women dress, cook, clean, socialise, care for their children, or perform sexually.

In this way it becomes clearer that men's violence against women is a much more complex issue than often thought. A picture emerges that individual perpetrators are not deviant or simply possess inappropriate attitudes but that their actions are strategic and supported by broader inequalities between men and women throughout our society.

## **Recognising the dynamic and strategic actions of the perpetrator**

So men's violence against women is not simply the action of a bad (or mad) man losing his temper and hitting his 'loved-one'. Nor is the issue one of men simply needing to develop more respect for women. It is true that perpetrators have little respect for women but the central issue is their desire for control over women rather than their lack of respect. The issue is one of systematic power inequalities and a society that supports men's entitlement to a range of gender privileges.

Therefore, it is important to recognise that men who seek to coercively control women do so because the range of benefits are high and the risks, of being caught or stopped, are low. The benefits to men are great: he is more likely to be serviced, have food prepared for him, have the house cleaned, have children prevented from disturbing him, have sex on demand. He is likely to gain material benefits, including money and other resources. He can keep her under control to prevent any risk she may have affairs or seek support from friends or family.

Men use a range of techniques to achieve coercive control. One of the most valuable and commonly used techniques is the disguise. This means that men will behave and present one way when abusing the woman in private (a terroriser), and very differently when in public, at work or socialising (a charmer). This ability to put on a disguise not only prevents people detecting his abuse but also acts to confuse and isolate the woman further. She thinks, 'maybe there's something wrong with me because he's acting so nice with them.' In fact in social situations he is cleverly able to act both as a respectable member of society while sending secret intimidating signals to the woman that only she will understand. For example, in this American example even a sweatshirt can be a weapon:

*Cheryl was the star pitcher for her factory softball team. After several innings when she pitched well, her boyfriend, Jason, would come onto the field and offer Cheryl her sweatshirt, saying, "Darling, you're cold. Why don't you put this on?" To the dismay of her teammates, Cheryl would "fall apart." Cheryl's teammates interpreted Jason's gesture as caring. But to Cheryl, the message was that she had violated an agreement not to make him jealous. The sweatshirt was his warning that, because of her infraction, she would have to cover up her arms after he beat her. Cheryl's "mistake" was to draw attention to herself by striking out the opposing batters. She quickly corrected this fault by falling apart. She was also too frightened to pitch well.*

(Stark 2009, p.229)

The particularly private nature of such 'cleverness' makes it very hard for many of us even to detect men's violence against women. Even worse, some men are able to express attitudes supportive of gender equality and respect for women while continuing to perpetrate abuse. Many well-intentioned education programs make the mistake of assuming that positive attitude change is the best sign of success. Instead we need to be careful to use measures that are indicative of improvements in women's real safety and rights resulting from men's actual daily relations with women.

Going along with such strategic thinking is the ability men have to justify or minimise the harm of their actions. As a result even the learning from a well-structured and engaged session on men's violence against women can have unintended consequences: "... after an hour-long session, one of the male participants thanked the facilitator and said: "It is very helpful to talk about rape. Some men here have raped women. By talking about it, men won't feel bad about what they have done" (EngenderHealth 2002).

The dominant sense of manhood in Australia is built on the idea of being tough, in control, competitive and smart. Coercive control is the logical outcome of enacting this unfortunately commonplace form of masculinity.

Therefore, men who are committed to supporting this important work must continuously strive to listen to and read the work of feminists who have worked tirelessly for decades for gender equality.

## **Opportunities for effective advocacy**

Recognising the complexity of men's violence against women and naming it more accurately gives men who advocate for women's rights for freedom and safety a much clearer focus for action. Speaking out now can move from a vague call to action to specifically:

- a) Ensuring that all work clearly names the gender of both the perpetrator and victim of violence;
- b) Challenging explanations or responses that tend to medicalise or individualise the issue;
- c) Recognising the criminality of much of men's violence against women;
- d) Providing a more accurate and broader understanding that violence is one strategy of coercive control;
- e) Pointing out the strategic and covert ways that perpetrators disguise their actions.

Finally, a proper understanding of men's violence against women is important for effective action.



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