



Men's
Referral
Service



Analysis

September 2011

The National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children: the proposed responses to men are an opportunity lost

Danny Blay

The National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children marks a significant step towards co-ordinating and distilling Australian efforts to end the scourge of so many relationships and families. Numerous advances in conceptual and practical responses, from legislation through to skill sharing and accountability of practice will potentially now come to the fore to provide consistent and safe responses that will benefit all Australians.

However, the Plan's references to responses to men who use violence are somewhat disappointing.

Limitations

Effective responses to men who use violence towards women and children are crucial in any systematised plan. Quality practice in this field requires such responses be based on advice and recommendations from experienced practitioners, research and evidence, and consultation with a range of stakeholders, including women's family violence workers. Quality practice also suggests a need to consider a range of different response models that are integrated and that adhere to defined standards of practice and principles that centrally locate the safety of women and children.

The Plan's conceptualisation of systemic responses to men who use violence towards women and family members is particularly narrow in terms of defining what such responses are or should be, and how they would be judged as being effective. From the outset, the Plan states that a robust legal response is required to prevent violence against women, suggesting that 'stronger policing leading to arrest, consistent sentencing of perpetrators, and serious consequences for perpetrators if they breach orders.' However, not only is there a dearth of research that suggests only strong legal action can stop men using violence towards women, statistically, the vast majority of men who use violence in this context do not ever come into contact with the law. This is not an indictment on policing or judicial efforts. Rather, it only highlights that, given the very nature of violence against women, it is hidden.

Law enforcement should always play a crucial and increasing role in violence prevention, however a sole focus on the law and its enforcement simply dismisses the numerous other opportunities available to engage men in a co-ordinated programmatic response that can work towards men's (former) partner's and their children's safety. Indeed, it could be argued that a sole reliance on the criminal justice system places a disproportionate responsibility on women experiencing violence to take action (such as calling the police or applying for court orders), potentially making them even more unsafe without there being any other quality processes that engage men in attitudinal and behaviour change. It dismisses opportunities to engage with men who use violence in ways that are professional, precise, accountable and transparent, and particularly address issues of dangerous underlying attitudes and beliefs. Indeed, questions need to be asked about whether the law itself has a capacity to invite men to consider their own violence-supportive attitudes, as well as sexism, misogyny and men's sense of entitlement, rather than relying on men simply considering violence against women and children as 'illegal'.

By definition, a reliance on a criminal justice response situates the response within a context of laws being broken, and offenders being sanctioned. While it can be argued that in some circumstances this can automatically lead to the increased safety of women and children, such as a man being incarcerated, it does not guarantee it in the short term, or importantly, the long term, and certainly does not imply any capacity for behaviour and attitudinal change on its own. This is especially the

case if specialist gender-based violence prevention programs are not part of a custodial or community-corrections sentence.

An over-reliance on a criminal justice response also narrows the capacity to determine levels of success in preventing future violence. That is, measuring recidivism in the context of the law does not provide for other measurements that may be outside a legal context, and demands that future violent behaviour must come to the attention of the criminal justice system. Not all forms of violence against women are illegal, but nevertheless they can be enormously damaging, they can escalate, and they should always require a response. Indeed, evidence suggests that women are often reluctant to report violence to authorities if they have been threatened if they do so, if they believe that their (former) partner may be incarcerated as a result of breaching an order, are over-reliant on their (former) partner for financial support, or if they are concerned about access to suitable accommodation, or even the safety of their children. The reliance on a criminal justice response in this context does not provide any other opportunities for people to seek support to stop the violence. Furthermore, the fundamental aim of Men's Behaviour Change Programs or similar family violence offender programs is not to reduce recidivism. Rather, reducing recidivism is a strategic objective that works towards the fundamental aim of stopping the violence.

Community-based responses

The fundamental aim of community-based efforts to engage and work with men who use violence and abuse towards women and children, such as Victoria's Men's Behaviour Change Programs, is about working towards the safety and the basic and essential human rights of women and children in a range of contexts, from preventing it from happening to responding swiftly if and when it does. This enshrines policies and practice that consider and respond to various aspects of women's and children's safety, regardless if men have come into contact with police or courts.

Community-based Men's Behaviour Change Program networks, as an example, not only provide opportunities for men to engage in a process to address and stop their use of violent behaviour, but already demonstrate an important capacity to link in better with corrective services and justice approaches in general, as well as prevention activities. While there is considerable overlap and some shared language between approaches, there are also separate and distinct research literatures and conceptual models that guide each of these sectors, and there is considerable potential for them to learn from each other. For example, the Caledonian system¹ demonstrates an approach that integrates a number of these perspectives.

Recidivism versus behaviour change and safety

In the experience of men's behaviour change workers the best indicators of 'success' in terms of men stopping their use of violence comes from the reflections of (former) partners, and in a range of contexts. Partner contact aspects of Men's Behaviour Change Programs invite (former) partners to discuss their experiences – often for the first time. Women are provided realistic information about the programs and their limitations, and are provided with referrals to specialist support systems. Partner contact provides the best opportunities for workers to gauge any levels of change, and, vitally, levels of risk, and act upon them. It also provides women with space and safety to consider various forms of violence and coercion that ordinarily are not on the legal process radar.

For example, the *What Counts as Success*² report suggests that one of the vital criteria as determined by female (former) partners is a notion of 'expanded space for action'. This is described as enabling women and children to cease having to modify or adapt their behaviour in an effort to keep themselves safe from a (former) partner/father who is prone to the use of violence. Regardless of any legal consequence, women and children's capacity to live freely and without the threat of violence is a much more realistic and valuable measurement of whether an intervention has worked, and to what extent. Additionally, a focus on recidivism in narrow terms can also perpetuate the situation where children remain as silent victims.

While the initial work of holding a man accountable for his use of violence may rest with police and courts, the continuing and sometimes long-term work in providing opportunities for men to consider

¹ http://issuu.com/stirling/docs/caledonian_system_-_theory_manual_25_may_2010-1-

² http://www.respect.uk.net/data/files/respect_research_briefing_note_1_what_counts_as_success.pdf

non-violent ways of relating and safer and more respectful attitudes towards women rests with community-based workers with the skills, expertise and time to provide a quality and necessary service. A man's involvement in a Men's Behaviour Change Program can often lead to a reduction in the likelihood of recidivism, thereby reducing demand for police and court actions. Alternatively, workers are in a prime position to act upon perceived or actual risks that would potentially circumvent future violence. Additionally, engagement with a Men's Behaviour Change Program can lead to other useful referrals after violence has ceased, such as child contact processes for those programs that have the resources to innovate carefully with this work, and through parenting after violence components of overall program delivery – programs that already exist within the broader context of men's behaviour change work.

Co-ordinated and engaging responses can also be useful in achieving short-term changes in some aspects of men's behaviour, even if not sustained or covering all aspects of his violent and controlling behaviours, so as to provide some breathing space for women to reflect on her own narratives about a (former) partner's violence. It creates better opportunities for women to enhance personal safety plans, discover their own agency, develop more social supports, and make informed decisions about the future.

Ultimately, policies, research studies, minimum standards and quality practice guides that focus predominantly on reducing recidivism sell the potential of male family violence intervention programs short. In the case of research, it can lead to a potential under-reporting of the benefits of these programs. It can also perpetuate the situation where partner contact, in terms of the provision of resources, is seen as an accessory of men's behaviour change work rather than as an essential component. Indeed, partner contact work is often conceptualised as a way of supporting the 'main work' done in programs with the men, rather than the work with the men in the groups sometimes being a way to support the more fruitful work that the partner contact worker is doing with partners.

The very definition of 'success' in the context of working with men who use violence needs to be accurately defined and tested. The *What Counts as Success*³ report emphasises that the first step of the very large multi-stage, multi-site long-term outcome study of UK programs co-ordinated by the Respect organisation was to invest in a significant research project that determined the success criteria. It suggests that recidivism in the eyes of the law is insufficient to gauge whether violence has decreased or ceased.

Networking and collaboration

A concerted, consistent and accountable response to men's use of violence towards women and children requires the co-operation and engagement of various stakeholders. It is these individuals and organisations who can collaborate and investigate levels of risk and to whom men can be accountable for their violence. The Plan does not provide enough scope in its definition of accountability in the context of men's use of violence. What seems to be absent is a range of accountability measures that are vital in stopping men's violence. It is vital that we situate accountability to women and children centrally to any conceptual response to violence against women, as well as accountability to the broader community, and that of services and agencies, rather than determining if the law has been broken.

There is a desperate need for research to measure how well responses to men who use violence are supported within integrated and co-ordinated family violence service delivery and broader community responses. Without accurate descriptions of the complexities of such responses and potential outcomes, the Plan is an opportunity lost.

Danny Blay is the Executive Officer of No To Violence, the Male Family Violence Prevention Association of Victoria, and the Men's Referral Service, and has wide experience and post-graduate qualifications in Male Family Violence Telephone Counselling, Men's Behaviour Change Group Facilitation and male family violence prevention training.

³ http://www.respect.uk.net/data/files/respect_research_briefing_note_1_what_counts_as_success.pdf