

Backlash and Beyond

Shifts in Community Attitudes to Domestic Violence

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This article explores some of the reasons for recent shifts in community attitudes, particularly an increase in the number of people who believe that women are as aggressive as men. This change in attitudes was revealed in a recent VicHealth survey (read more about the survey results in our regular section *Figuring Violence*, p.30). The article then looks at potential responses to these shifts for those involved in community education to reduce and prevent domestic violence.

For the feminist anti-violence movement in Australia, recent decades have been focused on 'breaking the silence' about violence against women. As the VicHealth (2006) survey of community attitudes shows, the silence has mostly been broken. Many in the community are aware of the prevalence of domestic violence, its seriousness, and that it is a criminal offence. But the survey also suggests that other shifts have occurred that indicate a decrease in support for a gendered view of domestic violence.

Perhaps the survey's most striking finding is the growing number of people in Victoria who see women as likely to be manipulative and violent towards men. The number of people who believed that domestic violence is perpetrated equally by women and men has doubled since 1995 (now approximately 20 per cent believe this). And almost half of the survey's respondents believe that in custody cases women invent claims of domestic violence.

A news item in *The Sunday Age* (20/8/2006) reported that the survey's results show that 'radical men's groups appear to be winning the propaganda war' because they have successfully promoted the idea that violence is gender-equal (Gough 2006). Sociology Lecturer Shane Hopkinson writes that he has also noticed a recent shift in views (2006). He says that female students frequently reject feminist perspectives – every year 'there is a more concerted push to challenge the idea that violence is a gendered problem, and less and less willingness to accept the idea that domestic violence is a problem of male violence particularly' (2006: 4).

This change flies in the face of a vast body of research from a wide variety of sources (including population surveys, police, hospital and service statistics), which consistently demonstrate the inaccuracy of the perception that violence is equally perpetrated by women and men. Most recently the 2005 *Personal Safety Survey* undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) revealed that since the age of 15, some 16 per cent of women had experienced an incident of violence by a current or previous partner, compared to 5.8 per cent of men (figures calculated from ABS 2006)¹. Other studies find that even when men and women report experiences of domestic violence, the context and impact of this is often different. For example, women are more likely than men to be injured and to report fearing for their lives (see Dobash and Dobash 2004). Nor is there any evidence that false allegations are often made by women in custody cases [see for example Flood 2005].

The Men's Rights 'Backlash'

A major reason for this shift in community views is the influence of men's and fathers' rights groups, which have been intent on proving that women are equally capable of violence and that men are unfairly being blamed by 'femi-nazi' feminists (see for example, Woods 2006). To support their claims, these groups make selective use of statistics from population surveys and cite narratives of desperate fathers suffering at the hands of manipulative wives who make

1. I acknowledge that this survey has limitations in measuring what could be called 'domestic violence'. This survey, like many others, simply counts acts of violence without considering whether such acts are part of the pattern of fear and intimidation that we understand to be 'domestic violence'. For more on this see the article in the Summer 2006 *DVIRC Quarterly* by Michael Flood (2006.).

up stories of violence to keep men from their children. These groups have found a receptive audience among journalists who are looking for fresh controversies around this issue. Their claims have been compatible with the socially conservative agenda of the federal government, which has been keen to reinstate 'the family' and traditional roles at the centre of public policy, and has removed almost all of the advocacy mechanisms for women within government (Summers 2003). The federal government's acceptance of claims by fathers' rights groups has resulted in recent changes to family law².

But the shift may also be linked to factors other than the activity of vocal anti-feminist men's groups and a conservative government. It's also connected, in complex and contradictory ways, to broader social, political and economic changes, shifts in views of feminism and representations of women.

Equality and the 'New Woman'

In part, this shift may be related to a general acceptance that in a 'post-feminist' world, women and men are now, more or less, equal. Compared to 40 years ago, women have greater financial independence, and freedom to pursue education and careers (though there is still a long way to go for women to achieve genuine equality in status or in the sharing of domestic or paid labour). Further, feminist-inspired images of the 'new woman' – successful, financially independent, career-oriented, attractive – have become influential in popular culture. Such images were promoted in the 1990s by well-known liberal feminists like Naomi Wolf (1993), who in her book *Fire with Fire* coined the term 'power feminism' as a contrast to what she saw as the pessimistic 'victim feminism' of

2. Under new amendments to the *Family Law Act 1975*, a claim that someone has experienced domestic violence must be 'reasonable', and new penalties have been introduced for 'false allegations' of domestic violence.

the past. Advertisers have successfully exploited the marketing potential of these 'girl-power' representations – as has been recently demonstrated by the enormous popularity of the Bratz dolls for primary school-age girls (Bratz are sexy, trendy, multi-ethnic bad girls who want it all – 'brats', as the name implies – quite different to Barbie with her demure sugar-and-spice sexuality). Recently, popular constructions of women, particularly young women, emphasise sexual power and 'raunchy' sexual expression modelled on images of porn stars and strippers (Levy 2005).

All of this may have translated into a common impression that women now behave 'more like men' in relationships – and therefore may be equally likely to be violent. Such a view of women's relative power may also be reflected by the slight increase, compared to the 1995 survey, in numbers of participants in the 2006 VicHealth survey who agree that 'it's hard to understand why women stay in violent relationships' (Taylor and Mouzos 2006).

Girl-powered Bullying?

The shift towards seeing women as equally violent in relationships may also be linked to the recent flood of media reports about an increase in bullying, road-rage and violence by young women. Jessica Ringrose (2006) argues that a 'moral panic' has emerged about this, and that in public consciousness, the image of the vulnerable girl has now been replaced by the 'mean girl'.

A new body of research has emerged looking at the phenomenon of 'reactive aggression' – a particularly 'female' form of aggression, based on psychological abuse, isolation and rejection. According to Ringrose, in the media, 'the problems associated with girls' aggression are somehow generalized to all girls and then

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equated with issues of domestic violence' (2006: 23)³. There are complex reasons for the slight increase in female aggression (including, according to Ringrose, race- and class-based motivations that are often overlooked). But the simplistic response by many commentators is that it is due to the influence of feminism – 'girl-power' has 'gone too far' and encouraged young women to behave 'like boys'. Few express concerns about far higher levels of boys' and men's violence – it is as if such behaviour is simply 'natural' or inevitable for men.

Negative Views about Feminism

The swing in views may also be linked to negative perceptions of feminism itself. As a VicHealth report on the factors influencing attitudes to violence against women notes (Flood and Pease 2006), and as an array of feminist commentators have lamented, the ability of feminism to bring about attitudinal change has waned in recent years. This may have affected attitudes towards men's perpetration of violence and women's victimisation.

The federal government in the past ten years has played a role in undermining the influence of feminism. It has promoted in public discourse an 'us and them' divide between feminists and others on the left (who are constructed as 'politically correct', educated elitists), and 'ordinary' Australian men and women. But there may be other factors in the decline in feminist influence in Australia.

Young Women, Feminism and Love

Debates among feminists about this 'crisis' in feminism have focused on younger women. Several studies suggest that they

tend to be reluctant to identify as a 'feminist' (see for example Bulbeck 2006)⁴.

In the 1990s this debate was fuelled by Ann Summers' 'Letter to a younger generation', in which she said that younger women appeared ungrateful for the choices created for them by an earlier generation of feminists, and wondered why a young woman didn't seem to share 'a responsibility for widening those choices for herself and her generation' (1993: 510). In the heated public discussions that ensued, some feminists appeared to blame young women for focusing on individual rather than collective advancement; while others blamed what they saw as a dogmatic or pessimistic style of feminism expressed by an older generation, and argued that media-savvy young feminists do activism in new ways (for example, Lumby 1996; Bail 1996).

In these debates about younger women's apparent apathy, commentators often ignored the political and structural disadvantages faced by a younger generation in an increasingly cynical and insecure world (Davis 1997). A focus on risk and fear dominates media and public discourses about young people. The impact of this was revealed by a 2006 national survey of 14,700 Australians aged 11-24, which revealed: 'The range of concerns – from stress to abuse to depression to suicide to body image – suggest new levels of turbulence affecting the already challenging transition from youth to adulthood' (Mission Australia 2006). Perhaps it's no wonder many young women prefer to concentrate on self-improvement and have a pessimistic view about the effectiveness of political action.

3. The Australian evidence for an increase in female aggression is mixed. For example, a recent report *Crime in Australia* found that 'females made up 22 per cent of all offenders in 1995-96 and 20 per cent in 2003-04' and, for females 'the rate for assault rose by 33 per cent, compared with 4 per cent for males during this period'. Young women were the majority of offenders (Australian Institute of Criminology 2006)

4. Bulbeck's survey of middle-class young people in ten countries found that about 40 per cent of females (in every country except Japan) identify as a 'feminist'. Support for this statement was higher among Indian, Vietnamese and Thai young women than it was for Australians and Canadians. Females in Japan were the least likely to identify as feminists (Bulbeck 2006).

A resistance to feminist theories about men's violence towards women may also relate to a desire to maintain an optimistic view of relationships. Heather Fraser (2003) argues that social workers have given inadequate attention to the role played by narratives of love in women's lives. She says that 'second-wave feminists tended to focus on the most harmful features of heterosexual love relationships' (2003: 280). Fraser argues that narratives of love particularly appeal to women who lack material resources or who are marginalised: 'in a life punctuated with hardship, love can be very appealing since it offers the possibility of excitement, comfort, company and the recognition of one's worth' (2003: 286).

This may at some level explain why women, and particularly young women, are seeking hopeful, positive images of relationships, and are reluctant to perceive them as potentially unequal, or to see women as vulnerable to violence.

Feminist Theorising about Women's Violence

As discussed, images of women and girls as powerful and potentially violent have become prevalent in popular culture. This highlights the importance of feminist theories that can acknowledge the complexities of power in intimate relationships, and that can explain and place in perspective violence by women.

Over the past decade or more, feminists have begun to identify some of the limitations of early feminist theorising and activism around violence against women, particularly explanations that appeared to locate the causes of such violence only in 'men' and 'patriarchy'. For example, after undertaking a review of anti-rape education since the 1970s, Moira Carmody writes that 'the universalization of men as violent and women as passive recipients of violence is still a pervasive contemporary feminist theory' (2005: 468). She, and others, argue that there has been a tendency to position

men simply as 'dangerous' and to present a 'totalizing concept of femininity which robs women of any agency or ability to exert power, express desire, take control, resist, prevent or avoid their victimization in intimate sexual encounters with men' (2005: 468).

Chris Atmore argues in DVIRC's (2001) Discussion Paper *Men as Victims of Domestic Violence* that acknowledging violence by women can be a challenge for domestic violence advocates. She says: 'It is understandable that some women and feminists working against the vaster and seemingly intractable spectrum of violence against women feel threatened by claims about male victimisation' (2001: 61). There are good reasons to be suspicious about the agenda behind such claims. For example, it has seemed relatively easy for services for men to obtain funding, which can then compromise services for women. There's also a risk that the ground gained in promoting gender-based explanations of violence will be lost, particularly under a socially-conservative government.

Several feminist theorists have begun to research women's violence, while also maintaining an acknowledgement of the high prevalence of violence against women. This is important, as to simply ignore or dismiss claims of women's violence and men's victimisation may increasingly have costs for feminism in the current climate. Research demonstrates that some women are abusive – in heterosexual and lesbian relationships – even if statistically most domestic violence is perpetrated by men (Atmore 2001). An analysis that focuses on gender or power is important but doesn't present the whole picture, and when presented as the only explanation it can mean that a single case example of a man suffering abuse or violence perpetrated by a woman is taken to prove that feminist understandings are simply incorrect.



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Lee Fitzroy has commented that current theorisations of women ‘fail to incorporate more complex analyses of women’s differing levels of power, their experiences and choices’ (1998). Her research reveals that in some cases women can be both victims (of male violence) and perpetrators (of violence against their children). In searching for an explanation, we need to consider the interaction of individual as well as social and cultural factors – ‘it makes sense to incorporate critical psychological readings of experiences of violence, deprivation and marginalisation into feminist analyses of violence *per se*’ (Fitzroy 2005: 23). Many others have argued for an analysis which understands the contribution of factors other than gender, such as class, race, colonisation, ability and age (see the article by Bob Pease and Susan Rees in this edition of the *DVIRC Quarterly* for more on an ‘intersectional’ analysis).

Importantly, acknowledging cases of men’s victimisation ‘does not mean sacrificing a political understanding of the pervasiveness of male domination of women, but rather perhaps complicating it’ – and realising that ‘how we think about violence can itself be part of the problem’ (Atmore 2001: 62).

Community Education and Prevention Campaigns

Changes in community attitudes raise questions about what strategies are effective in community education and prevention activities to reduce violence against women. The challenge is to develop strategies that are not easily rejected by a community that has a heightened sensitivity to the potential for women to have, and misuse, power in relationships.

Recent research with young people provides clues about the kinds of prevention strategies likely to be effective. A 2006 study by the University of Western Sydney and the NSW Rape Crisis Centre asked young people about their experiences of

sex, and their views on sex education and violence prevention (Carmody and Willis 2006). The findings reinforced the need for violence prevention education that doesn’t just focus on risk avoidance and awareness-raising about the danger of sexual relationships for women. Both young men and women were interested in skill-based education that will improve relationships and communication (Carmody and Willis 2006)⁵. Carmody says anti-violence education should acknowledge sexual pleasure and power for women, and focus on ‘promoting and developing ethical non-violent relating’ (2005: 478).

Prevention and education approaches can also benefit from an awareness of popular culture and generational shifts in representations of women. Heyward and Drake (1997) have argued that critiquing and re-working popular culture is an important feminist strategy. For example, rather than reacting to ‘girl-power’ or ‘raunch culture’ as necessarily regressive steps for feminism, it may indeed be a case of two steps forward and one step back. Kara Jesella (2005) believes that the emphasis on women’s sexual power and desire has been positive, as it has the potential to alter traditional views of women as sexually passive and vulnerable. Further, Geethika Jayatilaka argues that the dominance of the ‘girl-power’ image has demonstrated that ‘feminism could be repackaged and sold. Instead of looking down our noses at this phenomenon we need to think about how to harness and use it’ (2001).

Social marketing campaigns targeting men or women do have to walk a fine line between reaching audiences in ways which connect with the realities of their lives, and challenging traditional

5. Similar findings came out of research in 2002 funded by the federal government. These findings were used as the basis for the proposed *No Respect No Relationship* campaign, which DVIRC contributed to. This campaign was cancelled by the government in 2003. Unfortunately the research results were never released.

gendered power relations. This can mean finding a balance between pragmatism and ideology. The dilemmas involved in reaching a mainstream audience were recently highlighted by controversy over the pro-feminist White Ribbon Campaign's advertising. In 2006 the campaign attempted to capitalise on public interest in fatherhood to encourage men to take action to stop violence against women. Adverts that said, for example 'prepared to give your right arm to protect your daughter?' (accompanied by an image of an amputation knife) were followed by the message that men can wear a white ribbon to help stop their daughters becoming 'one of the 57% of Australian women who suffer from violent male abuse in their lifetime'. But the campaign attracted controversy. Many felt that its message about men's violence against women and girls got lost in the sensational and graphic imagery. Some feminists felt it simply reinforced dominant stereotypes of men as heroes and protectors of women. In contrast, those defending the campaign felt that, even if this were true, the confronting images at least encouraged men to take action and reinforced a message of care for women and children⁶.

Working with Pro-feminist Men

Engagement with pro-feminist men's groups to address male violence is another useful strategy for feminists. American pro-feminist activist Jackson Katz argues that 'anti-sexist men's voices can change the cultural conversation, because they can say things about men's violence that most women cannot or will not, say' – primarily because men cannot be written off easily as anti-male. Katz also points out that, (unfortunately for women) 'Even more to the point, some men will listen to other men's opinions about this subject more readily than they will listen to women's' (Katz, 2006: 76). Pro-feminist academic Michael Flood says men 'already feel blamed and defensive about the issue

6. See the blog on the White Ribbon campaign website www.whiteribbonday.org.au for more of the debates.

of men's violence', and this can be reduced by 'approaching men as partners in solving the problem rather than as perpetrators of the problem' (2006: 32).



Men can also point out that males are not most at risk of violence by women, but by other men (Flood 2006: 32). For example, according to the *Personal Safety Survey*, of the 485,400 men who had been physically assaulted in the previous 12 months, almost 89 per cent of the perpetrators of these physical assaults were male (calculated from data from ABS 2006: 30). The risk of experiencing violence from other men is a major problem in men's lives. This could be usefully addressed by men's groups.

Conclusion

Keeping in touch with political and social changes and shifting discourses in popular culture is essential for feminist anti-violence advocates. Attempting to grapple with and respond to these shifts can make feminist theorising and community education activities to prevent domestic violence more difficult and complex, but also richer and more effective.

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'Now I know it wasn't my fault'

Information for adults who were sexually abused as children

This is an updated version of DVIRC's earlier pamphlet for survivors of child sexual abuse. It aims to assist people to understand sexual abuse, and provides an introduction to some of the steps that can be taken towards recovering and finding support.

It includes information about common feelings experienced by adults who remember being abused as children. It also provides ideas on what may help, including quotes and advice from people who have experienced sexual abuse.

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