

## **"Real men don't hit women": Constructing masculinity in the prevention of violence against women**

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### **Introduction**

In 2014, the United Nations Development Program Goodwill Ambassador Antonio Banderas recorded videos in English and Spanish that were distributed online in support of the United Nations efforts to end violence against women (VAW) (UNDP, 2014). In an article headlined 'Real men don't hit women', Banderas stated:

As a male and as an artist I believe that women are a source of life - and poetry. Not even with a rose petal should women be offended or abused ... Hitting or abusing a woman is an act of cowardice. Real men don't hit women.

The video was shot in Chile's Atacama desert. The location dramatizes the metaphorical links Banderas makes between femininity and the nurturance of life. Presumably, then, the desert represents a wasteland of masculinity in the absence of the supposedly life-giving element of femininity. The reverence for women expressed by Banderas is not premised on a shared humanity or equality but rather on essentialist differences between men and women, and the value of femininity as synonymous with motherhood. The invocation of the rose frames the protection of women in terms of romantic love and heterosexual desire, both capitalising on but also advancing Banderas' public image as recently single movie star and heart throb. Banderas' sentiment that 'real men don't hit women' has been imposed over his image on the [www.heforshe.org](http://www.heforshe.org) website of UN Women, and serves as the primary message of a prevention campaign featuring Banderas circulated on social media.

With the ascendancy of VAW prevention as an international public health priority, there are now a range of campaigns and programs that aim to reduce VAW at the population level by changing social norms and attitudes regarding gender and violence. As Banderas' campaign illustrates, many of these activities foreground and endorse rather than challenge existing

norms about masculinity. This paper examines the dependence of many VAW primary prevention campaigns and programs on regressive notions of 'real masculinity'. It describes how the scope of VAW primary prevention has narrowed over time from a dual focus on structural gender inequality and gender norms to a largely normative approach that subsumes gender inequality to gender norms. This has resulted in an abstract notion of gender norms decontextualized from the social, economic and political contexts in which they take shape and meaning. This inattention to the structural determinants of VAW has promoted a 'one-dimensional' (Marcuse, 1964) account of masculinity that, the paper argues, potentially reinforces violence-supportive attitudes and obscures the social conditions and stressors associated with VAW. The paper advocates for a critical rather than normative theory of masculinity that directs equivalent attention to structural as well as normative interventions. This would supplement prevention campaigns and direct participation programs with an agenda of mobilisation against those social, economic and political processes that increase risk of VAW perpetration and victimisation.

### **The shift away from gender inequality in VAW prevention**

The VAW primary prevention agenda emerged in the late 80s and early 90s out of an international confluence of feminist activism and public health efforts to reduce violence against women and children (Heise, Pitanguy, & Germain, 1994). Momentum grew throughout the 1990s culminating in the 2002 publication of the World Report on Violence and Health by the World Health Organisation (Etienne G. Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002). The World Report identified that VAW was preventable and called for sustained action that 'promotes non-violence, reduces the perpetration of violence, and changes the circumstances and conditions that give rise to violence in the first place' (Krug, Dahlberg et al., 2002, p. 16). Activities that 'aim to prevent violence before it occurs' by targeting risk or protective factors were defined in the report as 'primary prevention' (p 15). In order to facilitate the development of programs and policies that prevent VAW, the World Report recommended the use of a theoretical framework that identified risk or protective factors at four levels of the social ecology: the individual, their relationships, their community and society.

The World Report emphasised the need to address gender inequality and gender norms simultaneously. Research into the determinants of VAW is ongoing, but the available data suggests that neither gender norms nor gender inequality alone have a determinative effect on

the prevalence of VAW but rather they operate through long causal chains, interacting dynamically and in complex ways across the social ecology (Wall, 2014). However efforts to address the two simultaneously have been stymied in the Australian context, where targeting gender norms has proven to be a more palatable method for preventing VAW than addressing structural gender inequality. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the integration of gender equality into VAW prevention frameworks was recommended but ultimately not implemented (Nancarrow, 2011). By the mid-1990s, the conservative Howard government had reframed VAW as a relationship problem to be addressed by counselling and mediation, rather than a social issue requiring a range of robust public policy responses (Murray, 2005). During this time, VAW prevention efforts were focused primarily on ad hoc educational ‘risk avoidance’ workshops for young people, particularly girls and women, alongside occasional awareness raising campaigns as well as treatment for victims and perpetrators (see Carmody & Carrington, 2000 for a discussion of the limitations of these approaches). There are a number of potential explanations for this turn away from structural gender inequality in the prevention of VAW. The proposition that VAW is a cultural problem to be prevented and treated largely by improved education and changes to attitudes dovetailed with neoliberal characterisations of social problems in terms of individual maladjustment and ‘bad’ family and community cultures. Other factors that may have contributed to this focus on gender norms in VAW prevention include the cultural turn in feminist thought towards the symbolic and discursive dimensions of women’s oppression, potentially occluding the contribution of structural inequality (see Fraser, 2005).

While international human rights and public health documents have emphasized (if they haven’t examined in detail) the relationship between gender norms and gender inequality, prominent VAW primary prevention frameworks in Australia have struggled to maintain this balance. Instead, they have tended to marginalise structural forms of inequality by conflating them with, or subsuming them to, gender norms. Indeed the very notion of structural inequality appears to have been lost in some cases. An examination of two key Australian prevention frameworks from VicHealth and Our Watch is illustrative. The prominent 2007 VAW primary prevention framework published by VicHealth (a statutory health promotion body in the state of Victoria) claimed to identify the ‘social and economic determinants of violence’ (VicHealth, 2007). However the determinants identified in the document are cultural rather than economic, pertaining to gender roles, identities, norms and cultures. Economic and political factors are instead relegated to second tier status and labelled

‘contributing factors’ but not determinants of violence. This normative focus is sustained in the document’s discussion of gender inequality, which it defines primarily in terms of sexist ‘beliefs’ operating in intimate relationships (p 13). According to this approach, gender norms and gender inequality are essentially synonymous insofar as gender inequality is taken to refer to men’s *views* about gender inequality, rather than structural forms of male dominance. VicHealth suggests that such views about gender inequality can become ‘institutionalised’ (p 13) but this is the limit of the document’s recognition that gender inequality takes systemic and institutionalised forms. This is a significant departure from the World Report which situates gender inequality within economic and political structures and recognises that recent macroeconomic reforms and public policies have actively contributed to women’s risk of VAW (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002, pp. 161-162).

Our Watch, Australia’s national foundation to prevent violence against women and children, was launched in 2014 with federal and state funding. Our Watch has built on the work of VicHealth to develop an ecological model that gives a greater degree of prominence to the issue of women’s autonomy and access to material resources. For example, Our Watch emphasises the role of ‘systems, institutions and policies’ in promoting ‘women’s economic, legal and social autonomy’ (p 15). This makes a clearer link between VAW and structural gender inequality than is evident in the VicHealth framework. However ‘dominant social norms’ remain the primary determinant of VAW at the ‘societal’ level in this approach (p 15). Indeed, Our Watch sustains the prioritisation of gender norms over structural gender inequality at the macro-level and indeed at all levels of the social ecology, with the exception of ‘systems, institutions and policies’ (p 15). This focus on attitudinal and normative determinants is clear in statements from Our Watch that it aims to drive change in ‘social norms, institutional practices and individual and community attitudes contributing to violence against women and their children’ (Our Watch, 2014, p. 3). The reference to ‘institutional practices’ here, contextualised by ‘social norms’ and ‘attitudes’, is reminiscent of VicHealth’s discussion of gender inequality in terms of ‘institutionalised’ support for sexist beliefs.

It is important to note at this point that VicHealth’s primary prevention programs have been diverse, and have included attention to structural factors such as gendered divisions of labor and hierarchies of power in communities and organisations (Carmody et al., 2014). Our Watch and VicHealth are both formulating their future prevention framework. However a

normative approach to gender inequality does not fully articulate the instantiation and reproduction of gender inequality within existing social structures and arrangements. For example, women are disproportionately responsible by the unpaid work of childcare at home and more likely to be in casual or insecure paid employment, resulting in entrenched gender disparities in lifetime earnings, wealth and superannuation/pension accumulation (Austen, Jefferson, & Ong, 2014; Schmidt & Sevak, 2006; Warren, 2006; Yamokoski & Keister, 2006). These shape women's position and recognition at the social, economic and political level, as well as women's power and decision-making authority within their relationships and households, increasing their risk and vulnerability to VAW (Pahl, 2001). Australian researchers and service providers are now re-emphasising the importance of women's economic and political participation, financial independence and security, social inclusion and community connection in reducing VAW (Landvogt & Ramanathan, 2011; Theobald, 2011; True, 2012). The National Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Their Children 2010 – 2022 recognised the importance of women's economic status with its specific references to paid parental leave, superannuation reform and increased support for pensioners (COAG, 2012). These insights have not been well integrated into VAW primary prevention approaches that, by minimising structural gender inequalities, promote a theory of prevention through cultural change that overlooks the material and systemic dimensions of gender inequality.

### **The 'one-dimensionality' of VAW prevention**

In part, the focus of VAW prevention frameworks on norms and attitudes reflects the influence of social psychology in the field of primary prevention, which asserts that attitudes and knowledge precede and predict behaviour (Pease and Flood 2008). However, while a thin account of social practice as driven by attitudes and norms may have utility when applied by health promoters to some kinds of health-related behaviours (such as the application of sunscreen or the use of condoms), it represents a simplification of the complex social aetiology of VAW (Pease, 2008). Gender norms and gender inequality cannot be easily disaggregated from one another, since gender norms do not function independently of processes that shape the distribution of power and resources within a society or community. For example, an increased risk of victimisation through domestic violence and sexual assault are specifically gendered consequence of poverty for women but not men (Cattaneo & DeLoveh, 2008). Poverty itself may be generative of pro-VAW gender norms and therefore economic inequality as a whole may be conducive to increased rates of VAW (Uthman,

Moradi et al., 2009). While the pathways through which economic inequality impacts on gender norms are still being elucidated, it is well recognised that poverty is an important predictor of VAW risk at the individual (Abramsky, Watts et al., 2011; Fergusson, Boden et al., 2008), community (Beyer, Wallis et al., 2013; Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012) and nation-state level (Remenyi, 2007). While it has long been recognised that VAW can lead to poverty, research is pointing towards a multi-directional relationship as the risk of victimisation and perpetration is increased by poverty at all levels of the social ecology.

Despite strong evidence for the role of poverty in the epidemiological distribution of VAW, it is addressed only obliquely in VicHealth's and Our Watch's ecological frameworks, where it is relegated to a second or third tier consideration. Indeed, as Benn Michaels (2006) has observed, a narrow focus on norms and cultural factors can result in the misrepresentation of poverty as just one form of social difference amongst many. For example, in the Our Watch strategic directions document, poverty is described as a characteristic of diverse 'communities' with diverse 'cultures' and 'needs' that Our Watch commits to acknowledge and respect (p 16). Poverty is thus reimagined as one of a number of 'diverse experiences' that require a sensitive and consultative approach (p 16). While the VicHealth framework does recognise that poverty increases women's risk of VAW, it suggests that this can be ameliorated by improving women's 'access' to existing resources and supports (p 39). In effect, both documents minimise the economic determinants of VAW as either a form of difference to be 'respected' or a problem of unequal 'access', but not distribution, of resources. These strategies maintains their fidelity to the gender norms approach but at the cost of rendering invisible those economic and political factors that reproduce poverty and exacerbate the precariousness of disadvantaged women's lives (True, 2012; Weissman, 2007).

The imbrication of gender norms with gender inequality suggests that VAW primary prevention requires a 'two dimensional' view of masculinity that holds gender norms and gender inequality as inter-related but distinct determinants of VAW. The term 'two-dimensional' here is borrowed from Marcuse (1964) who emphasised the need to critically interrogate the relationship between existing social arrangements and their dominant representations in order to generate practical strategies to facilitate social change. 'Two-dimensional' thought, according to Marcuse (1964), analyses the ambivalent relationship between prevailing ideologies and the status quo as historically contingent and open to

change. In contrast, ‘one-dimensional’ thought collapses these crucial distinctions. By failing to differentiate between existing social conditions and the cultural representations they produce, ‘one-dimensional’ thought accepts as true the manner in which social arrangements are represented and justified. Similarly, in VAW primary prevention, there is a tendency to conflate the structural with the normative, which inhibits an analysis of the relationship between the two. Instead, gender norms have come to be championed as the primary basis upon which VAW will be prevented based on the unexplained assumption that structural inequality plays a secondary and less important role.

As the following section demonstrates, this ‘one-dimensional’ focus on gender norms has produced an over-reliance on already existing stereotypes of masculinity in VAW prevention activities. Collapsed into these stereotypes are problematic norms about gender, sexuality and class that endorse rather than challenge existing inequalities within and between men and women. A range of prevention activities have taken up and promulgated violent or aggressive forms of masculinity as the province of ‘real men’, despite the evidence that it is precisely ‘real men’ – that is, those men most heavily invested in patriarchal masculinities – that are most at risk of perpetrating VAW (Flood & Pease, 2009). Marcuse (1964) warned that ‘one-dimensional’ thinking is unable to plan for change beyond the bounds of what already exists, and inevitably reproduces unequal social hierarchies. By failing to situate gender norms within the structural inequalities in which they take shape, VAW prevention activities are at risk of circulating representations of masculinity that naturalise and legitimise the social contexts of VAW.

### **Constructing masculinity in VAW prevention campaigns**

In their identification of gender norms as the primary determinant of VAW, a range of organisations in Australia and overseas have developed social marketing campaigns that aim to target men’s and boy’s attitudes to gender and violence. Although developed with ostensibly pro-feminist intentions, stereotypes about ‘real men’ feature prominently in many of these campaigns in an attempt to valorise protective or ‘strong’ masculinities and shame perpetrators of VAW. A recent Australian example includes the 2013 union sponsored anti-VAW campaign showing three construction workers staring at the viewer, arms folded, over the slogan ‘Real men don’t abuse women’.<sup>1</sup> There are multiple similar iterations of

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.cfmeu.asn.au/news/real-men-dont-abuse-women-cfmeu-launches-anti-violence-campaign>

campaigns such as this around the world, and they are typically the initiatives of local organisations and authorities. The 2007 poster campaign developed for the City of Grapeville, Texas, depicts men from a range of workforce sectors, including a police officer, a fireman and a council worker, staring grimly and pointing at the viewer over the slogan 'real men don't hit women'.<sup>2</sup>

In this campaign approach, 'real masculinity' is embodied by men in working class male-dominated jobs. The message is clear: 'Real men' have 'real jobs' and don't hit women. These representations of 'real men' accord with taken-for-granted social logics about respectable working class masculinities, however this is a problematic approach for campaigns that claim prevent VAW for multiple reasons. These campaigns function to celebrate the 'real masculinity' of men in male-dominated workforces from which women have been historically excluded. It is precisely the marginalisation of women from sections of the workforce that increases the likelihood of sexual harassment and promotes workplace cultures supportive of VAW (Chung, Zufferey, & Powell, 2012). Sexist divisions of labour contribute to women's financial insecurity, their economic dependence upon a partner, and hence their vulnerability to VAW (Weissman, 2007).

Notably, these are not anti-violence campaigns *per se*. To the contrary, the possibility of male violence is heavily implied by the forbidding expressions, pointed fingers and uniforms of the men depicted. The suggestion is that the prevention of VAW will be achieved by the threat of violence against male perpetrators. This point has been made more forcefully in prevention campaigns that appear to endorse vigilante justice. In 2006, the Australian charity The Shwartz Foundation hired notorious criminal and multiple murder Mark 'Chopper' Read to feature in a VAW prevention television campaign. In the advert, Read is shown shirtless in a prison setting where the camera pans over his scarred body, tattoos and sneering face with his trademark handlebar moustache. Read speaks directly to the camera as he warns the viewer that he has 'broken a lot of men who thought they were tough guys' and that men who abuse women are 'weak, gutless individuals' who 'get dealt with' in prison. He then threatens to kill perpetrators of VAW, stating 'You will suffer, we will break your neck'. The advertisement ends with Read laughing menacingly. Following viewer complaints, the

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.grapevinetexas.gov/index.aspx?NID=483>



advertisement was quickly pulled from television, although it can still be watched on Youtube where it has garnered over half a million views.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the only example of a prevention campaign in which authentic masculinity is explicitly conflated with violence and vigilante justice. In 2012, the Croatian Family Assistance Association released the ‘hit me, not her’ campaign, which depicts wrestlers, boxers and martial artists facing the camera in a fighting posture and daring the viewer to hit them.<sup>4</sup> The slogans used in the campaign include ‘Real men don’t hit women’ and ‘Real men stay in their category’. These campaigns do not seek to challenge aggressive masculinities but rather to legitimise them by directing them to supposedly constructive ends: violent conflict with ‘unmanly’ perpetrators of VAW. These campaigns not only endorse violence as a solution to social problems, but they are clearly at odds with the aims and interests of gay, lesbian and transgender social movements that have emphasised the role of violent masculinities in social oppression. In constituting ‘real men’ as the violent custodians of traditional gender norms, such campaigns raise the spectre of violence against others, such as sexual and gender diverse populations, who have been common targets of vigilante gender policing.

Of course, most VAW prevention campaigns do not call for violence against perpetrators of VAW. However ill-defined exhortations to ‘stand up’, ‘man up’ or ‘challenge’ VAW feature in many campaigns and, in the absence of more concrete descriptions of what this means, they appear to trade on at least the metaphor of manfully confronting a perpetrator of VAW. This can lend itself to the misunderstanding or misappropriation of prevention work that is more conscious of the challenges in engaging men and boys. For example, prevention organisation White Ribbon generally distances itself from the ‘real man’ trope and has developed compelling prevention and awareness raising campaigns without the invocation of gender stereotypes. Their 2013 ‘Uncover Secrets’ campaign involved advertisements and online material that encouraged viewers to examine the ‘dark secrets’ of VAW beyond the idyllic images of Australian leisure and landscapes.<sup>5</sup> Rather than pivoting on notions of violent masculinity and defenceless femininity, the campaign deconstructed hegemonic narratives about Australian life that obscure violence and abuse against women.

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<sup>3</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g\\_2M3LrFFAw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_2M3LrFFAw)

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.behance.net/gallery/5418443/AVON-ADV>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.uncoversecrets.com.au/>

However in its efforts to engage men and boys White Ribbon regularly employs language evocative of masculine conflict, encouraging men to ‘stand up’ and ‘challenge’ VAW because ‘thousands of good men have got their back’ (White Ribbon Australia, 2012), even while explicitly warning against physical intervention in an act of VAW.<sup>6</sup> This framing of VAW prevention as a (metaphorical) confrontation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ men lends itself to claims of masculine prowess in protecting and safeguarding women. In a 2013 speech in support of White Ribbon Day, White Ribbon Ambassador and the Member for Campbelltown Bryan Doyle said in NSW parliament:

Real men are blessed with strength and size, but that physical ability is meant to protect, not to belittle or assault women. In many aspects of my policing career, particularly as a police prosecutor, I have been fortunate to have the honour of protecting the interests of women (Parliament of NSW, Legislative Assembly, November 19, 2013, p. 2596).

In her response to his speech, the Member for Menai, Melanie Gibbons, congratulates Mr Doyle ‘for showing that real men should stand up’. It seems that the language of ‘standing up’, ‘manning up’ and so on is deeply entangled with practices of masculine self-aggrandizement even where such interventions are framed differently by VAW prevention organisations. This illustrates the challenge facing VAW prevention organisations that seek to mobilise hegemonic masculine ideals of strength and protectiveness without simultaneously activating more problematic norms of heterosexual potency, patriarchal benevolence and feminine weakness.

This challenge is evident in the prominent American campaign ‘My strength is not for hurting’, developed by the VAW prevention organisation Men Can Stop Rape.<sup>7</sup> The campaign involved a series of posters in which young men (sometimes displayed with a young woman, presumably their girlfriend) stare out at the viewer over the slogan ‘My strength is not for hurting’. This message was supplemented on various posters by more specific statements such as ‘When she said no, I said OK’ and ‘When men disrespect women, we say that’s not right’. The campaign depicted a range of young men from different ethnic

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.whiteribbon.org.au/whatmencando>

<sup>7</sup> The campaign ran from 2001 until it was retired in 2011 (Men Can Stop Rape, 2011).

backgrounds and includes a poster with a same-sex couple. The clear aim was to extend conceptualisations of masculine strength and authority to include non-violence and respectful attitudes in relationships. While this campaign lacks the aggressive machismo of some of those described above, it nonetheless foregrounds notions of masculine ‘strength’ in an attempt to construct non-violent men as more authentically masculine than other men (Macomber, 2012). The depiction of women in the campaign is notable for their adoring attitude towards their ‘strong’ non-violent partners, which Murphy (2009) interprets as an implicit visual message that affection and sexual access to women’s bodies are the rewards enjoyed by non-violent men. A potential reading of the campaign is that the loss of one traditional criteria of ‘real’ masculinity – dominance and control in intimate relationships – will be offset by another, namely (hetero)sexual success.

It could be said that the notion of ‘real’ or ‘strong’ masculinity is so overdetermined by patriarchal values that its deployment inevitably introduces unwanted cultural baggage into prevention campaigns that surreptitiously undermines their pro-feminist aims. Furthermore, these campaigns frequently present masculinity in a heavily constrained and formulaic way that collapses existing social divisions on the basis of class and sexuality in a ‘one-dimensional’ manner that does not interrogate or challenge existing social arrangements, but rather represents them as natural and legitimate. This is most clearly apparent in the range of VAW prevention campaigns that rely on male celebrities and sportsmen as prevention ambassadors. Australian examples include the ‘Man Up’ campaign, an international movement that has been sponsored locally by NSW Assistant Police Commissioner Mark Murdoch and has recruited prominent rugby players as spokesmen (Campion, 2013; Hansen, 2013a, 2013b). Such campaigns have an aspirational quality insofar as men and boys are presumed to idealise celebrities not only for their accomplishments as sportsmen, actors and so forth, but also their wealth, status and lavish lifestyles. In contrast to working class masculinity and street-ready violence valorised in some of the campaigns previously discussed, these campaigns instead conflate ‘real masculinity’ with economic and cultural capital beyond the reach of the vast majority of boys and men. Connell (1995) has argued that the mass media and sport are crucial organs in the construction of often unrealisable and arguably oppressive ideals of masculinity. When these are deployed in VAW prevention campaigns, Carmody (2009, p. 76) suggests that they delimits rather than expand the ways in which masculinity is understood in prevention work.

This can be seen in the campaign run by the British charity Women's Aid, which initially took a different approach to the 'real man' prevention trope. When the campaign was first launched in 2010, it was based on photos of British male celebrities and sportsmen in t-shirts with the purple slogan 'I'm a real man' (see Debenhams News, 2010). Alongside the shirt, some of the men sported a range of feminine gender signifiers such as pink tutus, fairy wings, tiaras and handbags. Many of the images were shot against a pink background with the men pulling faces and generally looking relaxed and cheerful. The campaign was deliberately comical in its juxtaposition of famous and successful men engaging in ostensibly non-masculine behaviour while wearing a t-shirt proclaiming their masculinity. In doing so, it placed the men in a kind of solidarity with girls and women and suggested an ease of recognition and identification that transcended gender. More generally, the campaign actively encouraged boys and men to playfully challenge fixed notions of gender and sexuality. It is notable that the campaign included an image of openly gay singer Will Young wearing the t-shirt 'I'm a real man'. These photos were circulated online and published in a UK edition of the magazine Cosmo.

It is interesting to note how the campaign has developed in the last four years. The questioning and humorous way in which the campaign framed the notion of the 'real man' has diminished over time. Today, the front page of the campaign website displays standard images of male celebrities and sports men standing in the t-shirt proclaiming that they are 'real men'.<sup>8</sup> This includes celebrity chef Gordan Ramsey, who, while outspoken about the domestic violence his father committed against his mother, is notorious for his aggressive style of 'hard masculinity' in the kitchen. The pink background and funny accessories have virtually disappeared, and so too has the characterisation of masculinity as diverse and open to reinterpretation. As the campaign came to reorientate around conventional depictions of masculinity, it eventually terminated in the cliché of benevolent sexism. This point is made repeatedly in the testimonials of male celebrities who endorse the campaign in their statements that 'real men' don't hit women but instead it's their 'job' to 'protect' women.<sup>9</sup> Precisely why the tone of the campaign shifted over time is unclear but it may reflect the unwillingness of high-profile celebrities to act as ambassadors for a campaign that undermines rather than enhances their masculine cache, which in turn is linked to their cultural capital and marketability.

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.realmancampaign.com/>

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/page.asp?section=00010001001000160002>

It is precisely the intersectionality of masculinity with other social axes, such as those of class, racialized status or sexuality, that produces the expanded terrain of masculinities that is the stated goal of VAW primary prevention (Connell, 1995). However for the most part, the diversities and ambiguities of men's and boy's experiences of masculinities remains a largely untapped resource for VAW primary prevention, which instead adheres to a carefully scripted account of masculinity in terms of power, dominance and social recognition. Paradoxically, it is precisely those groups of men and boys who live at a considerable distance from these masculine ideals that are the most common targets for intensive preventative intervention. As the following section discusses, face-to-face prevention programs typically seek to recruit men and boys excluded from regular wage labour or capital accumulation, because they are too young or come from disadvantaged communities. These programs apply the normative approach to VAW evident in the campaigns discussed above, with strong messages about the responsibility of 'real men' to prevent VAW. While this message can be delivered in a more nuanced way in direct participation programs in comparison to social marketing campaigns, the normative focus of these programs overlooks fundamental questions about the social power of participants to effect change in their lives and communities. Within a 'one-dimensional' framework in which masculinity is a cultural but not structural subject position, those boys and men with the least capacity to transform the determinants of VAW are responsibilised to do so while those who benefit the most from gendered and classed inequalities are rarely the focus of intervention.

### **Constructing masculinity in direct participation programs**

Considerable effort has been directed towards the development and evaluation of VAW prevention programs that incorporate face-to-face and direct participation delivery (World Health Organization, 2010). These programs typically engage participants in dialogue about gender and violence, alongside education and training components, with the aim of positively effecting participants' attitudes, skills and intentions (DeGue, Simon et al., 2012). This is surmised to prevent VAW firstly by changing gender attitudes and norms, and secondly by promoting more equitable and respectful relationships between men and women. When gender equality is referred to in the context of direct participation programs, it is primarily used in the sense that it was employed in the VicHealth prevention framework: as a characteristic of personal relationships not social structures, and hence closely related to gender norms and attitudes. Well known direct participation approaches include programs

that seek to reduce sexual violence by building young people's capacities to negotiate consent in sexual relationships, bystander approaches that aim to increase participant willingness to challenge sexist attitudes and intervene in potential incidents of VAW, and infant and parenting programs that promote equal and non-violent parenting (Carmody, Salter, & Presterudstuen, 2014).

The efficacy of these programs may be bolstered by their incorporation into 'whole of organisation' and community mobilisation approaches, in which there is dialogue and reform to promote gender equality via changes to organisational/community structures and practices (Carmody, et al., 2014). Such approaches show promise in their attempts to address structural inequalities as well as gender norms in the localised contexts of communities, organisation and institutions (Salter, Carmody & Presterudstuen, 2015). However direct participation programs typically take place in the contexts of social powerlessness and their participants are overwhelmingly young and/or disadvantaged. The most recent review of Australian VAW prevention programs that engage men and boys found that these programs were mostly based in youth settings or in disadvantaged communities, such as ethnic minority or Indigenous communities or in refugee and migrant populations (Carmody, et al., 2014). A few programs actively sought to engage older or privileged men such as company directors and high level managers, but this was rare. Instead, direct participation programs claim to change the determinants of VAW by conscripting boys and men with the least amount of social power to change those determinants due to either their youth or their relative disadvantage.

Despite this, direct participation programs frequently called on male participants to recognise themselves as privileged social actors with a responsibility to prevent VAW. This can involve appeals to 'real masculinity' that enjoin participants to take a more authoritative and responsible (that is, masculine) stance in relation to violence, or programs may advance a feminist-inspired critique of gender primarily in terms of male dominance. In either case, these idealist and abstract constructions of masculinity were at odds with men and boy's subjective experience of complex social relations often characterised by ambivalence rather than power. In Carmody et al.'s (2014) recent study of prevention stakeholders, a prevention policy expert observed that programs focused on addressing male power and privilege can fail to address the experience of subordinated masculinities in poor and disadvantaged communities:

And the challenge with that too, is that there are men and boys who are disenfranchised. Who - for whom power is not an experience they actually have, unless it's maybe lauding it over somebody else. But in the grand scheme of things, [they] are profoundly disenfranchised (p. 62 - 63).

This was emphasised by a prevention program provider working in refugee communities who noted the disconnection between prevention models of gender norms and men's experiences of fragile masculine authority in the context of migration and resettlement:

The first thing they see is they've got to give up something and they've got to give up a lot. They're already unemployed, they already can't find work, their role in the family has been trashed in their way of thinking - and you want me to give up this? (p. 63)

Youth and poverty are both risk factors for VAW perpetration and victimisation which suggests that targeted prevention programs for these populations are appropriate and necessary. However it is reasonable to ask whether normative change can be achieved while structural inequality and social stigma are left in place. Indeed, the focus of direct participation programs on VAW and participants' responsibility to drive change may have counter-productive effects in contexts of social powerlessness, potentially reinforcing feelings of dishonour and social stigma. A prevention program coordinator at a disadvantaged school was highly sensitive to the potentially stigmatising effects of direct participation programs on her students:

That's constantly at the forefront of our minds that these young people walk around carrying a lot of shame already. So how do we correct this or support them to challenge that thinking without shaming them? (p. 63)

The proposition that there is a direct relationship between sexist norms and attitudes to VAW is contested by the quotes above. Instead, prevention stakeholders contextualised gender norms and VAW within male participants' subjective experience of their disadvantaged social location. It seems that the decoupling of gender norms from questions of inequality, such as economic and political power, has led to an overly optimistic view of normative change amongst some prevention agencies. In contrast to these individualised and decontextualized accounts of agency and change, social theory proffers models of agency as a situated and embodied accomplishment that is constrained by processes and structures of

disadvantage (McNary, 2014). Hoggett (2001) draws a distinction between ‘first-order’ form of agency, which is the universal human capacity to respond and adapt to their conditions, and a ‘second-order’ agency drawn on by those with the resources and influence to transform or reshape the conditions in which they live their lives. The transformative nature of second-order agency depends upon the social power that is frequently unavailable to disadvantaged groups, who may experience this powerlessness in the corrosive terms of shame, humiliation and inchoate frustration (McNay, 2014). The lack of a deep understanding of structural inequality in VAW leads prevention policy to conflate first and second order agency, in which a shared ‘first order’ agency is considered evidence of men’s and boy’s capacities (indeed, responsibility) to initiate individual and collective transformation.

In this process, the ethical assertion that men and boys should take action to prevent VAW is transformed into the assumption that they are able to do so, regardless of their particular circumstances. This conflation of the ethical with the factual is made possible the prevailing view of VAW as a cultural phenomenon perpetuated by sexist norms and attitudes untethered to material and social facts. The production of women’s vulnerability to VAW within economic and political arrangements via a myriad of processes and structures that intersect with gender norms – gendered divisions of labour, the casualization of employment, punitive welfare service provisions, the economics of austerity, and so forth – is made invisible by the normative VAW prevention approach (True, 2012; Weissman, 2007). Government and business are thus exculpated of the responsibility to scrutinise how taken-for-granted decisions and practices increase women’s risk of VAW on the macro-scale. Instead this responsibility is devolved to groups of boys and men who are often amongst those negatively impacted by structures of class and racial disadvantage. This is not to say that boys and men cannot benefit from programs that build their respect for women, enhance their capacity to negotiate consent and conflict, and heighten their awareness of power imbalances in relationships. However the ambitions of VAW primary prevention activities are significantly more ambitious than this: the reduction of the prevalence of VAW at the population level.

While direct participation programs may be associated with a range of benefits to participants, the available evaluations do not show a level of efficacy that would achieve the goal of primary prevention. Even the most promising programs show relatively small changes in participant attitudes and intentions with an unclear link to subsequent behaviour (World Health Organization, 2010). Moreover, given their time and resource intensity, it is unlikely



that direct participation programs could be brought up to scale at a population level even if their evaluations were more promising (Michau, 2007). In light of these limitations, the Centre for Disease Control has concluded that direct participation programs are unlikely to reduce the prevalence of VAW in the absence of larger-scale interventions, while expressing uncertainty about what those larger-scale interventions might look like (DeGue, Holt et al., 2012). This paper argues that a key reason for the relatively limited impact of direct participation programs is that the determinants of VAW, involving the intersection of normative and structural forms of oppression, are more extensive, complex and entrenched than is recognised by the one-dimensional focus on normative change. The insistence that men and boys ‘man up’ to prevent VAW in their lives and communities while the structural determinants of VAW are left unaddressed places unrealistic expectations upon often disempowered individuals and groups. This approach also largely empties the concept of ‘primary prevention’ of its substantive content, replacing the emancipatory vision of a society free from VAW with a re-enchanting if unachievable patriarchal prerogative to protect women from harm. It is precisely those overlooked structural determinants of VAW that should be the targets of interventions to complement and amplify the impact of normative interventions, but this requires a significant theoretical reorientation away from a myopically culturalist paradigm of VAW prevention.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a comprehensive model of VAW prevention cannot be formulated by abstracting attitudes and norms from the contexts that produce and sustain them. This risks reifying and further entrenching those ideologies of gender that presently justify and obscure relations of violence and oppression. At present, many prevention activities adhere to a view of masculinity grounded in norms and attitudes that reflect prevailing conditions of inequality and act to naturalise and rationalise that inequality. The ‘real man’ trope accepts the inevitability of male violence and status conflict, and seeks to mobilise this violence for the protection of women. This paper argues that this approach is a premature capitulation to the conditions of gender inequality and a fundamental failure to imagine how men and women might live in a society free from violence. It has resulted in a limited agenda for change characterised by calls to ‘man up’, ‘stand up’ and ‘speak out’ against VAW. Such calls may initiate useful dialogue but they may also, as this paper suggests, generate a regressive kind of self-congratulatory spectacle of masculinity.

Gender norms and attitudes are important antecedents to VAW, and they interact with structural inequalities in ways that can increase rates of VAW and mute the effects of protective factors (Rani & Bonu, 2009). Social marketing and direct participation programs are therefore important interventions within a broader, coordinated prevention response to VAW. However without an equivalent concern for structural gender inequality, the focus on gender norms risks becoming a purely theoretical heuristic without the practical purchase to effect behavioural or social change. At worst, attention to gender norms may serve as a distraction from an entrenched unwillingness to address structural gender inequality. The UN Women's [www.heforshe.org](http://www.heforshe.org) website discussed in the introduction to this paper now includes an electronic button that men and boys can click on to affirm they are 'real men' who will 'stand up' for women's rights. This automatically signs users up to a mailing list and gives them access to campaign materials, and suggestions for events they can organise to raise awareness about VAW. These initiatives are of course laudable but it is unclear how such piecemeal efforts will catalyse the substantive change in women's autonomy and status necessary to reduce the epidemic prevalence of VAW. UN Women acknowledges that it is unlikely to meet its 2015 Millennium Development Goals in relation to women's economic, sexual and social equality due largely to a lack of funding and global support.<sup>10</sup>

The existing focus of VAW prevention frameworks on norms and attitudes should be complemented by an equivalent concern for structural gender equality. Such an expanded vision would require VAW prevention advocates to consider the impact of government and business decision-making on women's vulnerability to VAW. Weissman (2007) has criticised the failure of anti-VAW efforts to conceptualise the relationship between "public political economic events" and those interpersonal and family dynamics that are conducive to VAW, particularly in a time of austerity and economic crisis (p 446). However there has also been a neglect within VAW primary prevention of those initiatives that could be understood as having made a contribution in this area, including in the Australian context the child-care rebate, the proposed national maternity leave scheme, and taxation arrangements like the family tax benefit. A 'two-dimensional' VAW prevention approach would bring as much scrutiny to the economic and political as to the cultural, recognising the inextricable link

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/mdg-momentum>

between the two and the need for simultaneous intervention in the structural as well as normative conditions of VAW.

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