



The Right to Safety - Violence against women as a human rights issue

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Good morning to all. Forgive me for not reading a list of guests etc. It seems to me an inappropriate thing to do, especially as I have been asked to talk about violence against women as a human rights issue and in accordance with human rights law we are all equals. Thus, I speak with you as all equal.

Auntie Josie (when welcoming us to country) observed that there are many men in the audience, and she rhetorically asked why are they here? Why am I as a man here? My answer is simple but hopefully says far more — regarding violence against women, I am part of the problem but also I am a partner in the solutions.

Violence against women is a prevalent crime in Australia. Violence against women is wrong. It is a breach of women's human rights.

Every woman and girl, like men and boys, have inherent dignity and value. Every person has the right to life, liberty and security of person. No-one should be subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment. Everyone is entitled to freedom of thought; everyone is entitled to freedom of opinion; and everyone is entitled to right of expression.

No where in human rights law does it say "Men Only".

Violence cuts across all aspects of the Australian community – it knows no geographical, socio-economic, age, ability, cultural or religious boundaries.

Contrary to their human right to security of person, however, over their lifetimes close to one half of women aged 15 years and older experience some violence. Sexual violence affects almost one in five Australian women and physical violence affects at least one in three Australian women.

While both women and men can be perpetrators and victims of violence, the majority of sexual assault and domestic and family violence is perpetrated by men against women. Moreover, women usually experience violence at the hands of men they know, often in their own homes, and often repeatedly.

Some groups of women are at greater risk of violence:

- Indigenous women report higher levels of physical violence
- Women with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual violence
- Young women are sexually assaulted at much higher rates, especially young pregnant women
- Immigrant and refugee women are more likely to be murdered as a result of domestic and family violence

As a man, it seems to me important that I say more about men's violence against women:

- Among all women who suffered physical violence in the 12 months prior to an ABS survey (2006), 8 in 10 were assaulted by males.
- 1 in 10 Australian women stated that they had experienced at least one incident of physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by a male in the 12 months prior to the survey (Mouzos & Makkai 2004)
- Nearly 2 in 3 Australian women stated that they suffered at least one incident of physical or sexual violence by a male over their life-time
- About 1 in 10 women who had ever had a relationship with a male experienced sexual violence from a partner in their life-time (Mouzos & Makkai 2004)

In our State these statistics — or rather than statistics, the victims that are among these numbers — equate to tens of thousands of women who have revealed that they have been the victims of violence. We do not know the true extent of the violence because not all violence is reported to authorities or disclosed in surveys.

The known violence is shocking.

What causes men's violence against women? In sum, gender roles and relations. In sum, social norms and practices. In sum, access to resources and systems of support.

Before I explain some points on the causes of violence, I hasten to say 'up-front' that most men are NOT violent against women.

Most men are not abusive; are loving; and are respectful of women. Most men believe physical

and sexual — indeed all violence against women — is never acceptable. Unfortunately too many men act in ways that are inconsistent with that belief. By their silence too many men suggest they support attitudes associated with violence; and by their inaction too many men are complicit in maintaining the inequalities that affect women.

As I said, most violence against women is perpetrated by men. Given men have mothers, wives, girlfriends, daughters and so on, it begs the question "Why is this so?"

Some men learn that aggression; mental torment; physical abuse and other types of violence are ways to resolve conflict; to manipulate and control women; and, to ensure that women 'know their place'. Some men believe the myths about gender roles and gender inequalities that underpin sexism; look upon women as objects; and, suggest that men are superior.

There is NO single solution to preventing violence against women but men must be part of the solutions.

With this in mind, I frequently ask (paraphrasing Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the UN)

- What can I and other men do to help eliminate violence against women that has identified as "... *one of the most heinous, systematic and prevalent human rights abuses in the world*"?
- What can I and other men do to help eliminate violence against women that "... *is a threat to all women, and an obstacle to all our efforts for development, peace and gender equality in all societies*"?

This morning I will answer these questions as Commissioner for Victims' Rights and as a White Ribbon Ambassador?

Women as victims of crime have rights. Public officials, for instance, are required to treat all victims with respect and dignity. If the rights of one woman are diminished, the rights of all women are threatened. Women as victims of crime are entitled to help, they want / as they need — the discussion must be about both availability and accessibility of help.

As Commissioner, I:

- Advocate for front-line services for emergency and immediate care for women who have suffered violence;
- Encourage prompt & appropriate police responses and other emergency responses;
- Campaign for available & accessible health and legal services – that are there when victims want them, not when others want to give them and preferably at no cost, if necessary;
- Support safe options for women surviving or fleeing violence situations, including staying in their homes if they choose (and the removal of perpetrators);
- Promote (and urge governments to fund) hotlines that are available 24-hours a day so victims can (amongst other things) report violence and seek protection; and,
- Monitor courts' practices and report on the effects on women;

I am not only be in favour of but also participate actively in action plans to promote women's right to safety, such as the Right to Safety strategy and to promote equality.

As a White Ribbon Ambassador my key messages to other men are:

- Do not deny the violence against women
- Do not excuse the violence
- Do not devalue women
- Do not denigrate women
- Do not blame women
- Do not remain silent

Previously some of you would have heard me read my poem 'If I were a woman?' Today, I will read only the closing two verses. The poem paints a picture about the nature and extent of the horror of violence against women and is a plea to men to never commit violence against women, to never excuse violence against women or to never remain silent.

It is also a stark reminder that the terror that most invades women's lives is not politically motivated terrorism but the terror inflicted by those who say, "I am doing this for you; I respect you; or I love you".

*If I were a woman in our world,
Even just for a day,
I'd look around me and know:
That I'm not alone as a victim of men's
violence;
That this violence happens because I am
a woman;
That women everywhere continue to
struggle for equality.
I'd also know that those who're meant to
help us,
Are often responsible for violence against
women.
Too many men inflict it! Too many men
are silent!*

*I'm not a woman,
No, I am a man!
I might not understand
How it feels to be a woman;
But if I am to be a better man,
I must listen to women
And I must no longer be silent;
But if I am to be a better man,
I must no longer take women for granted
And I must see them as equal.
Then, and only then, will I be a real man
...*

Last Friday, 25 November, I was privileged to be a White Ribbon Ambassador at the launch of a book titled 'Memoires of a suburban girl' by Deb Kandelaars. The book, although fiction, is based on the life of a teenage girl trapped in a violent

relationship. It seems fitting this morning, in the aftermath of the tragic killing of a teenage girl by a male apparently known to her, to draw the book to your attention.

The foreword of the book is an extract from a Billie Bragg poem that I will read. The message is clear to me, hopefully it is to you.

“Thank you for the things you bought
me, thank you for the card
Thank you for the things you taught me,
when you hit me hard
That love between two people must be
based on understanding,
Until that’s true your things all stacked
out on the landing
Surprise, surprise. Valentine’s Day is
over.”

The Right to Safety Strategy is a call for action. If we act accordingly then Valentine’s Day will be over for more women as victims of men’s violence.

Thank you all.

(Speech made at the launch of the next phase of South Australia’s Women’s Safety Strategy 2012-2022, Friday 2 December 2011)