

EVIDENCE BRIEF

# Reinforcing factors for gender-based violence

2024

**Our  
Watch**  
  
Preventing violence  
against women

# Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge, and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is an issue for the whole community. As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, the evidence clearly shows the intersection between racism, sexism, and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to suffer from violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

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# Background and purpose of brief

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch, including the Commonwealth Government.

In 2021, Our Watch developed the second edition of *Change the story*, an evidence-based framework to guide a coordinated and effective national approach to preventing violence against women.

Our Watch has prepared this brief as part of its ongoing work and commitment to provide clear and accessible evidence, information and advice to inform primary prevention work across Australia. It was also prepared in the context of the 2024 Commonwealth Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches. It forms part of a series of five briefs, including:

- **Brief 1:** Primary prevention across the life cycle
- **Brief 2:** Settings for primary prevention
- **Brief 3:** Reinforcing factors for gender-based violence
- **Brief 4:** Whole of system opportunities for primary prevention
- **Brief 5:** Opportunities to engage with men to support primary prevention

This brief focuses on outlining a range of factors that *Change the story* calls 'reinforcing factors' for violence against women. These are highly relevant to the review's interest in 'risk factors', 'pathways' and 'intersecting factors'. The brief points to various 'whole of system opportunities' to address these factors through a range of prevention actions.

## Note: The importance of an intersectional approach

As with any approach to prevention, in developing actions to address these factors, an intersectional approach is critical to address the intersections between sexism and gender inequality and racism; colonialism; heteronormativity; cisnormativity; homo-, bi- and transphobia; ageism; ableism and class discrimination and oppression.

An intersectional approach should be integrated in both policy and practice, and at all stages of an activity, from design through to implementation and evaluation. An effective intersectional approach to the prevention of violence against women is one that explicitly addresses the multiple intersecting systems of oppression and discrimination, power and privilege that shape the social context in which this violence occurs, and influence men's perpetration and women's experiences of violence.

Action 6 in *Change the story* outlines a range of activities that need more attention to address the intersections between gender inequality and other forms of systemic and structural oppression and discrimination, and to promote broader social justice. The approach outlined in this brief should be read in conjunction with these actions.

# Reinforcing factors for violence against women

A central challenge for the prevention of gendered violence is to address its gendered drivers. However, violence against women does not have a single 'cause', rather it is the result of numerous complex factors and interactions, that play out from the individual to the social level. This is why *Change the story*, the agreed national framework to guide prevention of violence against women, outlines the need to address the gendered drivers but also the need for additional work to address a range of other factors that influence the prevalence and dynamics of violence against women.

There are a range of views about what these kinds of factors should be called or how they should be conceptualised. While *Change the story* refers to these as 'reinforcing factors', others refer to them as 'risk factors', 'determinants' or even 'causes' of violence. Regardless of terminology, there is strong agreement that these issues need to be addressed as part of a holistic, national approach to preventing violence against women.

There are opportunities for governments and other stakeholders to do more to address the reinforcing factors outlined in *Change the story*, including in a collaborative way. In the context of preventing violence against women, a gender lens is essential in guiding the development of this work.

These reinforcing factors identified in *Change the story* are:

- Condoning of violence in general.
- Experience of, and exposure to, violence.
- Factors that weaken prosocial behaviour.
- Backlash and resistance to prevention and gender equality.

These can both intersect with the gendered drivers and/or have their own influence on the prevalence and patterns of violence against women.

Each of these factors may:

- magnify or increase the influence of the gendered drivers in some contexts or circumstances
- increase the overall prevalence of violence, or the likelihood or frequency of violence in particular circumstances or contexts
- influence the nature, severity and dynamics of violence in particular contexts or circumstances
- affect the relative influence of gender inequality, and other forms of systemic and structural oppression and discrimination, on the prevalence and patterns of violence against women.

While the gendered drivers of violence against women are a constant underlying presence in society, these reinforcing factors are more context-specific; they have an influence in particular circumstances. Careful analysis of how they manifest in gendered ways is also necessary, both to explain the prevalence and patterns of violence against women, and to inform prevention efforts.

This brief focuses on two of these factors, that are of particular relevance to current discussions about prevention approaches, and the issues that Our Watch understands are of interest to the rapid review panel members. These are: experience of and exposure to violence (for example in childhood); and factors that weaken prosocial behaviour (such as alcohol, or neighbourhood-level poverty).

*Change the story* makes clear that these factors need to be addressed. It outlines a range of strategies to address them (see Actions 10 and 11 below). These measures are a critical part of the broader solution to ending violence against women.

## **Experience of, and exposure to, violence.**

Direct experience of violence or maltreatment as a child, as well as children's exposure to domestic or family violence can have many profound and lifelong adverse impacts.<sup>1</sup> These childhood experiences are also correlated with experiences of intimate partner violence in adulthood. Men who witness parental violence as a child are more likely than other men to go on to perpetrate intimate partner violence later in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

Living in a climate of constant tension and fear affects children's feelings of safety, and their development.<sup>3</sup> Early exposure to violence can lead to developmental issues<sup>4</sup> and later behavioural problems, such as poor school performance, bullying or anti-social behaviour, which can become entrenched in adolescence, manifesting in aggressive or high-risk behaviour.<sup>5</sup> Without intervention, this developmental pathway can lead to a higher risk of perpetration of partner violence for boys and victimisation for girls. People who, as children, witnessed parental violence are two to four times more likely than others to later experience partner violence themselves.<sup>6</sup>

This pathway between childhood and adulthood experiences of violence is not inevitable. A child's exposure to violence can shape later attitudes to relationships, making some more accepting of violence against women, but it conversely makes others 'highly intolerant of such violence, having experienced its damaging effects'.<sup>7</sup> The negative experiences of such childhood trauma can also be reduced by other social, educational and psychological factors, including positive relationship models, and exposure to gender-equitable and non-violent norms. This means children who have been exposed to, or experienced, violence are not inevitably at higher risk of perpetration or victimisation.

Long-term exposure to any kind of violence, including intimate partner violence, racist violence, lateral or community violence, armed conflict and war, can contribute to the normalisation of violence in general, particularly in the absence of positive alternatives and support for recovery

and healing. Without such support, these experiences can create a belief that violence is an appropriate form of discipline or punishment, or way of solving disputes.<sup>8</sup>

However, none of these effects are gender neutral; social learning about the meaning of violence does not occur in isolation from learning about gendered power and roles. Childhood exposure to a father's violence against a mother or stepmother specifically normalises violence as an expression of masculinity in relationships: children witnessing such violence learn that it is acceptable for men to control and denigrate women.<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates the need for interventions to address gender norms and power relations, rather than addressing the experience of violence as gender neutral.

The evidence is clear that experiencing or being exposed to any kind of violence, either in childhood or as an adult, often has long-term and significant adverse impacts for individuals. In some circumstances it can also significantly increase the likelihood of men perpetrating violence against women in later life. For this reason, strategies that reduce the long-term impacts of experiencing violence, or prevent further exposure to violence are highly beneficial. Strategies that *also* address the gendered impacts and dynamics of these traumatic experiences have an especially important role to play as part of the broader approach to preventing and responding to violence against women. See Action 10 in *Change the story* and summarised below, for the range of actions that are needed.

## **Factors that weaken care, concern and empathy for women ('prosocial behaviour')**

*Note: There are a range of views about what these kinds of factors should be called or how they should be conceptualised. While *Change the story* refers to these as 'reinforcing factors', others refer to them as 'risk factors', 'determinants' or even 'causes' of violence. Regardless of terminology or conceptual approach, there is strong agreement that these issues need to be addressed as part of a holistic, national approach to preventing and responding to violence against women.*

*Change the story* refers to several factors that weaken 'prosocial behaviour'. This term refers to behaviours that help or benefit other people, or society. Prosocial behaviours are based on a concern for the rights, welfare, and feelings of another person. In this context, prosocial behaviours are when men show empathy, respect, care and concern for women. When these behaviours are weakened for whatever reason, the result is reduced empathy, care, concern and respect for women, and men showing less concern for the consequences of their behaviour on women.

This is not only about individual attitudes or behaviours. Social norms play a key role in either strengthening or weakening prosocial behaviour. Positive social norms encourage prosocial behaviours, while harmful social norms weaken or undermine them.

In this context, positive social norms are those that support care, respect and empathy towards women. They encourage everyone to behave in ways that challenge harmful forms of masculinity, sexism, disrespect, aggression and violence, and uphold gender equality.

On the other hand, some stress factors and environmental conditions can have a negative impact on social norms and undermine prosocial behaviours. These include alcohol, neighbourhood poverty, disadvantage and isolation; male-dominated environments; natural disasters and crises; and gambling. Because their effects are often gendered, these factors can reduce care and concern for women and increase the likelihood of gendered violence.

## Alcohol

Alcohol is correlated with a high number of, and more severe, incidents of violence against women and features in a disproportionate number of police call outs to family violence incidents.

Heavy alcohol consumption can also weaken people's care, concern and empathy for other people, but it appears to be the *interaction* between alcohol use and social norms relating to gender that increases the likelihood, frequency or severity of men's violence against women.

Alcohol consumption by men who already hold sexist attitudes is associated with increased perpetration of intimate partner violence.<sup>10</sup> The contribution of alcohol to violence is significant when combined with gendered social norms and practices that condone violence against women, and norms relating to masculinity and men's behaviour when in groups of other men.<sup>11</sup> Prosocial behaviour can be especially undermined when a culture of men's drinking is encouraged and embedded in male-dominated spaces or events characterised by aggressive or competitive male peer relations and ideas of male conquest and aggression. These gendered 'drinking contexts' can affect the ways individual men behave under the influence of alcohol.

Recognising the influence of alcohol on the prevalence of men's violence against women, *Change the story* includes two actions specifically intended to address this (see Action 11 in below). These measures are a critical part of the broader approach to ending violence against women.

There is also a need for further research and policy innovation in this area, because there are opportunities to build evidence on how policies to regulate alcohol can contribute to reducing men's violence against women, and what particular interventions or combinations of interventions might be most effective in this area.<sup>12</sup>

## Neighbourhood-level poverty

Prosocial behaviours are more likely to be present in neighbourhoods when there are high levels of social support and connectedness and a strong community identity – these are norms that have been shown to help protect women from violence.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, poverty and disadvantage at the neighbourhood level is associated with increased social isolation.<sup>14</sup> This can weaken formal and informal sanctions against violence, and violence against women in particular, and weaken or discourage prosocial norms and behaviours.<sup>15</sup>



## Male-dominated environments

There can be a lack of respect for women and their rights in male-dominated settings and contexts where male peer relations predominate and work to protect men's power and privilege.<sup>16</sup> These environments and cultures can weaken and often seriously undermine prosocial behaviour towards women and undermine (or even create a backlash against) any attempts to prevent gendered violence and uphold gender inequality.

## Natural disasters and crises

Weakening of prosocial norms has been shown to occur during natural disasters and crises. There is a growing body of research linking natural disasters to increased levels of violence against women. Such situations create significant social stress, disrupting social networks, increasing social isolation and limiting access to support services, all of which can weaken prosocial behaviours and increase the likelihood and prevalence of violence against women.<sup>17</sup> National and international literature finds increased rates of violence and abusive behaviour towards women during disasters, crises and emergencies – including the COVID pandemic – particularly for women with disabilities and women living in disadvantaged circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

## Gambling

Heavy gambling can also weaken prosocial behaviours. In tandem with social norms relating to gender, the social stress caused by loss of income from gambling can intensify the frequency and severity of men's intimate partner violence against women.<sup>19</sup>

## Actions to address the reinforcing factors

Strategies that address the four reinforcing factors can make an important contribution to overall national prevention goals. However, there are opportunities to strengthen consideration, action and investment in these areas by government and other stakeholders.

In relation to the two reinforcing factors discussed above, there are a range of potential actions. Actions 10 and 11 in *Change the story* are considered below.

### Action 10. Reduce the long-term impacts of exposure to violence and prevent further exposure

- Strengthen early intervention mechanisms for children and young people that aim to address the gendered impacts of exposure to violence against women and promote alternative models of healthy, equitable and non-violent relationships, characterised by respect and equality, and not limited by gender norms and stereotypes.
- Support and advocate for healing strategies and other efforts to mediate the impacts of past and ongoing occurrences of violence such as child abuse, colonial violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, racist violence, violence against women with disabilities, war-related trauma and torture experienced

by refugees and asylum seekers, or violence occurring in prisons and detention centres.

- Work with local and state-wide organisations to strengthen the promotion of non-violent parenting, which in turn contributes to preventing child abuse.
- Encourage, support and raise the profile of individuals who have experienced violence and are, or wish to be, anti-violence advocates in public or in their own communities.
- Strengthen efforts in policy and strategy to prevent all other forms of violence (such as child abuse and racist, community, public or lateral violence), especially through the provision of specialist expertise on the gendered dynamics of these forms of violence.

### **Action 11. Strengthen prosocial behaviour**

- Dismantle norms and practices within organisations, institutions and systems that protect men's power and privilege at the expense of women's health, safety or wellbeing, focusing particularly on male-dominated settings and contexts.
- Provide support for and implement programs and initiatives that increase social cohesion, community connectedness and access to required services within communities across Australia, particularly those that experience multiple forms of social injustice arising from structural oppression and discrimination.
- Address the relationship between harmful alcohol use and social norms relating to both violence and gender, with a particular focus on groups and settings characterised by harmful masculine drinking cultures.
- Improve the regulation of alcohol in ways that help to change harmful social norms relating to the intersection between violence, alcohol, gender and gendered social/organisational contexts
- Work with boys, young men and adult men to build their knowledge about, and empathy for, the harmful impacts of violence, abuse, harassment, objectification and discrimination on women.
- Apply a gender lens to emergency management and response planning in the context of disasters and crises to address the increased likelihood of violence against women, ensure such events do not worsen existing inequalities, and increase community resilience over the long term.

# Endnotes

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