

# HOW TO TALK OPENLY AND SAFELY ABOUT VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND HARASSMENT

Leaders may be asked to comment or talk about violence, abuse and harassment – whether in the media or speaking to their community. It's important to talk about these issues. Public conversations about these issues can improve people's understanding, lead to changes in community attitudes and policy, and send clear messages of support to people who have experienced or witnessed violence. It can also encourage those who use violence to access support services.

Talking about violence, abuse and harassment can feel daunting. In Australia, one in four women and one in thirteen men have experienced violence by a current or former intimate partner. Your audience is likely to include people with personal experiences of violence, so it's critical to know how to talk about violence respectfully to avoid re-traumatising people.

This factsheet provides practical tips on ways to talk about gender-based violence that increase safety. It does not replace the need for training and support on how to respond to individual disclosures of violence.

## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

In Australia, we use both **violence against women** and **gender-based violence** to refer to acts that can cause harm to women. These terms emphasise how:

- sexual assault, and family and domestic violence disproportionately affect women
- violence occurs in a social context where power and resources are distributed unequally between women and men
- violence reinforces this gendered power imbalance.

These terms encompass all forms of gender-based violence that women experience:

- **Physical violence** can include punching, choking, and damaging property. It can be fatal due to physical injury.
- **Sexual violence** is any sexual activity that occurs without consent and includes assault, harassment, and coercion.
- **Emotional or psychological abuse** is used to threaten, intimidate, belittle or humiliate someone, and includes threats of violence or death towards a woman, her children, family or pets.
- **Spiritual or religious abuse** can involve forcing someone to participate or preventing someone from participating in spiritual or religious practices without their consent.

- **Financial or economic abuse** involves controlling access to money and possessions without consent. It can include limiting access to funds, forcing someone to spend money or sell belongings, or interfering with someone's schooling or work.
- **Technology-facilitated abuse** uses technology (such as emails, text messages or social media) to control, abuse, harass, punish and humiliate people.

These types of violence are usually not experienced in isolation, but as part of an overall pattern of abusive and controlling behaviour.

Intimate partner violence, domestic violence and family violence are terms used to describe violence that occurs in a current or former family or intimate relationship. They are often used interchangeably, but:

- **Intimate partner violence** may be more relatable for people – particularly younger people – who are in a relationship but are not living together or legally married, and for people in same sex relationships.
- **Family violence** is a description preferred by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because it captures broader kinship networks and community relationships. It is also often used as way of discussing gender-based violence that occurs outside the context of an intimate partner or ex-partner relationship.

We commonly use **victim/survivor** to refer to those who experience violence. This term recognises people are victims of crime and survivors with respect to their personal strength and resilience. Individuals will often have strong preferences about how they want to be identified, and this should be respected and reflected in your language. It's important to note that while violence has lasting impacts, it does not define the lives of those who have experienced it, or their futures.

## SAFETY AND WELLBEING IS PARAMOUNT

It's vital that any information you provide doesn't cause or contribute to the risk of harm, offence or distress of those affected by violence.

This can mean not sharing specific details about an incident, who was involved, what occurred and where it occurred – especially in circumstances where someone might be easily recognised (for example, someone from a residential college). In some cases it will not be appropriate, safe or legal to use real names or other identifying details about the victim/survivor or perpetrator.

Consider whether someone's culture, ethnicity, sexuality or other personal characteristics are important to the point you are making, and if not, don't raise it. Using these descriptions unnecessarily can inadvertently reinforce myths about the causes of violence or who it affects.

In any communication about gender-based violence, it is essential to respect victims/survivors' experiences and feelings by being compassionate, empathetic and supportive.

## ALWAYS INCLUDE SUPPORT OPTIONS

We know that when we talk about violence, there will be disclosures of people's experiences of violence. This is normal. Always use the opportunity to ensure people in your audience who may be looking for support and assistance know where to go. Provide details of relevant services where people can get support or further information, including services that meet the needs of people who face additional barriers to accessing safe support services, including women with disability, members of the LGBTIQ+ community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This could include supports in your institution as well as government or community domestic, family or sexual violence services in your local area. An example might be:

In an emergency or if someone is in immediate danger, call 000. Any student or staff at [the university] wishing to report a sexual assault should contact [support service]. 1800RESPECT, the national sexual assault, domestic or family violence hotline, is available 24 hours a day on 1800 737 732 or visit 1800RESPECT.org.au. MensLine Australia is a telephone and online counselling service for men, on 1300 78 99 78 or mensline.org.au.



If a conversation about violence against women is happening in your community, it is important to recognise this will raise a range of emotional and behavioural responses. **Even if you cannot legally or safely comment about a specific incident, you can still encourage anyone feeling distressed or concerned to access support services.** Addressing the conversation is a separate action to responding to an incident, but is still an important part of increasing safety.

## NAME VIOLENCE AND ABUSE FOR WHAT IT IS

Where it's legally possible, use terms like 'violence against women', 'sexual assault', 'sexual harassment', 'image-based abuse' or 'stalking'. This helps contextualise gender-based violence as a widespread and serious issue.

Avoid terms that can excuse or minimise violence, such as 'revenge porn' or 'private dispute'. As a general rule, use language that is in line with [Our Watch's media guidelines](#) or the [Australian Press Council guidelines on family and domestic violence reporting](#).

It's important to consider the context in which the violence occurred. Violence against women is usually not a single event, but a pattern of abusive behaviour. It may not be appropriate to use words like 'incident', which can give the impression that violence is an isolated and random event.



## FOCUS ON THE ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR, NOT WOMEN'S CHOICES

At all times, avoid suggestions that victims/survivors may be to blame or are otherwise responsible for the acts of violence against them. Avoid focusing on details or characteristics of the victim/survivor or their environment – such as what someone is wearing or their alcohol consumption – because this can be interpreted as victim-blaming.

Making a broad and inclusive statement – for example, that all women have the right to live free from violence and to be safe in their homes, on the street, or wherever they choose to go – can help push back on media or public pressure to identify specific actions or details of a victim/survivor, and help avoid victim-blaming.

## ACCOUNTABILITY AND KEEPING THE PERPETRATOR IN VIEW

Accountability for violence should always sit with the perpetrator. Try to keep the perpetrator in view – for example, it's preferable to say 'a man sexually assaulted a woman' instead of 'a woman experienced sexual assault'.

In some contexts, it is not appropriate to use the term 'perpetrator' – for example, when talking about children and young people who use family violence, or a woman who uses force in self-defence. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and some communities prefer 'a person who uses violence'.

## REFLECT THE EVIDENCE

It's important to discuss specific incidents of violence in a balanced way that provides context on the prevalence and drivers of gender-based violence in the Australian community. This helps people understand the evidence.

Be careful not to inadvertently reinforce common myths about gender-based violence. For example:

- Don't describe violence as being 'driven' by alcohol, drugs, mental health issues or stress. The evidence shows that while these issues may exacerbate the frequency or intensity of violence, they do not drive it.
- If a man kills his partner, it is important not to focus on family circumstances or stress. Identify the primary issue as violence against women, and gender inequality as the key driver of this violence.

Public communications can be an opportunity to challenge community views about consent or gender stereotypes (particularly about women's and men's sexuality) that condone or excuse violence.

Do not use language that questions women's allegations of violence. The evidence shows that it is more likely that women do not report violence for fear of having their motives questioned, and that false allegations are far less common than underreporting and false denials by perpetrators.

## PREPARE FOR RESISTANCE

Public discussion and commentary on violence against women can be met with negative reactions or backlash. If you can, put in place processes to manage negative reactions before you make a public statement about violence against women. This can include monitoring social media, and encouraging people to look after themselves and their colleagues and to practice self-care. Further information can be found in Our Watch's [practice guidance on dealing with backlash](#).

## RESPONDING TO MEDIA REQUESTS FOR COMMENTS

When discussing violence against women in the media, consider referring journalists to the [Our Watch guidelines](#). Reporting of violence against women is regulated and restricted by complex and variable Commonwealth, state and territory laws, and journalists should be aware of their publication's guidelines and local laws.

## SUPPORTING VICTIMS/SURVIVORS WHO ARE CONTACTED BY THE MEDIA

Journalists may approach victims/survivors to tell their story. With the right support, victims/survivors can share their stories safely to put a human face to the statistics about violence against women and challenge misconceptions. Doing so can also empower victims/survivors in their personal journey of recovery.

It's important to consider the limits of your institution's capacity and capability. Universities can let people know what support is available for people before, during and after their media engagement – such as counselling, security arrangements, and referrals to specialist services.

Specialist family, domestic and sexual violence services are generally best placed to act as a point of contact when the media requests to speak to victims/survivors. Specialist services have the expertise to support victims/survivors who want to share their stories, and can provide appropriate debriefing and support mechanisms. They can help plan for current and emerging safety issues (such as social media safety and public backlash), and help with a plan for the day the story comes out.

## USE APPROPRIATE IMAGERY

It's important that images don't inadvertently disempower victims/survivors or perpetuate stereotypes about gender, race, disability, sexuality and age. As a general rule, avoid images that portray victims/survivors as drunk, helpless, or cowering, or suggests that only physical violence is serious.