

# Communicating with purpose

A guide to gender-based  
violence prevention  
communication in higher  
education



**Our  
Watch**



Preventing violence  
against women

This guide was developed in consultation with communications professionals from Victoria University, University of Technology Sydney and Flinders University.

For more information on the prevention of gender-based violence in universities, visit [ourwatch.org.au/universities](https://ourwatch.org.au/universities).



## Acknowledgements

This guide was published on Wadawurrung country in Victoria, Australia, in November 2024.

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-Indigenous 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*, there is an 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 experience violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Indigenous women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 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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# About this practice guide

**All members of the higher education community deserve to study, work and live in a safe environment, free from gender-based violence.**

Communications professionals in universities play a vital role in shaping how gender-based violence and gender inequality are addressed, whether through proactive campaigns, engagement of leadership, or day-to-day communications with internal and external stakeholders.

This practice guide offers guidance and support to universities on crafting communications that drive cultural change as part of a whole-of-institution approach to preventing gender-based violence.

The guide aims to equip communication professionals with tools and tips to effectively contribute to gender equality and violence prevention through clear, consistent, and impactful messaging.

Every communication, whether it's a press release, media comment, email to students, or even a campus poster, carries the potential to reinforce or shift social norms. Inclusive and evidence-based language that challenges harmful and rigid gender stereotypes is essential to creating a university environment where everyone feels valued and respected. With each message, communications professionals within universities have the opportunity and accountability to reflect values of equality, respect, and inclusivity, as aligned with the university's strategic goals.

Information and advice from this guide can be used by a range of staff and selectively incorporated into training sessions, style guides, program design, and formal approaches to crafting communications within the remit of individual institutions.



# Tips on a page

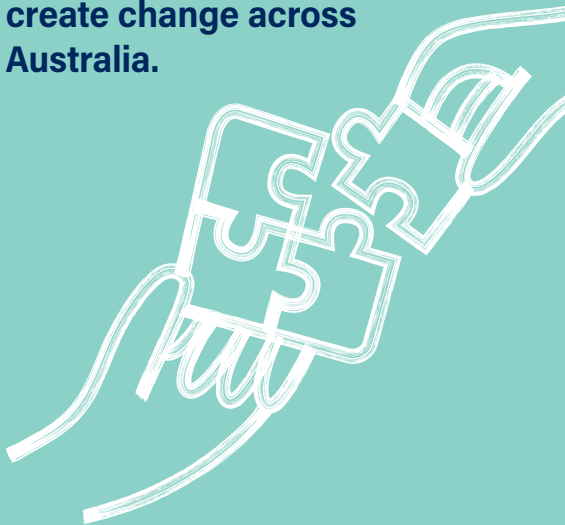
- 01** **Develop a set of key messages adapted for different target audiences**, with clear guidelines on what to say, what to avoid, and how to frame issues around primary prevention to ensure consistency and clarity of internal and external communications.
- 02** **Clearly link gender inequality to gender-based violence** and highlight the role of universities in prevention efforts.
- 03** **Develop tailored messaging** that directly addresses the drivers and reinforcing factors of gender-based violence.
- 04** **Communicate a shared vision** grounded in values and evidence that reflects that the majority of the Australian population rejects gender inequality and violence.
- 05** **Adopt empowering, strengths-based language** that is framed to encourage the university community to understand their role and feel motivated to contribute to ending gender-based violence.
- 06** **Consider the multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion and discrimination** experienced by communities across the university when framing messages on primary prevention to help foster a university environment that is more inclusive and effective.
- 07** **Embed lived experience into messaging in a safe and ethical way**, guided by victim-survivors and people with lived experience.
- 08** **Equip university leaders to effectively promote and model gender equality and respect**, with consistent communication that clearly articulates the university's commitment to ending gender-based violence.
- 09** **Develop tailored messaging for internal audiences** to convey the university's commitment to fostering a culture of equality and respect and preventing gender-based violence among staff and faculty.
- 10** When responding to or communicating about incidents of violence, ensure you **provide information about how individuals can access support and pathways to report**. Ensure communications on incidents correctly attributes accountability while acknowledging the complex legal context in which it may occur.
- 11** **Utilise a diverse representation of male voices** in your communications to challenge harmful stereotypes, encourage active bystander intervention, highlight the university's commitment to creating safe university environments; and to emphasise that gender equality benefits everyone.
- 12** **Prepare for resistance and backlash** to prevention efforts, framing messaging as part of a broader organisational commitment.

# Our Watch's role

Our Watch is Australia's leader in the primary prevention of gender-based violence, that is - stopping violence before it starts. Our Watch's vision is an Australia where women\* and their children live free from all forms of violence.

Guided by robust national and international research and evidence, Our Watch works to embed gender equality and address the drivers of violence wherever people in Australia live, learn, work and socialise.

Our Watch works in partnership with governments, communities, the prevention workforce, and leaders across a wide range of sectors to create change across Australia.



# Educating for Equality

The *Educating for Equality* model provides Australian universities with a whole-of-university approach to guide, support and build upon existing work to promote gender equality and prevent gender-based violence in universities.

It draws on the national and international evidence base including *Change the story* - Australia's national framework for the primary prevention of violence against women, including gender-based violence.

The model offers practical tools and resources to support a primary prevention approach in universities that is holistic and underpinned by long-term strategy and coordination across all 'domains' of a university. It highlights the role everyone within a university must play in creating a culture where rigid gender stereotypes are challenged, gender-based discrimination is unacceptable and gender equality is actively promoted and modelled.

This model can also support or complement the achievement of external benchmarks, including SAGE Athena Swan, Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) Employer of Choice for Gender Equality, Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI), Pride in Diversity Index, Australian Network Disability Index and Welcoming Universities.

Within *Educating for Equality*, internal and external university communications are identified as key enablers in prevention work and the whole-of-university approach.

This practice guide can be used to complement current and future work in implementing *Educating for Equality*, or as a standalone prevention resource for university staff.

\*The term 'women' that is used throughout this guide refers to anyone who identifies and lives as a woman, which includes cisgender and trans women.

# Communicating primary prevention

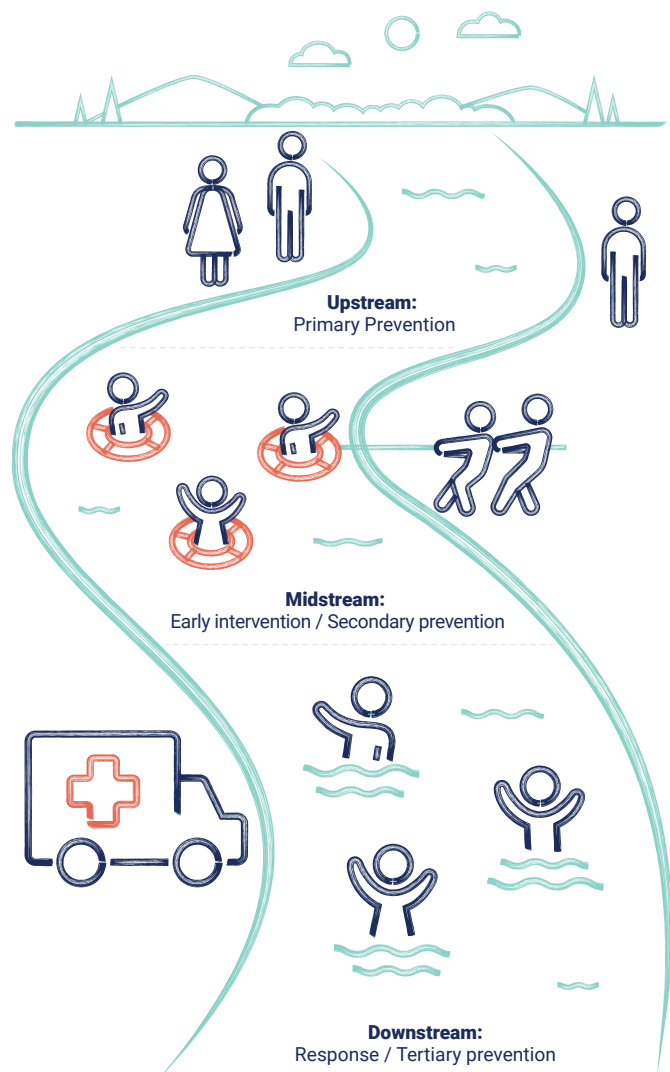
**University communications activities can not only raise awareness of the support services available to people affected by violence, but they can also promote the university's commitment to preventing gender-based violence.**

Research shows that gender-based violence arises in the social context of gender inequality and that this violence has distinct gendered drivers. Gender inequality occurs when men, women and gender diverse people do not have equal social status, power, resources or opportunities, and their voices, ideas and work are not valued equally by society.

Primary prevention means stopping gender-based violence before it starts. Primary prevention strategies address the gendered drivers of violence – the underlying social structures and behaviours that increase gender-based violence.

Preventing violence means implementing primary prevention initiatives across all the places we live, work, learn and socialise, like educational institutions, sporting clubs, workplaces, the media and at home.

Effective communications objectives within universities require a clear understanding of the link between gender inequality and gender-based violence, and that universities are a key setting where primary prevention of gender-based violence initiatives can be implemented.



# Communicating the gendered drivers of violence

***Change the story*** - Australia's shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children - identifies four expressions of gender inequality that increase the likelihood of gender-based violence occurring.

These are known as the 'gendered drivers'. Gendered drivers are the factors rooted in gender inequality that contribute to gender-based violence.

*Change the story* also identifies reinforcing factors that can increase the frequency or severity of gender-based violence such as harmful alcohol and drug use, gambling, the normalisation of violence, and socio-economic disadvantage.

Although addressing them on their own will not prevent all forms of gender-based violence, actions must be taken to address these reinforcing factors across all levels of society to minimise their impact on gender-based violence, as well as reduce the other societal impacts and harms resulting from them.

»» For more information on the gendered drivers of violence in a university setting, see Our Watch's *Educating for Equality* model.





## Driver 1

In universities, **excusing or minimising gender-based violence** and sexual harassment (e.g. dismissing women's experiences of sexual harassment, or sexually suggestive comments, or jokes that intimidate or offend), or **trying to justify** why the violence occurred.

### Action 1

#### Challenge condoning of gender-based violence

##### Example

Create a communications campaign targeting community attitudes and social norms that condone violence.

## Driver 2

Gender inequality in universities resulting in **men dominating decision-making** and limits to the independence of women and gender-diverse people. (e.g. an unequal number of women and gender-diverse people in leadership roles).

### Action 2

#### Promote inclusive gender equality, safety and respect

##### Example

Increase and retain women in senior leadership positions and decision-making roles through training and reviews of gender-bias in recruitment, retention & promotion.

## Driver 3

**Rigid gender stereotyping** which limits the ways people can express themselves (e.g. making assumptions that certain academic pursuits are better suited for women or men).

### Action 1

#### Challenge gender stereotyping

##### Example

Embed communications across the university that challenges gender stereotypes and celebrates diversity.

## Driver 4

Male peer relations that **disrespect women and each other** (e.g. hazing or chants that degrade women, unwanted touching or sexual gestures, excusing a peer's disrespectful behaviour, discouraged from taking a stand because they fear rejection by their male peers).

### Action 1

#### Support and engage men to promote positive masculinities and supportive male peer relationships

##### Example

Work with student leaders to understand and model respectful, ethical, safe and equitable behaviours and relationships in their student accommodation setting or club.

## Reinforcing Factors

### 01

Condoning of violence in general.

### 02

Experience of, and exposure to, violence.

### 03

Factors that weaken prosocial behaviour.

### 04

Resistance and backlash to prevention and gender quality efforts.

# Language and framing

**When communicating about gender-based violence prevention, adopt empowering, strengths-based language. This includes avoiding rhetoric that could be seen as patronising or paternalistic.**

For instance, rather than framing efforts as “helping disadvantaged women and groups,” which implies a deficit, a more empowering approach would be “creating meaningful opportunities for all individuals to thrive in a safe and supportive environment.” This shift in language not only uplifts those affected but also encourages broader participation in solutions.

Older messaging models for primary prevention often used deficit frames, which risk making the challenge of gender-based violence seem overwhelming and the proposed solutions inadequate. In contrast, strengths-based language focuses on potential and progress, inspiring hope and action. See page 12 for more terminology reframing tips.

It is also important to approach people as capable agents who can make better choices when it comes to supporting gender equality and preventing gender-based violence. Lecturing or talking down to people can cause them to stop listening, so framing messages in an empowering way is key. Using positive messages helps avoid evoking feelings of fear, guilt, or shame, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic, which can further drive harmful attitudes. Communications regarding gender equality and primary prevention should always be framed in ways that encourage the university community to understand their role and feel motivated to contribute to ending gender-based violence.

*Common Cause Australia's* Vision-Barrier-Action framework sets out a pathway for communicating the change we want to see:

- Our **vision** is a future where gender equality is the norm, and gender-based violence no longer exists, reflecting our shared values of respect, fairness and safety.
- The **barrier** to achieving this vision lies in deeply ingrained attitudes, stereotypes, and power imbalances that continue to support and drive gender-based violence.

To overcome this, we need to take **action** by challenging these harmful norms, educating communities by highlighting solutions, and empowering individuals to advocate for equality and respect in all aspects of life.

»» For more tips on framing gender equality, see VicHealth's *Message guide*.

»» For more information on values-based messaging for primary prevention, see Connecting Communities' *Communicating for Connection*.

## Communicating values

A university's values shape how it sees itself and how others view it, highlighting what makes it unique, its culture, and its connection to the community and other sectors and industries. When these values are deeply and authentically embedded in the university's culture and consistently demonstrated in internal and external communications, they resonate with staff and students.

Using values-based messaging means starting with widely shared values, like respect, fairness, and safety, to guide the conversation. Grounding your communication in the university's values helps create a sense of shared purpose and encourages everyone to contribute to lasting positive change.

## Intersectionality

Communications professionals in higher education play a critical role in raising awareness about how gender inequality and other forms of inequality, such as racism and homophobia, intersect to shape experiences of violence. This approach, often referred to as 'intersectionality', highlights the importance of addressing multiple, overlapping forms of discrimination that contribute to gender-based violence.

Communicating about primary prevention efforts with an intersectional lens ensures that prevention initiatives are inclusive and consider the diverse experiences of the university community. By framing messages that acknowledge and address these intersecting inequalities, communications professionals can help foster a university environment that is more inclusive and effective in preventing gender-based violence, regardless of background or identity. This approach can guide the development of campaigns, events and associated speaker selections, and educational content that promote gender equality while addressing broader systemic inequalities, ultimately contributing to a safer and more equitable university community.

## Sharing lived experience

Embedding lived experience into communications is vital for effectively preventing gender-based violence. Engaging victim-survivors to share their stories can have a powerful impact, but it's essential that these messages are authentic and empowering. Storytelling must always be safe and ethical, guided by the victim-survivors themselves to ensure their voices are respected and their experiences are shared on their own terms. Victim-survivors should not be pressured or encouraged to participate in communications activities unless they are very comfortable, they understand how their stories will be used, and are at a stage that they can reflect and share openly without contributing further to their trauma.

Building long-term partnerships with people, communities and organisations who have lived experience or expertise in intersectional approaches helps to create genuine, relatable messages that resonate with diverse audiences.

» For more information on taking an intersectional approach to preventing gender-based violence, review Our Watch's [\*Educating for Equality\*](#) framework.

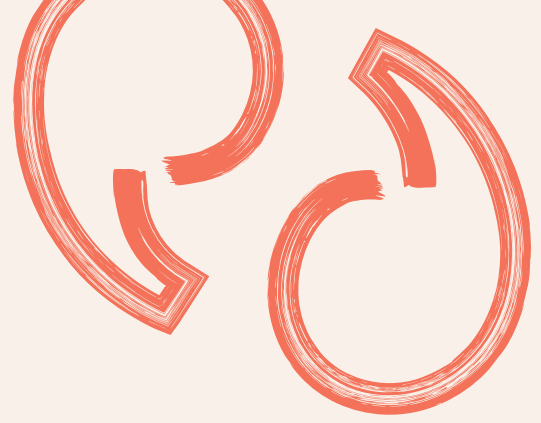


### Important!

Universities must ensure their policies and systems are set up to support those who have or are experiencing violence. A positive outcome of this work is that people who have experienced violence will possibly ask for help. Your university should be prepared to handle these disclosures sensitively and effectively before engaging in work to prevent gender-based violence.

# Terminology

<b>Problematic language</b>	<b>Preferred language</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<b>Perpetrator, offender, respondent</b>	Person using violence, young person using violence, man using violence	By emphasising behaviour over identity, this approach shifts the focus from labelling the individual to addressing their behaviour, which reduces stigma and promotes accountability and the possibility of change.
<b>Family violence, domestic violence, violence against women</b>	Gender-based violence	This broader term aligns with efforts to address systemic power imbalances and promote a more comprehensive understanding of violence prevention, acknowledging that violence can affect people of all genders, including women, men, and gender-diverse individuals. This term is the preferred term across the higher education sector.
<b>Victim</b>	Victim-survivor, person with lived experience of violence	The term victim-survivor acknowledges both the harm experienced and the resilience of individuals who have endured gender-based violence, emphasising agency, recovery, and the ongoing journey of healing.
<b>Cause of violence</b>	Gendered drivers of violence	The term highlights the specific social, cultural, and structural conditions where violence is more likely to occur, shifting the focus from individual incidents to the broader societal factors that sustain gender-based violence, making it clear that prevention requires addressing these underlying drivers.
<b>Opposite sex</b>	Person of another gender	This inclusive term acknowledges the diversity of gender identities beyond the binary categories of man and woman.
<b>Men and women/ladies and gentlemen</b>	People of all genders, folks, everyone, people	Using gender-neutral language promotes inclusivity, avoids reinforcing a binary understanding of gender, and fosters a welcoming and respectful environment for all individuals.
<b>Vulnerable</b>	People experiencing barriers to..., people at higher risk of experiencing violence, people experiencing multiple forms of discrimination	While some people may experience higher rates of violence (and severity), it is the perpetrators of this violence and the systems and structures (like sexism, racism, or ableism, etc.) that condone or justify violence and discrimination against them that renders some people more 'vulnerable' to violence than others. Experiencing times of vulnerability does not make someone vulnerable.



<b>Problematic language</b>	<b>Preferred language</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<b>Marginalised</b>	Excluded, discriminated against	The power is with the (usually dominant) group that identifies another group as marginalised.
<b>Toxic masculinity</b>	Unhealthy or harmful forms of masculinity	The new framing emphasises how societal norms and structures shape and reinforce specific masculine behaviours, focusing on the broader social context rather than labelling behaviours as inherently negative. This approach fosters a more constructive dialogue by acknowledging that these norms are socially constructed and can be challenged and changed, rather than presenting them as fixed and inherently harmful.
<b>Gender pay gap</b>	Gender pay discrimination	The new framing provides a clearer focus on the underlying issue of unequal treatment that leads to pay disparities and addresses the systemic biases and discriminatory practices that contribute to these disparities.
<b>Obligation (in the context of legislative requirements)</b>	Opportunity, responsibility, accountability	These terms reframe legal requirements as a proactive and beneficial endeavour rather than a burden. It emphasises that employers have the opportunity to create a safer, more inclusive environment, which can enhance their organisational culture and employee satisfaction.
<b>Masculinity</b>	Masculine stereotypes, gender stereotypes, old ideas about masculinity	Many people don't know what masculinity is and conflate it with 'men'. Referring to masculinity instead as a stereotype or an outdated set of ideas implies that it is both something undesirable and external to men. For more tips on framing masculinity, see VicHealth's <i>Framing Masculinity Message Guide</i> .
<b>Real man/men</b>	Decent or dignified men, good human beings	'Real men' panders to oppositional frames that suggest there is one ultimate way of being for men – typically associated with traditional masculine stereotypes. For more tips on framing masculinity, see VicHealth's <i>Framing Masculinity Message Guide</i> .

Stay updated on current language recommendations for the LGBTIQ+ community by referring to the Victorian Government's [LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Language Guide](#) (updated regularly).

## Case study

# Taking an intersectional approach

**Recognising the need to improve its communications related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and initiatives, the communications team at University Z aimed to develop more culturally appropriate and inclusive messaging that accurately represented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and experiences.**

To achieve this goal, the team engaged directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff, organising a series of remunerated consultation sessions with the university's Indigenous Student Association and Indigenous staff network to gather input on current communication practices and areas for improvement.

These consultations revealed the importance of using respectful language and terminology, the need for more diverse representation in university communications, the desire for greater visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander achievements and contributions and the value of incorporating Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.

Based on this feedback, the communications team created guidelines for using appropriate terminology and imagery, emphasising the diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The team also established a review process involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members to ensure cultural sensitivity in all materials. The guidelines were integrated into the university's broader tone-of-voice training, ensuring that all messaging reflects a nuanced understanding of diverse experiences.

To increase representation, the team launched a campaign highlighting the accomplishments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and alumni across various fields. They also worked with the Indigenous liaison office to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into broader university messaging, such as Acknowledgments of Country in official communications.

The team also organised cultural awareness training for all communications staff to deepen their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories. This training helped staff members approach Indigenous-related topics with greater sensitivity and respect.

To measure the impact of these changes, the communications team conducted regular surveys and focus groups with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff. The feedback showed a significant improvement in how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members felt represented and included in university communications.

By actively involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in the process, University Z was able to create more respectful and representative messaging that resonated with the Indigenous community across the university.

# Engaging people and motivating action

**Key to effective primary prevention messaging is engaging and educating different audiences in ways that resonate with them, and then motivating them to take action.**

This requires developing **tailored messaging** that directly addresses the drivers and reinforcing factors of gender-based violence (identified in *Change the story* above) and considers the multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion and discrimination affecting many communities. Think about your diverse university community demographics, and consider language, tone, communication medium, accessibility, and even power dynamics that might influence how and when different audiences absorb messaging about gender equality.

For content specifically curated for and by young people on sex, dating and relationships, visit [The Line website](#) and social media. This content is an excellent example of changing the style, format and language of prevention messaging to resonate with a specific demographic.

Communicating a shared **vision** of the future for everyone within the university community is also essential. This vision should be grounded in evidence-based research, reflecting that the majority of the Australian population rejects gender inequality and violence. This approach, referred to as social norming, works to reinforce the fact that the majority are already onside with gender equality and moving away from rigid ideas of gender.

It's not just what we say but how we say it that builds trust and influences others. When crafting messages, communications professionals should consider the **purpose**: is the message intended to educate or persuade people to act, or simply create awareness? For example, if increasing campus safety at night is the goal, ensure the call to action is clear, and constructed in a way that resonates with the target audience/s who can contribute to campus safety at night.

## Quick tip:

The messenger is just as important as the message itself. Peers, role models, leaders and communications professionals can play a powerful role in delivering messages that drive social change. For example, if your messaging is directed at students, have other students' voices and images at the forefront of your communications, or have students curate or participate in the development of content.



# Communications from leadership

**Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the values and culture of a university. What leaders expect, accept, and celebrate directly influences behaviour across the institution. To effectively prevent gender-based violence, it is essential that university leaders actively promote and model gender equality and respect, using consistent communication as a key tool.**

This requires leaders to clearly articulate the university's commitment to ending gender-based violence and embedding gender equality in their communication, whether addressing internal stakeholders or the broader community.

University leaders must be equipped to communicate on this issue effectively, with the support of university communications professionals. This involves not only preparing to promote and endorse values of equality and respect but also responding to resistance and contributing to reducing incidents of violence across campuses. This focus reinforces the university's commitment to preventing gender-based violence and aligns with workplace and higher education legislation and regulations, including within positive duty, (which places responsibility on employers to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace), WGEA, Gender Equality Act (VIC), TEQSA, the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, and the National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence.

A key challenge in leadership communications is balancing institutional reputation management with authenticity when addressing sensitive issues. Resistance to work preventing gender-based violence may come from leaders who

prefer to highlight only positive aspects of their university, which can dilute the impact of messaging.

However, leaders must avoid glossing over challenges, as a genuine acknowledgment of both successes and ongoing work fosters trust and transparency within the university community.

## Writing a communications plan

Gender-based violence requires a complex and invested communication strategy, especially given there are significant emotional, legal, and health implications. Plans should be co-designed with students, staff and stakeholders across the university community, including those most at risk of experiencing gender-based violence.





## How communications professionals can support leaders

- Craft and provide leaders with clear, evidence-based key messages that emphasise the university's commitment to gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence.
- Equip leaders with talking points, speeches, and press releases that highlight the university's efforts in these areas.
- Provide leaders with guidelines on appropriate and inclusive language, sensitive topics, and evidence-based frameworks, ensuring they can confidently speak on these issues.
- Facilitate open dialogue by organising events where leaders can engage directly with students and staff, encouraging conversations about gender equality and violence prevention.
- Build relationships with students, student unions, clubs and societies, residences and alumni to gather local stories and data that can support leaders in conveying the importance of preventing gender-based violence, ensuring these voices are ready to engage with media alongside leadership at key events.
- Monitor and provide feedback by tracking the effectiveness of communications related to gender equality and provide feedback to leaders on areas for improvement or opportunities for stronger engagement.

## Case study:

### Demonstrating leadership on the issue of gender-based violence

Victoria University (VU) developed a comprehensive strategy for communicating senior leadership's commitment to preventing gender-based violence.

The Vice-Chancellor used his platform to amplify the importance of addressing gender-based violence in higher education and the role all staff can play. This included written internal communications and emails, speaking before or at events, and participating in training opportunities alongside colleagues.

The communications team supported the Vice-Chancellor to host the CEO of Our Watch on the university's official podcast. The episode was recorded in front of a live audience during 16 Days of Activism to Prevent Gender-based Violence. This episode not only raised awareness about gender-based violence but also showcased the university's proactive approach to engaging experts in the field.

The Vice-Chancellor also recorded a personal video message that is played before all gender-based violence training sessions and workshops. In this video, the Vice-Chancellor speaks about why addressing gender-based violence is crucial for him personally and for the university as a whole, modelling behaviour that supports gender equality and violence prevention.

# Consistency of communications

**Consistent communication is crucial for shifting social norms and expectations around behaviour across the university.**

One of the most challenging messages to communicate to new audiences is the link between gender inequality and gender-based violence.

Repetition and consistency are essential to reinforcing understanding across the university community even when communications are tailored through a variety of formats and approaches.

## Quick tips on consistent communications

- ✓ Don't overcomplicate your messaging – stick to simple, clear messaging that highlights the link between gender equality and preventing gender-based violence.
- ✓ Schedule regular messaging across communications channels to align with relevant themes/ days/events to reinforce primary prevention messaging.
- ✓ Develop tailored versions of your key messaging for different communications platforms to target different audiences (noting the different ways you might communicate the same message on university-wide emails, social media posts, internal bulletin boards or bathroom door posters).
- ✓ Use practical and relevant examples so target audiences can see themselves and their experiences in how they relate to primary prevention.
- ✓ Keep communications fresh and engaging to avoid oversaturation of messaging (e.g. through visuals, new examples, quotes, and evidence).

## Case study

# Consistent communications done well

**University Y has developed a comprehensive strategy that leverages multiple channels and formats to reinforce its key messages around gender-based violence prevention.**

The university's approach began with a clear articulation of its key messages, including its values and commitment to gender equality, creating or updating messages to resonate with different target audiences and ensuring university brand and strategy alignment. Building on this foundation, they launched a multi-faceted campaign that included regular social media posts, internal newsletters, and campus-wide digital displays. Each piece of content reinforced the connection between gender inequality and gender-based violence, using consistent language across all platforms.

One particularly effective initiative targeting staff and academics was a video series, featuring short, impactful stories from students, staff, and alumni about their experiences and perspectives on gender equality. These videos were shared across university social media channels and embedded in relevant pages on the university website, providing a personal and relatable dimension to the broader message.

The university also integrated its prevention messaging into existing university events and activities targeting students. During Orientation week, new students participated in interactive workshops that addressed gender stereotypes and promoted respectful relationships. These workshops were complemented by a series of posters and digital signage around campus that reinforced key messages using eye-catching visuals and concise, impactful text.

The university's leadership played a crucial role in maintaining message consistency. The Vice-Chancellor regularly addressed the topic in their monthly all-staff emails, connecting gender-based violence prevention to the university's broader strategic goals. Additionally, deans and department heads were provided with talking points and resources to incorporate prevention messaging into their communications with staff and students.

For international students, the university created culturally sensitive materials that addressed specific concerns and were available in multiple languages.

# Internal communications

## Workplaces, including universities, have a responsibility and opportunity to shape positive and inclusive environments.

Gender-equal workplaces report higher retention rates, increased staff morale, and improved employee health outcomes.

Additionally, universities are required to publish gendered wage data under the Workplace Gender Equality Act (WGEA) and provide progress reports in compliance with

the Gender Equality Act (VIC), reinforcing their commitment to transparency and accountability in promoting gender equality.

Internal communications are critical in conveying the university's commitment to preventing gender-based violence among staff and fostering a culture of equality and respect. Universities should use any available internal channels, including newsletters, internal websites, emails, and in-person meetings and internal events, to advance key messaging tailored to internal audiences at the university.

### Quick tips on internal communications

- ✓ Ensure all relevant policies and procedures, such as those related to domestic and family violence support and gender equality, are easily accessible to all staff and students.
- ✓ Regularly communicate the university's efforts to prevent gender-based violence. This might include the launch of new policies or initiatives, delivering training to staff and students, revising codes of conduct, or reviewing occupational health and safety policies to address gendered risks.
- ✓ Build internal committees and networks of support, whether through formal working groups or existing professional relationships. This can help build and articulate messages that resonate across departments, faculties, and staff and student groups.
- ✓ Utilise opportunities to raise awareness about gender equality through events like guest speaker sessions, 'lunch and learns', morning teas, walks, or campaigns that bring attention to the issue.
- ✓ Ensure an intersectional approach is taken to communications that reflects the diversity of the broader community and reflects an understanding of the different barriers people or communities face in relation to gender-based violence.
- ✓ Build in two-way communications processes and feedback loops so that you are demonstrating you are reflecting and incorporating the views of your university community, and to better understand how your messages are being absorbed.
- ✓ Ensure events prioritise the equal representation of all genders, highlighting the voices of diverse men, women and gender-diverse people.

# External communications

## Did you know?

Encouraging and empowering students and staff to be active bystanders against sexism and sexual harassment on university campuses has shown to have a positive and enduring impact. Review VicHealth's [Guide to implementing a university-wide bystander email campaign](#) for more information.



**All stakeholder engagement, media/public statements, and other external communications should consistently reflect the university's commitment to promoting gender equality.**

A good first step is to ensure that the university's website prominently features public statements supporting gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence.

Celebrating progress, no matter how small, helps demonstrate that change is possible and sustains the energy needed to continue this important work. When sharing positive or success stories, it's important to balance them with an honest acknowledgment of ongoing challenges. Acknowledging both achievements and areas for improvement is key to maintaining credibility and building trust.

Universities can also act as a powerful influence on external stakeholders and partners by communicating their support for the prevention of gender-based violence and encouraging others to act. This can include messaging to contractors and suppliers, sector and research partners, and the wider community.

# Responding to incidents of violence

## **Communications professionals play a part in fostering a university culture where staff and students feel confident to speak up about sexism, harassment, discrimination, or violence, through:**

- Assisting to provide clear, accessible reporting mechanisms, which should be regularly communicated across internal channels, emphasising confidentiality and the support available to those who disclose experiences of gender-based violence.
- Encouraging open dialogue, normalising bystander intervention, and helping to ensure policies are well-known to staff and students and are easy to understand.
- Regularly sharing information about how individuals can support others to report or access support, contributing to a safe and inclusive culture.

Transparent and sensitive communication is essential when incidents occur. Acknowledging the complex reporting and legal contexts in which they occur, communications on this topic should include:

- Careful acknowledgment of incidents, ensuring privacy for those involved while demonstrating that the university is taking action.

- Avoiding victim-blaming language and focusing on perpetrator accountability and the supports available.
- Appropriate help-seeking information, highlighting the steps being taken to prevent future incidents.
- Communicating lessons learned, policy updates, and up-to-date information and available resources to further reinforce the university's commitment to safety, equality, and long-term cultural change.

This work may not always fall directly under the responsibility of communications teams. Instead, teams might collaborate with departments such as People and Culture, Equity and Diversity groups, researchers, and Student Services to elevate key messages identified by those areas. While communications teams can play a crucial role in reinforcing these messages, they would typically support rather than lead these initiatives.

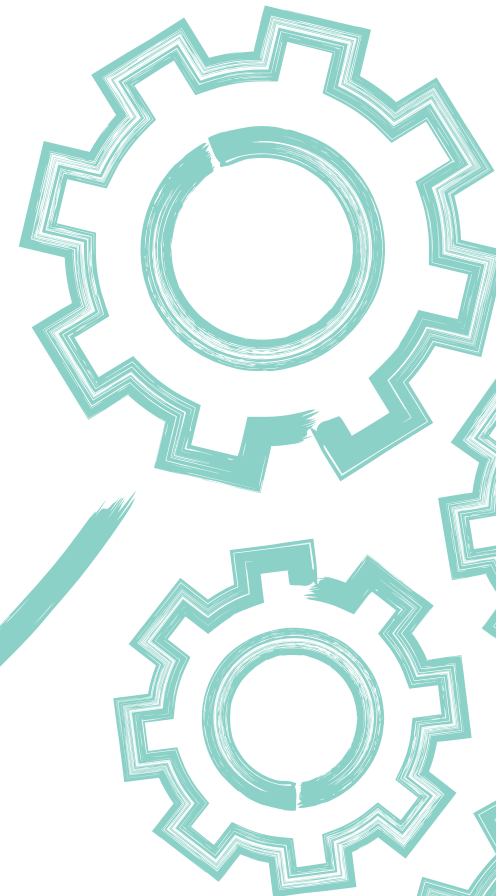
# Engaging men in primary prevention

## Tips for engaging men in the prevention of gender-based violence

- ✓ **Be intersectional** – this means thinking about the ways different men may experience power and privilege, as well as oppression and discrimination. For example, consider how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultures offer alternatives for how men can be and the important role they can play as custodians of Country and carers of family and community.
- ✓ **Be gender transformative** – this means actively challenging dominant ideas of what it means to 'be a man' and promoting alternatives based on equality and respect.
- ✓ **Maintain accountability to women and gender diverse people** – this means ensuring their voices are central in work to engage men.
- ✓ **Be strengths-based** – this means focusing on the values, beliefs and hopes that men hold in relation to gender equality that can be seen as strengths and empowering them to see their role in creating positive change. Many men are increasingly gaining confidence to challenge or resist pressure to conform to harmful masculine stereotypes – and many more would like to.
- ✓ **Look for solutions across all levels of society** – this means thinking about solutions not just at the individual level, but at the level of organisations, institutions and systems.

There are things all men can do to prevent gender-based violence. When engaging men to promote gender equality and prevent gender-based violence, it's important to use targeted and intersectional approaches that address the drivers of violence.

» For more information on engaging men and masculinities, see Our Watch's [Men in focus](#) resources.



## Case study

# Engaging men to prevent gender-based violence

**University W faced a critical challenge when open days revealed a significant decline in interest from prospective students, particularly women and gender-diverse people, following allegations of sexual assault on campus and high-profile media incidents.**

Past campaigns addressing gender-based violence had been ineffective, often focusing solely on the actions of victim-survivors and receiving lukewarm interest across the university community. Determined to change this narrative, the university's communications team developed a comprehensive strategy for the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence campaign focusing on engaging men in prevention.

The campaign, titled "Be the Change: Men Against Gender-Based Violence", was primarily digital with one in-person event. It incorporated best practices from *Educating for Equality*, emphasising inclusive planning, consistent messaging, and leadership engagement. The digital components included a social media series called "Voices for Change", featuring daily posts of male students, faculty, and staff sharing personal commitments to gender equality. A digital pledge wall, "Men's Commitment to Safety", allowed other male community members to publicly commit to specific actions promoting gender equality.

The campaign also featured a video series, "Redefining Masculinity," challenging rigid gender stereotypes and promoting healthier forms of masculinity. The centrepiece in-person event was the "Men's Summit for Gender Equality," a day-long conference featuring keynote speakers, panel discussions, and workshops, which was also live-streamed for broader accessibility.

Throughout the campaign, the team used strengths-based language and values-based communication, aligning with university values of respect, safety, fairness and inclusivity. They addressed intersecting forms of discrimination by ensuring representation of diverse male voices, including those from underrepresented communities. The campaign's key messages emphasised that gender equality benefits everyone, challenged rigid gender stereotypes, encouraged active bystander intervention, and highlighted the university's commitment to creating safe university environments.

The results were impressive, with a recorded increase in male student engagement compared to previous campaigns, positive media coverage, increased applications from students identifying as women or gender-diverse for the following academic year, and the establishment of a permanent "Men for Gender Equality" student group.



# Dealing with resistance and backlash

**Dealing with backlash and resistance is an integral and expected part of advancing primary prevention of gender-based violence initiatives within higher education.**

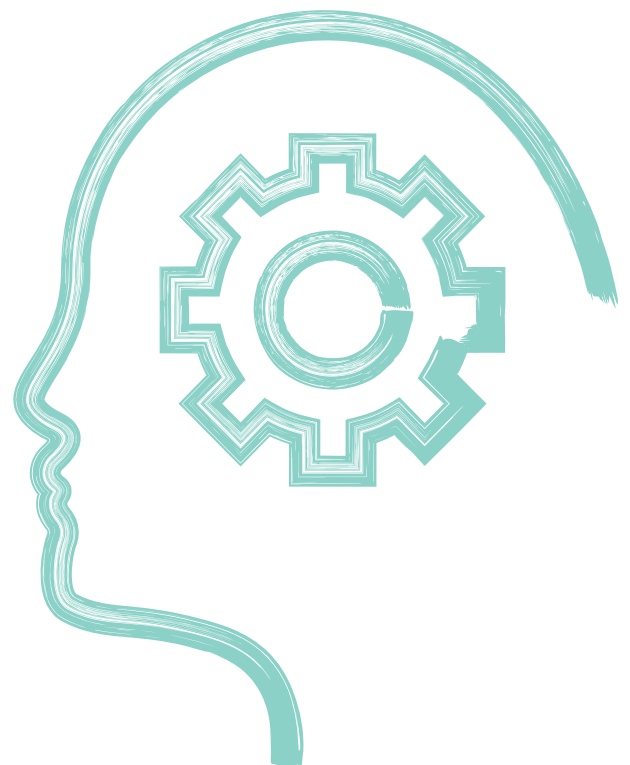
Communications can be used as a tool to reduce or address resistance and backlash, but it can also generate resistance and backlash. Working toward transformative change, especially when the change challenges entrenched norms and practices, can provoke defensiveness and unease among some individuals. Some resistance may be a reaction to specific communications, and some may even come from leaders who do not value the relevance or importance of prevention communications. Leaders may also dismiss initiatives due to external pressures or lack of confidence or tools to address the issues in meaningful ways.

To manage this effectively, it is crucial to prepare for resistance and backlash early, and frame messaging as part of a broader organisational commitment rather than targeting specific individuals. This approach helps to de-personalise the issue, reducing feelings of personal attack and encouraging a collective responsibility towards the initiative.

Involving all stakeholders from the start of primary prevention initiatives is key to mitigating resistance. By engaging staff and students early in the process, communications professionals can help create a sense of ownership and avoid the perception of being caught off-guard by new policies, practices or communications.

Prepare your team with well-thought-out responses to resistance or backlash to key messaging, as well as common questions and concerns that are likely to arise. This proactive approach ensures that everyone is equipped to address challenges confidently and constructively, fostering a more supportive environment for changes aimed at preventing gender-based violence.

»» For more strategies on dealing with resistance to gender equality work, see VicHealth's *(En)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives*.



# Key messaging

**Key messages help keep the university 'on message' by providing structure to communications, helping to guide conversations, and ensuring that all stakeholders understand the importance of gender equality in preventing violence.**

As a starting point, develop a set of key messages adapted for different target audiences within your university, and clear guidelines on what to say, what to avoid, and how to frame issues around primary prevention to ensure consistency and clarity of internal and external communications.

The following key messages draw on evidence from *Change the story* and *Educating for Equality*, and are intended to shape proactive, safe messaging that aligns with a university's commitment to promoting gender equality and preventing gender-based violence. These messages should be integrated into everyday communications to provide the university community with a clear understanding of why this work is essential.

Specific key messages will resonate with different members of the university community depending on their position, motivation, lived experience, level of interest and ability to contribute to promoting gender equality.

**The *Educating for Equality* key messages are divided into three themes:**

## 01

**Gender equality is fundamental to the university's mission and the personal and professional success of students, staff and alumni.**

- Gender equality is good for everyone.
- Gender inequality sets the scene for violence to occur.
- Everyone in the university community should be safe and well.
- Gender-based violence is a workplace issue.
- Effective leaders know that gender equality is not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do.

## 02

**Everyone within the university has a role to play in promoting and modelling gender equality and preventing gender-based violence.**

- Everyone in the university community needs to work together to promote gender equality, whether they are staff or students.
- All aspects of teaching and learning can model respect and equality, including what is taught and how it is taught.

- Every part of student life can reinforce gender equality and contribute to the prevention of gender-based violence.
- As workplaces, universities have a leading role to play in creating an environment free of violence, where people are safe, respected, valued and treated as equals at work.
- Universities can champion gender equality and prevent gender-based violence through research programs.
- Universities can take active steps to ensure their business and operations reflect their commitment to gender equality and violence prevention.
- Universities can promote gender equality by having a response system in place that is victim-survivor-centred and trauma-informed.

## 03

### **Universities are leaders in gender equality and preventing gender-based violence.**

- Universities can use their influence and expertise to inspire and support gender equality initiatives in the broader community.
- Universities are in a unique position to help future workforces achieve gender equality.

# Conclusion

## **This guide on communicating gender-based violence prevention in higher education emphasises the critical role that effective communication plays in fostering a culture of respect and equality.**

By equipping communication professionals with the tools to craft clear, consistent, and impactful messages, universities can drive cultural change and actively contribute to the prevention of gender-based violence.

By embedding these principles and practices into internal and external communications, institutions can create a culture where everyone feels valued and respected, ultimately leading to safer university environments.

The guide highlights that leadership commitment is vital for sustaining these efforts and that university leaders must model behaviours that reflect a genuine dedication to ending gender-based violence and promoting gender equality. This involves not only articulating a clear vision but also being transparent about ongoing challenges and successes.

The approach outlined in this guide serves as a roadmap for universities to align their communications with their strategic goals, ensuring that every message reinforces the shared values of safety, respect, fairness and inclusivity.

Follow the Our Watch social media channels for inspiration and feel free to share our content on your channels: [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [X](#), [YouTube](#).

[ourwatch.org.au](https://ourwatch.org.au)

**Our  
Watch**



Preventing violence  
against women