**Managing resistance to gender equality for policy and practice**21 March 2018

**Dr Michael Flood:**

Thank you for that. I wanted to acknowledge that we're on the land of the Wurundjeri people and I wanted to pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging.

Now, one thing that's happening and it's not happening by magic is that I've prepared a series of tweets to go out during my talks. I'm not secretly tweeting from my pocket, I've scheduled them to go out and they should roughly follow my talk or in fact preface my talk we'll see. I wanted to acknowledge very much that the resource you've got, this beautifully produced resource *(En)countering resistance* and this talk are based on a longer piece of work, and it was a longer piece of work that VicHealth commissioned me and Molly Dragiewicz and Bob Pease, two other important academics in Australia, to do a kind of evidence review and that's a 15,000 word evidence review. And I'm conscious of the fact that’s not out there in the world, but I'll make sure that we release it as quickly as we can. But VicHealth did a brilliant job of condensing and making more accessible and bringing to life the material in that evidence review for this publication, *(En)countering resistance*.

So let's start with some definitions. *Backlash:* resistance against progressive social change is a common feature of society. When patterns of inequality shift, when patterns of injustice shift, individuals and groups resist, they push back – particular individuals and groups who are advantaged by the status quo – and so I use the term backlash and resistance interchangeably. Any form of resistance to progressive social change. So resistance is resistance *to*. It’s resistance against a progressive policies, progressive initiatives and so on. And obviously we're focused on gender inequalities and I have a focus on those and also on violence against women, and I want to stress that there are many other ways in which gender inequalities are reproduced.

Resistance helps maintain gender inequality, but gender inequality is maintained by a whole lot of other things as well, a whole lot of kind of routine everyday processes that prop up gender inequality. The term backlash sometimes gets used for the more visible, aggressive, organized forms of backlash by anti-feminist men's groups and fathers’ rights groups. And certainly that's an important form of backlash, but the definition of backlash that were used in our evidence review is broader. It encompasses other forms of backlash and resistance.

So a few of the features of backlash and resistance. One you've already heard – whenever there’s progressive social change, whenever we make progress towards our goals of gender, a gender justice, social justice and so on, there's resistance; particularly from members of privileged groups. Members of privileged groups push back because of their material investment in privilege, because of their psychological investment in privilege.

So in a sense, backlash is a sign of progress as you've heard. And one way of putting this that I haven’t heard today is ‘if you don't catch shit, you're not doing shit’. In other words, if you're not provoking some kind of tension or hostility, you probably not actually doing much at all. But before we get too enthusiastic about the levels of hostility and resistance you get, backlash can be successful of course. So there are various examples in history where pushback against gender equality or pushback against violence prevention has actually been successful and privilege has been successfully restored.

Second point about resistance and backlash is of course they're contextual. They're shaped by their context, by their culture, by their country, by their workplace and so-on, so backlash looks different. Backlash/resistance probably looks different in the CFA from what it looks like in a large white collar workplace. Looks different again from what it might look like in other culturally and linguistically diverse communities and so on.

Another point about backlash is that backlash from resistance can be individual or collective. So for example, in an organisation, in that CFA or in your workplace and so on, there may be individual men who sit silently through the workshop, or tear down a poster, or criticize a program coordinator behind her back, or vote against the gender equality initiative at the board meeting. So resistance can be individual. Resistance can also be collective whether there are collective efforts to push back against gender equality. That might be formal where, for example, an anti-feminist men's group, like one in three Men's Health Australia, lodges a sex discrimination case or puts into submission or so on. It also can be informal when a group of mates, or male peers, criticize a particular initiative or act in some coordinated way. So resistance can be individual or collective and can be formal or informal. Couple of other things. It's more likely to come from the people who are advantaged by the status quo. In short, men are more likely to resist progress towards gender equality than women. And so you get greater levels of male defensiveness than female defensiveness but of course you do get it from women as well and I'll talk more about that in a minute.

So let's shift then to what backlash actually looks like. Classic form of backlash is *denial*: denying the legitimacy of the problem, the problem of gender inequality or the problem of violence against women. *Disavowal*: yes, it's important, but it's not my problem. What's it got to do with me? So, disavowing responsibility. *Inaction* is simply doing nothing obviously and organisations are really good at doing nothing, in relation to particular initiatives. *Appeasement* is kind of placating or pacifying: ‘yes, yes, it's important and we'll get to it soon’ or ‘yes, yes, we are doing something about that’. So in other words, trying to limit impact by placating advocates. *Appropriation* is sneaky. Appropriation is kind of pretending to adopt change while covertly undermining it. Even sneakier still is *co-option* where your political enemies or others use the same language you're using of equality or rights or justice or victims, but do so for reactionary, for conservative events. And of course there is active *repression* where a particular change initiative such as a sex discrimination policy or violence prevention initiative is actively shutdown or dismantled once it's begun. Some other words, you've got a continuum from kind of passive blocking techniques and inertia through to minimizing or co-opting right through to aggressive and hostile opposition. And in fact you can also think of that continuum in terms of where people themselves sit and where organisations themselves sit. I don't know if you can see the terms there, but we've got overtly hostile and opposed individuals or organisations up on the left to people who are interested but not engaged in the middle, to people down the right, people in organisations on the right who are active leaders. And this comes from Russ Funk, an American activist.

Let's look a little bit more at denial and I’ll focus on violence against women which is an issue that I'm particularly interested in. One classic bit of denial is simply to deny that the problem exists, to suggest that it's been exaggerated, it's not very common, or in fact, to rename it and redefine it out of existence, and shifts I think to more de-gendered terms such as family and domestic violence I think are problematic in that sense because of what they do and don't name. Another classic response of course is to blame the victims, is to say yes, this issue is important and women need to be more careful. Women need to protect their drinks or carry their keys in their fist to their car or so on. Of course we can deny the credibility of the message. It's exaggerated, it's untruthful, it's irrational and so on. We can attack the credibility of the messages and that's a particularly popular one. If you're a fan, and I really hope you're not, but if you're a fan of Mark Latham or Bettina Arndt, you'll see that those anti-feminist commentators routinely attack our motives and attack our kind of credibility. It's a witch hunt. I think it's particularly ironic to call this a witch hunt because historically witch hunts were about the policing of women and women's health and women's sexuality, and involve large numbers of murders and torture of women.

Anyway, let's call it a witch hunt. Let's talk about the domestic violence industry because of course everyone in this room who works on addressing violence against women is extremely well paid. So attack the messages and then finally reverse the problem. Adopt a victim position, claim reverse discrimination and so on. So these are some of the familiar tactics that we see. So where does this come from? Well, we shouldn't be surprised at all by resistance and backlash because sexist and violent supportive attitudes are alive and well in Australia. And in fact, VicHealth has been really, really good at collecting successive waves of data on community attitudes towards gender and violence, and we know from that, for example, that many people in Australia, more so men and women, but women as well, many people are far too willing to excuse domestic violence. We blame the victim. We don't know why women stay. We see women as liars making false accusations. We see men as lust driven pigs who can't be held responsible for their sexual behaviour and so on. So those kinds of violence supportive attitudes feed into resistance and backlash.

There's also sexism, and if we look at the ways we raise boys and men and girls and women, we see sexism is a routine part of that and the scripts we give men for how to be men are particularly dangerous here because we socialize men to be afraid of femininity, to see women and femininity as lesser, to suppress stereotypically feminine qualities like empathy and nurturing and compassion. And that plays itself out, that in poor responses to victims. Men are less likely than women to recognize sexism and when they do, they're less empathetic to the victims of sexism. So in other words, resistance and backlash are entirely predictable. Entirely predictable because of sexist social norms and that does mean that they're more common in context workplaces for example, or sporting settings that are more sexist, more patriarchal; in other words, they have stronger beliefs in gender segregation and women's inferiority to men. Of course women too may resist and criticize gender equality initiatives and that's shaped by some of the same sources as men's including kind of hostile stereotypes of feminism and so on.

But backlash is also and probably above all about defence of privilege. It's a response by dominant groups who feel threatened by challenges to their privilege and one of the classic ways to respond of course, is to deny that privilege and there are some wider trends that shape this as well. One is a kind of diluted watered down version of feminism. It's not really feminism at all by this point in which attention to sexism and patriarchal inequalities is pushed aside and instead there's this kind of watered down idea of women and men as equally limited by gender roles. There's also the idea of post-feminism, the idea that feminism was important but we don't need it any more. We've achieved gender equality now. Gender inequality is a thing of the past, feminist activism is no longer required, this kind of idea of post-feminism. There’s also neo-liberalism and neo-liberalism briefly involves a kind of focus on individual rights, individual empowerment, and the economic market as the solution to any social problem. That makes it harder for feminists and others to talk about structural inequalities, to talk about social solutions to those inequalities. So that's a very quick account of what backlash and resistance are, what they look like, where they come from.

So what can we do about it? Three sets of strategies, in fact I noticed that the green resource adds a fourth set of strategies to do with individual responses and that's important, I'm glad that that's there. But the three sets of strategies are first about framing how we articulate or represent or describe that goal. So in other words, the first set of strategies are ideological or discursive or rhetorical. They're about the content and meaning of our efforts. Second set of strategies are how we teach about it, how we engage people in learning about our initiatives. And the third set of strategies are to do with organisations or institutions about organisational processes, structures and so on. So let's look briefly at framing strategies. First point I should make, and it's not on this slide, the first one I should make is that how we frame gender equality initiatives is absolutely critical, and the ways we should frame gender equality initiatives to respond to resistance, are actually the same strategies we should use more generally, the way we should make the case for gender equality initiatives more generally.

The first thing is when it comes to gender equality, we've got to start with a robust feminist framework. It's got to be a framework which is conceptually clear, which is theoretically insightful, which is politically progressive, which is practical. So that's setting the bar fairly high if you like. Where to start with is what we understand by gender. We know that gender is personal, for example, gender is in part about each of your and my sense of identity, a sense of self and how we perform that in our everyday lives and interactions. And in fact, I was acutely conscious um out there having morning tea, of the different ways in which gender can be performed, consciously in positive and negative ways. But gender is also interpersonal. Gender is about men's and women's relations, about the organisation of family life, friendships, workplace relations and so on. But perhaps most importantly of all, gender is about wider structures and institutions and social relations. Gender involves inequality, systematic inequalities of power involving disadvantage for women and privilege for men. Gender intersects with other forms of social difference and inequality. This is the kind of intersectionality 101 and of course we need some kind of progressive or emancipatory agenda. We need an agenda of reducing gender inequalities, building gender justice. So that's kind of feminism in 200 words or less.

As part of this work, articulating the benefits, articulating a gender equality initiative, we need to spell out the rationale why we're doing this, what the benefits are. So one thing to do in a workplace, for example, is encourage the expectation of positive outcomes, that this will be a good thing. This will be good in terms of more harmonious relations, in terms of productivity, in terms of job security, in terms of competitive advantage for the organisation and so on. It's also important to find shared principles and goals on which we can draw. There will be greater buy in and less resistance if people see the work as consistent with their own values and goals and consistent with the mission, the goals of the organisation itself. There are values and principles that many of us hold. Values of democracy and fairness and equality, a fair go, on which we can draw. There are universal principles, principles of human rights that are important. Given that men in particular are more likely to resist, we have to make the case to men that men will benefit, that men will benefit from progress towards gender equality. And there's research to show that if men see gender equality as a win-lose situation, there's something where men lose and women gain, they're far less likely to support such initiatives. We have to make the case to men that it's win-win, that in fact men themselves will benefit in important ways from progress towards gender equality. And what this is about is focusing on privileged groups in this case, men, and their enlightened self-interest. They're kind of alternative or anti-patriarchal self-interest. And in the same way anti-racist work needs to appeal to white people. And anti-homophobic work needs to appeal to heterosexual people and find ways in which they will benefit from progress. So when it comes to men, for example, men will benefit in terms of freedom from toxic masculinity, freedom from narrow constructions of masculinity which are dangerous for women, but also limiting for men themselves. Men will benefit in terms of our interpersonal relations, in terms of benefits to the women and girls we care about, but in also of course to the women and girls we don't know and will never know. Men will benefit also in terms of benefits to our workplaces and our communities, gender equality has benefits for the communities and workplaces in which we live. Now there's a caveat here, there's an important qualification to this. Men will have to give up some unfair privileges. So for example, if in your organisation, ninety-five per cent of the corporate board positions are held by men – and that's true nationally in Australia, men are ninety-five per cent of the holders of those positions – some of those men are going to have to leave the room. OK? There's going to have to be some giving up of unfair privilege. Likewise at the moment, if I send in my CV and the exact same CV is sent in with a female name, my CV will be judged more highly. Obviously there's more competence because of my male name. That's not fair and I and other men will have to give that up.

We also have to address some claims about male disadvantage, we have to address men's disempowerment. Now that disempowerment can be imagined, it also can be real. Some men feel dis-empowered when they're not. What's happened is they've lost unfair advantages that they had taken for granted. So the discomfort those men feel is not the discomfort of real oppression, but it's the discomfort of losing privilege. There's a bumper sticker; ‘When you're used to privilege, equality can feel like oppression’. So we have to address that though, that feeling of disempowerment. However, some men genuinely are disempowered. Think of the circumstances of many Indigenous men, think of the forms of formal and informal discrimination that queer and trans men face. So there are genuine forms of disempowerment. When it comes to domestic violence for example, we have to address the claims made, for example, what about women's violence against men? And that is an absolutely predictable response. And so a good place to start is to say absolutely you have, we have to address violence against men. And violence against men is overwhelmingly by other men. We also have provide accurate critiques of the claims made about male perpetration and about female perpetration and male victimization. We need good understandings of the data, what the data actually show us, and we need critiques of the kinds of methods and frameworks we use to make those false claims about domestic violence. Now this is all sounding a bit dense, but this spells this out in a bit clearer detail.

Essentially if you just count violent acts, if you just count, ‘have you ever in the last year experienced any of these violent acts by a partner’ then if you just do that, then males looked like about one in three, or one in four of the people who experienced any violent acts by another sex partner in the last year. So some people go, oh, men are one in three of the victims of domestic violence. They're really not. Because as soon as you ask about fear or injury or self-defence or context or history, as soon as you really start asking anything at all about male and female victims’ experience you find that it's not one in three at all. In fact, men are likely to be about one in 10 or one in 15 of the genuine victims of domestic violence. So in other words, if you're dealing with this issue, you need to do your homework and there are good resources out there for making exactly those rebuttals, those counter arguments to those false men's rights claims.

There are other resistant understandings that we need responses to too. So when it comes to violence against women, one classic response from men is ‘not all men’ in fact it was a Hashtag, #notallmen, and yes, we do have to recognize that men are not the same, all men do not have the same risk, the same likelihood of perpetrating violence against women. At the same time, that idea that they're the bad man over there and I'm one of the good men, that's a bit too simple. We have to recognize, for example, that some men control or coerce their female partners without ever laying a hand on them. Comforting distinctions between good and bad men miss the kind of continuum of behaviour among men, and of course non-violent men like me might condone violence or reproduce gender inequality in other ways.

Another response is, well, why not address all violence? Why are you focused on violence against women? Isn't all violence bad? Yes, it is. All violence is bad. Just like all cancer is bad. That doesn't mean we shouldn't have research or health programs focused on particular forms of cancer because in fact different forms of violence such as violence against women, violence against men and so on, have different dynamics, different drivers, and therefore require focused responses. So in other words, we need well-rehearsed responses to these kinds of forms of pushback. We also have to directly criticize anti-feminist backlash. The report says focus on the movable middle. Now I think that's important, but we also have to robustly criticize men's rights and anti-feminist arguments. We have to offer a kind of energetic critique of those men's rights arguments. Now I'm going to not do justice to the two other strategies, but teaching and learning strategies are about very much how we engage people, how we engage people in reflection and discussion on these issues. And the report runs through a range of key strategies to do with bringing people into those conversations in productive ways.

The final area it addresses is about organisations and we simply won't make change without senior support, without getting organisations on board. If people in your organisation clearly see that there's institutional support, there's institutional leadership, then that will make a difference. That will make it much more possible that you can minimize resistance and make progress in building gender equality. The *(En)countering resistance* resource and the longer evidence review are rich with strategies for encountering and responding to resistance and backlash. You will face backlash, but there are effective ways to lessen it. Thank you.