Preventing violence against women: Community of practice reflections

In April 2014, VicHealth hosted its second Community of Practice Forum for advanced practitioners of primary prevention of violence against women. The theme of the forum – *Managing Difficult Conversations* – set the stage for practitioners to share the challenges and successes they experience in building relationships and communicating the key messages of preventing violence against women in a range of settings and roles.

The purpose of this paper is to capture the themes and highlights from the day, and to share this practice knowledge more broadly in the emerging field of preventing violence against women.

The content and quotes reported here come directly from forum participants.

Communication is our key work

Our work is about social change, so we engage with a broad range of people who are potential or existing allies, partners or ambassadors. In that process, conversations can occur that are challenging for both PVAW practitioners and those with whom we engage. It's important to learn how to manage these conversations because they are a core part of our work. Difficult conversations are not only inevitable, they are essential.

> *We need difficult conversations for change to occur.*

It's through conversations that we get to name, examine and potentially shift the personal and cultural attitudes and practices that contribute to violence against women.

Why do difficult conversations arise?

Discussing men's violence against women, and its determinants such as gender inequity, can create discomfort for a range of reasons.

The topic of primary prevention of violence against women:

- is still a relatively new issue to be discussing in workplaces, sporting clubs, schools and faith settings, so there's often a lack of understanding and a sense that this is not 'our' business.
- challenges the sexism, misogyny and discrimination that exist in the community.
- brings attention to something that is entrenched, the accepted norm, so disrupts the status quo.

- confronts people's sense of identity as well as their political ideology. *It relates to how much people believe government should 'interfere' with people's lives and how much personal freedom we should have to behave as we like.*
- questions a man's right to power, which can be threatening and create antagonism.
- generates fear of being implicated:
  - *Men fear being blamed; they think you are having a go at them, so they become defensive. You have to be very careful with your language.*
  - *An organisation may fear how they might need to change, or how it will affect their professional practice or budget.*
- raises the complexities of the issue. *It's difficult to show how gender equity relates to violence against women in a short conversation.*
- is stigmatised. *There's a stigma attached to discussing gender equity. It's a great way to make a party go quiet. You get labelled a resident or crazy 'femo'.*

Practitioners can also contribute to a difficult dynamic in a conversation.

> *When you carry an urgent social issue, you can bring a 'you're either with me or against me' kind of attitude, which sets up a dualistic, right/wrong dynamic.*

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Conversations occur across the spectrum of spheres of influence

VicHealth's *Preventing Violence Against Women Framework for Action* details the range of factors that determine and contribute to violence against women at an individual, community, organisational and societal level (also known as an ecological approach). The work of a PVAW practitioner can involve engaging in conversations about charged issues, such as rigid gender roles, in a range of settings, and at different levels of influence. This can span discussions with family members through to senior managers and government ministers.

Underlying determinants of violence against women: Gender roles and relations		
Individual and relationship	**Community and organisational**	**Societal**
• Belief in rigid gender roles and identities and/or weak support for gender equality • Masculine orientation or sense of entitlement • Male dominance and control of wealth in relationships	• Culturally specific norms regarding gender and sexuality • Masculine peer and organisational cultures	• Institutional and cultural support for, or weak sanctions against, gender inequality and rigid gender roles

Priority settings for action		
• Community services • Local government • Corporate • Faith communities • Education	• Workplace • Cultural institutions and networks • Arts • Sport and recreation • Media and popular culture	• Health • Cyberspace and new technologies • Justice • Academic • Military and like institutions

Source: VicHealth 2007, *Preventing violence before it occurs. A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria,* Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

Difficult conversations: The bad and the ugly

In the day-to-day work of a PVAW practitioner, it's not uncommon to find ourselves in a conversation that ends in a position contrary to what we are trying to achieve. What factors are at play when conversations are poorly managed or end disastrously?

'Losing it' – in response to others' aggression or the build up from facing discriminatory attitudes over time.

> *I either get so angry or annoyed that I clam up, or I get right in there and it's two heads colliding.*

> *I was at a pub one night and there was a guy who asked me what I did. So I told him and the conversation went wrong right there. He took a very confrontational approach telling me how much men suffer violence, and how women lie and that men are more oppressed etc., etc. The problem was I thought, "I have to change this guy's opinion," and I proceeded to act as badly as him, rebutting anything he said, and the conversation disintegrated pretty quickly. I'd rather have thought, "If you want to think that, well, all I can do is just tell you what the facts and statistics are" and walk away from that situation.*

Close ties – the hardest conversations can be with people we have a close personal relationship with, such as family and friends.

> *What do you say when older relatives make comments such as "What's a man meant to do when a woman pushes his buttons?" or "Yes, but did you see the way that woman was dressed?"*

> *You have to make the decision whether it's worth pursuing the discussion, which could damage longstanding family relationships.*

Speaking up in social situations can feel too hard, or be a conversation-stopper.

> *After my 15 minute rant about conditioning [to my family], everyone just sat there in silence for about two or three minutes, then we went on to a completely different topic. We haven't talked about it since.*

For PVAW practitioners, the personal and professional completely overlap.

> *In other professions where that happens it would be a matter of course to have professional supervision on a regular basis. How can we make that happen?*

Sometimes it's difficult for conversations even to take place.

Bureaucratic blockages – formal or hierarchical environments can diffuse the work we are trying to do.

> *When working in organisations where there's a lot of bureaucracy, such as local councils, the conversations you start can get referred onto your manager, then onto someone else and you can end up not being involved at all, or the work doesn't go anywhere.*

> *When you're working with external partner organisations, you need to make sure the message gets carried up to the managers and the CEO, and doesn't just stay at a worker-to-worker level.*

The impossible – there will always be some conversations where it's just not possible to create change.

> *We will not get some people to see things in a different way – we have to live with that. I don't think we should feel the need to do the impossible.*

Difficult conversations: The good

Difficult conversations can be managed effectively. What approaches have worked well for advanced PVAW practitioners?

Having **time** to talk to a person, one-on-one rather than in a group, is one important condition for positive conversations.

> *When you can sit down with one person for a couple of hours and have the time to address the nuances and the complexities and let them give their story and talk about their own experiences, good conversations almost always happen.*

Allowing time to let emotional reaction pass and then returning to the conversation later also helps.

Working with people or groups that are **ready and receptive** helps the conversation flow. This can also be due to the skill of the PVAW practitioner assessing readiness and adapting accordingly, gauging what can be asked of others, and discerning how best to bring in active partners.

Trusting in the **power of a group to self-regulate:**

> *When you have a structure that creates a safe and respectful environment for having these types of conversations, the pointy issues still arise, but they don't tend to escalate as much.*

> *The group itself tends to regulate offensive behaviour. For example, once in a group a man said, "It's ok to hit a woman as long as it's below the neck." Just by allowing some silence and asking the group "What do others think about that?" another group member said "No. That would never be ok."*

Validating or simply listening to men's concerns or objections:

> *A council recently held an art installation about family violence. A man, who was quite aggressive and angry about the fact that the council was doing something about preventing violence against women while violence against men was a big issue too, approached a staff member. The staff member simply acknowledged everything he said: "Yes, you're right, there is violence against men. Yes, they need services too. I agree." Rather than trying to make her point she just listened and, by the end of the conversation, the whole thing turned around. He was asking about violence against women, what the stats were and he acknowledged, "Oh, that really is an issue."*

> *Be very present to what's happening in the conversation rather than holding so tightly to your own agenda that you think you've got to keep pushing it, regardless.*

Asking questions that prompt critical reflection:

> *Just asking, "Why do you think that?" can draw people out to explain more about why they hold a position. It can create a bit more space for people to reflect and re-evaluate what they are saying, which sometimes creates a shift.*

Depersonalising the issue:

> *Taking it away from the personal helps. For example, you can make it about the future and say "If we don't make change, 33% of these young girls will experience violence."*

The favourite quote of the forum was:

> *Aim to add light to the conversation rather than heat.*

What do I bring to the conversation?

There are a variety of tools that can help practitioners pause and reflect on the thinking processes at play during a conversation.

The 'Ladder of Inference', developed by organisational psychologist Chris Argyris, is one tool that prompts us to consider the bias we bring to a conversation. What data do we 'select' or ignore? What assumptions do we make? What conclusions do we arrive at? What beliefs do we base our conclusions on and are they well founded? And why have I chosen this course of action?
(See: www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_91.htm)

> *One assumption is that I can be independent of people who have the attitudes and beliefs that we are working to change. But we need to examine our own worlds. I have societal conditioning and biases in me as much as the next person.*

> *At one forum we ran, we looked around the room to see how people were engaging. One guy was constantly on the phone, shifting in his seat, not engaging. We thought "problem", "really resistant", "big issues there". The tendency to lean towards those assumptions isn't helpful in moving towards a greater understanding or critically reflecting on our own communication approaches and strategies.*

> *I can assume I'm already in a fight before it's even started.*

> *We 'select' data in that we focus on men's violence against women, but we could be better versed with data on violence in the broader community or that men experience. I've benefited getting my head around violence men experience, and it's led to useful conversations about masculinity and men's violence against each other. There are lots of themes that overlap with our work.*

> *We all acknowledge that we all do it [make assumptions] to various degrees. The challenge is to stop and reflect.*

Using a tool such as the Ladder of Inference can help steer conversations into more fertile ground by reducing the chances of jumping to conclusions, and helping us remain objective when working with or challenging others. It helps us understand how others interpret situations differently to ourselves and alerts us to our own tendency to filter out important information when it doesn't fit our world view.

Specific techniques and approaches that can help

Through role plays the group explored specific techniques and approaches that might help overcome resistance in conversations.

ROLE PLAY 1

A practitioner has a conversation with an African male elder about his involvement in a PVAW training program aimed at strengthening elders' skills to address violence in the community. The elder is annoyed at being asked to participate:

> *Why do you want men? It's a women's issue, do the program with them. We don't have time. Anyway we have mediation skills already and when there is a problem in the home, they come to us with their problems and we solve it.*

Consider:

- Is this 'difficult conversation' the right starting point? Has enough groundwork been done beforehand to prepare the way?
- Can I bring a champion to the conversation who has a good relationship with the community or client we are working with?
- Is there a mutual intent for the conversation or are the two parties on different pages? For example, preventing violence against women might not be the elder's agenda, but keeping families together and understanding why women leave their marriages could be.
- When there is strong resistance to talking about violence against women, related topics, such as respectful relationships, can offer a better starting point. This is about reading the audience, and meeting them where they are at, while being alert to maintaining the integrity of the message.

ROLE PLAY 2

A council CEO has signed-off a gender equity action plan. A PVAW practitioner has a conversation with a council manager about gender equity training, one of the strategies agreed upon. The manager doesn't see the need for training:

> *I'm really uncomfortable telling my staff to do this training that I don't believe we need. I wasn't around when we signed onto the strategy. We value diversity here, and gender is part of that. We have lots of managers who are women and we all get paid the same. We do gender equity really well here.*

Consider:

- Asking questions to learn more about their anxieties – what are your concerns?
- Not arguing back, which diffuses resistance.
- Probing their perception of not needing training, e.g. what are the signs that there is gender equity in your organisation?
- Calling on a higher authority: "Your CEO has signed up for this."
- Offering alternatives, e.g. if you don't want gender training we could start with other strategies such as a gender audit or leadership training.

Top 10 forum insights

This list highlights the skill sets and attributes needed for working effectively in the PVAW field. You can use these ideas to 'add light rather than heat' to your conversations.

1. **KEEP PERSPECTIVE – IT'S A PROCESS** Understand that you are engaged in a social change process, influencing change over time. Each conversation is just one part of that bigger process. Allow time for individual conversations, and for relationships to develop. This helps avert 'desperate' conversations.

2. **BE PRESENT IN THE CONVERSATION** Use self-awareness, mindfulness and active listening to focus on what is happening now in this conversation.

3. **BE OPEN vs DUALISTIC** Rather than always having your end point in mind and trying to 'ram it home', come into the conversation with openness. Look for common ground and values that align.

4. **GAUGE READINESS** Know your audience, and meet people where they are at.

5. **PREPAREDNESS** Do your homework. Do you know the background and context of this situation? Do you have the data or influential examples you'll need for this meeting or forum? What issues are you likely to come across? Do you have a repertoire of questions? Plan your conversations.

6. **DEVELOP THE CRAFT** The skill of creating effective conversations is a craft that is honed over time. You can get better at it by practising the skills, techniques and self-reflection required.

7. **TAKE UP YOUR AUTHORITY** You understand the issues, you know the research, you have the experience, so have the confidence to take up your authority to be in this space and do the work you do.

8. **SELF-REFLECTION** Reflect on your practise and the assumptions you bring to your work.

9. **RECONNECT WITH WHAT DRIVES US** Take time to reconnect with the vision and your own convictions about the importance of this work. Take time to nurture yourself so that you can work sustainably.

10. **RESPECT** Practice what you preach. Endeavour to hold the person in positive regard. Respect that people come from different starting points, and acknowledge that engaging with PVAW can mean changing identity, behaviour and privilege. *It's an integrity issue that we work with respect in relationships, given that's what we are promoting.*