

Summarising the evidence

WOMEN'S INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AGAINST MEN

Context brief



Australian Government

Australian Institute of
Family Studies

**RESPECT
VICTORIA**

To what extent will addressing the gendered drivers of men's violence against women help to prevent women's intimate partner violence against men?

This brief is part of a suite of resources produced as part of the *Summarising the evidence* project. Visit the [project page](#) for the accompanying research summary, information about the scope and aims of the project and how it was conducted.

Respect Victoria gratefully acknowledges the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies and all authors in conducting this work.

This context brief is a companion document to the *Summarising the evidence* research summary by Salter and Woodlock² that explores the prevalence, nature, drivers and reinforcing factors of women's intimate partner violence (IPV) against men. Respect Victoria have used the findings in that summary, as well as other academic and practice literature, to consider how far our existing approaches to preventing men's violence against women might take us towards better understanding why this form of violence occurs, and how we can prevent it before it starts.

THE GENDERED DRIVERS AND REINFORCING FACTORS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia*¹ identifies four gendered drivers of men's violence against women:

- the condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

These drivers are each addressed with actions to prevent violence against women. These actions challenge the social contexts that allow violence to occur and help to address reinforcing factors that make violence more likely (explained in more detail below). The essential actions to address the gendered drivers are:

- challenge condoning of violence against women
- promote women's independence and decision-making in public life and relationships
- build new social norms that foster personal identities not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes
- support men and boys to develop healthy masculinities and positive, supportive male peer relationships.

Understanding these drivers – and importantly, the actions to prevent them – are an important foundation for primary prevention efforts. This work helps us to understand the dynamics that allow violence to occur, including how power and control are used and abused.

Alongside the gendered drivers, *Change the story* also identifies further factors that can serve to reinforce violence against women. These do not predict violence against women on their own, but may influence the likelihood, prevalence or dynamics in different settings and contexts:

- condoning of violence in general
- experience of, and exposure to, violence (particularly during childhood)
- factors that weaken prosocial behaviour (e.g. disasters and crises; settings where there is heavy alcohol consumption)
- resistance and backlash to prevention and gender equality efforts.

INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING PREVENTION

Change the story emphasises that other forms of structural oppression intersect with gendered inequality to shape how and why men's violence against women occurs. However, more work is needed to understand how they combine to shape the drivers of different forms of gendered and family violence and the way they are experienced across our communities.

The following evidence guides and frameworks have begun to explore these intersections, mapping shared and distinct drivers across different communities and developing tailored prevention approaches:

- *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children* which looks at how the gendered drivers play out as they intersect with colonialism for Aboriginal women³
- *Changing the landscape: A national resource to prevent violence against women and girls with disabilities* which looks at how violence against women with disability is shaped by the intersection of ableism and the gendered drivers⁴
- *Pride in prevention* which looks at the role of heteronormativity and cisnormativity alongside rigid gender roles in driving violence against LGBTIQ+ persons⁷
- *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women* which considers how intersections between the gendered drivers and other forms of structural oppression can be addressed to prevent violence against women who are from immigrant and refugee communities.⁹

Understanding the impact of different sources of oppression will also help us refine and expand upon the known actions to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women, creating safer communities for everyone.

What is women's intimate partner violence against men?

Women's intimate partner violence (IPV) against men, while not uniformly defined, generally refers to behaviours in heterosexual relationships where women use physical, sexual, financial, and emotional violence against male partners. Unlike men's IPV against women, which is commonly driven by a desire for coercion and control, women's IPV against men is usually motivated by self-defence.² The research summary found that women are also less likely than men to have used sexual assault or violence that led to injury or death.² Where they did cause injury to their partner, this was usually found to be in the context of self-defence. The term 'women who use force' was coined as an alternative to IPV to reflect these differences.^{1,5,6} This term is now widely used in the Victorian family violence sector.⁸

Where might addressing the gendered drivers help in preventing women's intimate partner violence against men?

The majority of women's use of force in intimate relationships perpetrated against men is a reaction to on-going IPV perpetrated by male partners.² This means that the drivers of men's violence against women create the social and relationship conditions where women are more likely to use force against men.² As such, efforts to prevent women's use of intimate partner violence must include a strong focus on addressing the gendered drivers of men's violence against women.

Several life history and contextual factors are correlated with both women who use force in their relationships with male partners, and men who experience violence. For men and women, these include:

- use of alcohol and other drugs
- experience of family violence as a child (either targeted or because of exposure to domestic violence)
- childhood history of physical and sexual abuse.²

These map to the reinforcing factors of violence against women set out in *Change the story*.¹ Actions to 'reduce the long-term impacts of and exposure to violence,' and 'strengthen pro-social behaviour' (which includes addressing abuse of alcohol and other drugs), are therefore particularly relevant for preventing women's use of force in heterosexual relationships.¹⁰

Future directions for preventing women's intimate partner violence against men

Challenging harmful myths

Discussion of women's IPV against men must not lead to erroneous and harmful claims that IPV is 'mutualised' or not a gendered issue. That is, perpetrated with equal intent and severity and experienced with equal impact by both parties. This narrative is a common form of resistance to primary prevention of violence against women messaging.^{11,12} It also informs key messages used by groups like Men's Rights Activists leading the backlash against prevention.

IPV is overwhelmingly more likely to be perpetrated by men than by women, particularly in heterosexual relationships.¹³ Despite this, the 2021 National Community Attitudes Survey found that 41% of study participants believe that women and men are equally likely to perpetrate violence.¹⁴ This underscores the need for targeted attention by family violence efforts to address the false narrative that violence is a mutual problem in heterosexual relationships.

Better intersectional analysis of women's use of force against men

The evidence review summary was not able to disaggregate the evidence on prevalence, nature, drivers and reinforcing factors by race, sexuality, trans experience, disability, age or Aboriginality.² Further research on the experiences of specific communities is required to consider the unique dimensions of how and why women use force in their relationships, and the tailored approaches that can help prevent it.

Better understanding the role of early intervention and crisis responses

Primary prevention efforts to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women are critical to preventing most instances of women's intimate partner violence against men. Alongside this and in the shorter term, working with men to challenge their behaviour and de-escalate or interrupt patterns of abuse, while supporting women to leave abusive relationships safely and build secure, stable lives, will reduce the likelihood of women using force in their relationships. Better evaluative practice data and research is required to help understand the role of these interventions in long-term prevention efforts.

Research consistency

Evidence reviews examining research into women's use of force against men are made difficult by differing definitions and prevalence measures. These should be refined to inform more consistent data gathering and to better understand correlations with rates of men's violence against women.

Building understanding about men as victims and women who use violence

Although most IPV perpetrated by women against men occurs in the context of men's IPV, there are instances where men are victimised in relationships where this is not the case.² Little is known about how and why these instances of violence occur, what drives it, or the most effective approaches to prevent it. Cisgender men are victimised and cisgender women perpetrate violence in the context of same-gender relationships; and intimate partner violence occurs within trans and gender diverse people's relationships.^{15,16} Building shared understanding of the drivers of violence in these gendered and relationship dynamics is an emerging area of research and practice.

Existing research and evidence frameworks to prevent violence against LGBTIQ+ people indicate that addressing some of the gendered drivers of men's violence against women can guide efforts to prevent these forms of violence. They also point to the role cisnormativity and heteronormativity play in driving violence against these communities.^{7,17} More needs to be done to understand what promising practice approaches look like in prevention for different cohorts of LGBTIQ+ communities, and how they can inform conceptual frameworks for preventing IPV in non-heterosexual relationships.

References

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Further reading

All resources from Summarising the evidence can be found on the [project page](#).

Research summaries

- Adolescent violence in the home (E Campbell & L Wall)
- Child maltreatment: a snapshot summary (D Higgins & G Hunt)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated against women by men (Respect Victoria)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated by women against men (M Salter & D Woodlock)
- Online violence and harassment perpetrated against women (B Harris)
- Non partner sexual violence (A Quadara)
- Sexual harassment occurring in the world of work (S Charlesworth & C Deen)
- Violence perpetrated against older people by another family member or carer (E Stevens, R Kaspiw & R Carson)

Context briefs

- Summarising the evidence: Exploring what we know about drivers of violence against women, family violence and other forms of gendered violence - Project overview
- Summarising the evidence: Adolescent violence in the home
- Summarising the evidence: Child maltreatment
- Summarising the evidence: Elder abuse
- Summarising the evidence: Online harassment and abuse against women
- Summarising the evidence: Women's intimate partner violence against men
- Summarising the evidence: Work-related sexual harassment

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Acknowledgement of Country

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we rely. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture.

We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside Aboriginal communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of Aboriginal communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

Victim survivor acknowledgement

Respect Victoria acknowledges the significant impact of family violence and violence against women on individuals, families and communities, and the strength and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence. We pay our respects to those who did not survive, and to their loved ones.



Respect Victoria is the state's dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women. Our vision is a Victorian community where all people are safe, equal and respected, and live free from family violence and violence against women.

To achieve our vision, we lead and support evidence-informed primary prevention and act as a catalyst for transformational social change. Primary prevention aims to stop violence from occurring in the first place, by changing the culture that drives it. We drive coordination and effectiveness of the prevention system. We build and promote primary prevention knowledge and evidence. We keep prevention on the public and policy agenda. We guide prevention wherever Victorians live, work, learn and play. We raise awareness that violence against women is preventable and influence community conversations to fuel social change.

We are an independent voice, with functions, powers and duties enshrined in legislation.