This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30019770

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2009, Praeger Publishers
Chapter 9

Reshaping Attitudes toward Violence against Women

Michael Flood
Bob Pease
Natalie Taylor
Kim Webster

Since the early 1970s, when the grassroots women’s movement mounted its challenge to rape and domestic violence, there has been a worldwide revolution in societal responses to violence against women. Among the changes, the best known are the proliferation of community-based services for victims and reforms in public policy, law, policing, and health care. What is less well-known is whether the revolution in societal intervention is reflected in how ordinary citizens think about violence against women. However important institutional reforms are in the short term, they are unlikely to be sustained unless the normative climate changes that supports violence against women.

How widespread is the belief that women “ask to be raped,” that there are circumstances in which it is acceptable for a man to hit a woman, or that violence against women is acceptable? Do people feel empathy for women who are assaulted or raped, or do they blame the victim and excuse the perpetrator? Why do some family members, friends, and professionals respond to victims with support and sympathy, while others respond with indifference or blame? Why do some men use violence against women and others do not? Why do some victims feel self-blame, while others do not? We know that individual and community attitudes shape how women and men experience and
understand violence against women. More than this, these attitudes influence the perpetration of this violence, community responses to violence against women, how victims respond to assault, and whether institutional reforms can be sustained.

This chapter provides an international perspective on attitudes toward violence against women. We begin by identifying the role attitudes play in shaping the problem. Next, we provide an international picture of existing attitudes and identify the key factors that shape them. Finally, we identify critical junctures where interventions to change violence-supportive attitudes can make a difference.

THE LINK BETWEEN ATTITUDES AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Attitudes are significant in shaping violence against women in three domains. They influence (1) community and institutional responses to violence against women; (2) the perpetration of violence against women; and (3) women's responses to this victimization.

Attitudes and Community Responses to Violence against Women

Attitudes play a role in how individuals other than the perpetrator or victim interpret and respond to violence against women. First, community attitudes shape informal responses. We know that women living with intimate partner violence are more likely to turn to friends and family than to the police or other professional networks. The existence of violence-supportive attitudes means that family members, friends, acquaintances, and bystanders respond with less empathy and support to victims of violence. For example, people who make negative attributions of victims also are less likely to say that they would report the incident to the police and more likely to recommend lenient or no penalties for the offender. U.S. college students who hold more violence-condoning attitudes are more likely to blame the victim, and among men, victim-blaming is associated with offering less helpful interventions.

Societal attitudes also shape the formal responses of professionals and institutions to the victims and perpetrators of violence against women, including police officers, judges, priests, social workers, doctors, and others. It has been reported that police officers who allocated greater blame to the victim of family violence also indicated that they would be less likely to charge the assailant. In turn, if the assailant is not arrested despite the victim's preference, the victim is less likely to report future domestic violence to the police. Among doctors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and other health care professionals, those who have received education about child, spouse, or elder abuse are
more likely than other clinicians to suspect abuse among their clients and to intervene in violence (by noting it in their charts, discussing it with the family and with other professionals, and reporting it to the relevant agency).

These formal and informal responses have effects on the victims themselves. How others respond to a victim’s efforts to obtain assistance influences subsequent help-seeking, separation, and eventual recovery from the abuse. Further, the psychological well-being of victims and their ability to escape from abuse are shaped by the levels of material and emotional support they receive.

**Attitudes and the Perpetration of Violence against Women**

Attitudes and values supporting the use of violence have also been shown to have a fundamental and causal link to the perpetration of violence against women at both the individual and community levels. For example, men are more likely to commit sexual assault if they have hostile and negative sexual attitudes toward women and identify with traditional images of masculinity and male privilege. Boys and young men who endorse more rape-supportive beliefs are also more likely to have been sexually coercive. Men with more traditional, rigid, and misogynistic gender-role attitudes are more likely to practice marital violence.¹

A meta-analysis is a sophisticated way to summarize the empirical research that bears on a particular problem. A recent meta-analysis aggregating data across all studies relating an aspect of masculine ideology to the incidence of sexual aggression found that all but one measure of masculine ideology in general, and holding sexist, patriarchal, and/or sexually hostile attitudes in particular, was significantly associated with sexual aggression and the use of violence against women.² Qualitative research has also found that men who have been violent to their female partners use popular discourses about uncontrollable male aggression, female provocation, and weakness to excuse, justify, and rationalize their violence. Further, overall rates of violence against women are higher in communities where there is widespread acceptance of violence-supportive norms.³

Attitudes thus play a crucial role in the perpetration of violence against women. At the same time, they are not the only causal factor at work, and violence against women is also shaped by other social, cultural, and institutional forces. We return to this in the conclusion.

**Attitudes and Subjection to Violence**

Women’s responses to being subjected to violence are shaped by their attitudes and those of others around them. To the extent that
individual women agree with violence-supportive understandings of domestic violence or sexual assault, they are more likely to blame themselves for the assault, less likely to report it to the police or other authorities, and more likely to experience long-term negative psychological and emotional effects. Various studies document that female rape victims’ self-attributions of blame are associated with greater trauma and distress. Women are also less likely to report violence and abuse by their partners if they adhere to traditional gender-role attitudes. The recovery process has also been shown to be affected by attitudes. For instance, black women’s recovery from rape is hindered if they adhere to the cultural stereotype that black women are “sexually loose.”

Furthermore, stereotypical and narrow representations of violence inhibit women from even recognizing and identifying their experience as constituting violence and hence as abusive. One of the key reasons women do not report incidents that meet the legal definition of sexual assault is that these do not fit common stereotypes of “real rape”—they were not by a stranger, did not take place outside and with a weapon, and did not involve injuries. Women are more likely to perceive acts as criminal victimization if they “deprive victims of liberty, threaten their lives or physical integrity, or produce psychological harm.” Victims also do not report violence because of their perception of others’ attitudes: their fear that they will be blamed by family and friends, stigmatized, and that the criminal justice system will not provide redress.2

Despite compelling evidence that attitudes influence the perpetuation of violence and how violence is experienced and perceived, there is no evidence that attitudes play a causal role in women’s risks of victimization in the first place, particularly with respect to rape. To emphasize this would be to blame the victim for her victimization.

VIOLENCE-SUPPORTIVE ATTITUDES

Gauging the extent to which violence-supportive attitudes exist within the community is crucial for understanding the work needed to change attitudes about violence against women. Violence-supportive attitudes are those that “support” violence through trivializing violence and its impacts, attributing blame to victims, denying that violence has occurred, or justifying or excusing violence. The last three decades have seen the steady development of scholarly tools with which to assess attitudes toward violence against women. For instance, at least eleven measures of beliefs and attitudes regarding sexual aggression have been developed, addressing such dimensions of sexual violence as the acceptance of rape myths or adversarial sexual beliefs, hostile or hypermasculinity, victim-blaming or victim empathy, and the likelihood of committing rape if one was assured of not being caught. Other
instruments focus on attitudes toward other, specific forms of violence against women, from wife assault to sexual harassment and date rape. These quantitative survey tools are complemented by more qualitative methods, using interviews, focus groups, and other ways to explore people’s understandings and experiences of violence against women. These tools have been used in a wide variety of countries and contexts, generating a wealth of information about attitudes.

Internationally, there are typical patterns regarding attitudes toward violence against women. A large number of studies have shown that:

- The degree to which behaviors are regarded as violence or an offense varies widely;
- The acceptability and perceived seriousness of violent behavior varies with sex, sociodemographic variables, and context;
- Males, on average, tend to hold more violence-supportive attitudes compared with females; and
- There are differences based on cultural background, tradition, and country of birth (possibly reflecting different cultural and background influences) in attitudes toward violence against women.

A recent telephone survey with a representative sample of 2,000 people conducted in one of Australia’s eight states in 2006 provides a convenient example of such patterns. The survey found that pushing and slapping, forcing a partner to have sex, throwing or smashing objects near a partner to frighten them, or trying to scare or control one’s partner by threatening to hurt family members were more likely to be viewed as “always” domestic violence than behaviors such as yelling abuse at one’s partner, repeatedly criticizing one’s partner, controlling the social life of one’s partner by denying them money, and harassing one’s partner by phone or e-mail. Instead, these latter behaviors were more often regarded as “usually” or “sometimes” violence. The particular circumstances that surround these less physical and more emotionally controlling behaviors seem to determine when they are considered violence. People are less willing to classify behaviors as violent when the community discerns shades of gray.

Another typical pattern in many countries is that the general population does not subscribe to attitudes supporting the use of violence. For example, most respondents in the Australian survey believed that violence was serious (98 percent of women and 93 percent of men) and that both intimate partner violence and forced sexual contact in a relationship were crimes (with these statements attracting the support of 97 percent and 93 percent of respondents, respectively). Eighty-two percent disagreed that violence was a private matter to be handled in the family. Most classified physical acts of force, such as slapping and pushing, forcing one’s partner to have sex, and throwing and smashing
objects near one’s partner to frighten or hurt them as serious and as violence. Fewer than 4 percent believed that intimate partner violence could be justified in most scenarios put to them (for example, if a woman keeps nagging her partner, if she refuses to have sex with him, or, if following separation, she commences a new relationship).

Nevertheless, international research indicates that a sizeable minority of the population continues to have attitudes supporting the use of violence. For example, in the Australian survey, a substantial proportion of respondents held beliefs that have the effect of diminishing perpetrators’ responsibility for their behavior. In contrast to the small percentage of respondents who believed that violence could be justified, 23 percent believed that it could be excused if it resulted from people “getting so angry they lost control” and 24 percent if the violent person “genuinely regretted” what they had done afterward. Thirty-eight percent of respondents believed that rape results from men not being able to “control their need for sex.” Eight percent of respondents agreed that, “most women who are raped asked for it” and 15 percent agreed that, in relation to sex, “women often say no when they mean yes.” Similarly, 23 percent disagreed that women rarely make false claims of being raped.

In some countries and contexts, violence is accepted by the majority of the population. A recent World Health Organization (WHO) study found that the proportion of women who agreed with one or more justifications for wife-beating (such as a wife’s infidelity) varied from 6 percent in Serbia and Montenegro city to more than 68 percent in areas of Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Peru and in Samoa, Thailand, and the United Republic of Tanzania. Given the gender gap in this area (see below), men’s agreement in such contexts is likely to be higher still.

While there is very little international data with which to test this, it is possible that there has been a general improvement over time in community attitudes regarding violence against women. The past decade has seen substantial efforts by government and health authorities in various countries, as well as community-based initiatives, to publicize the seriousness of violence against women and to inform and educate the community about what violence is and that it is unacceptable. It might be expected that attitudes toward violence against women may have changed over time as a consequence of such heightened awareness campaigns. Improvements may also reflect the liberalization of gender norms and growing gender equality in heterosexual relationships and families, given that one of the most significant predictors of violence against women is male economic and decision-making dominance in families.7

The 2006 Australian survey does allow assessment of changes over time, as its findings can be compared with a similar, national survey conducted eleven years earlier. Higher proportions of the community
in 2006 than in 1995 classified most of the behaviors widely associated with abuse as violence. Throwing and smashing objects to frighten and repeatedly criticizing were also regarded as more serious compared with the 1995 survey. However, there were also some troubling trends. For example, slapping or pushing was significantly less likely to be regarded as very serious in 2006. Although most people still view men as the main perpetrators of domestic violence, a higher proportion of the community in the 2006 survey believed that domestic violence is perpetrated by men and women equally (20 percent in 2006 compared with 9 percent in 1995), despite findings which consistently show that men are the main perpetrators of domestic violence. There were gender differences in response to this question. Men were more likely in the main sample to believe that both men and women equally commit domestic violence (24 percent) than women (17 percent), while this pattern was reversed in the culturally and linguistically diverse sample (32 percent and 31 percent, respectively).

We now turn to the factors that shape violence-supportive attitudes.

**FACTORS SHAPING ATTITUDES**

It is useful to break down the factors that shape attitudes toward violence against women into two clusters: those having to do with gender, including gender attitudes, roles, and relations, and those having to do with race, ethnicity, and other cultural factors. We begin with these, and then outline further individual, organizational, community-level, and societal factors that influence community attitudes. We emphasize only those factors whose influence has been demonstrated by empirical research.

**Gender and Gender Norms**

One of the most consistent findings to emerge from studies of attitudes toward violence against women is the gender gap in attitudes. In general, men are more likely than women to agree with myths and beliefs supportive of violence against women, perceive a narrower range of behaviors as violent, blame and show less empathy for the victim, minimize the harms associated with physical and sexual assault, and see behaviors constituting violence against women as less serious, inappropriate, or damaging. Much of the research on attitudes has been done among college and university samples, and the gender gap is well-documented among these and other populations both in the United States and elsewhere. The gender gap is also evident in attitudes toward particular forms of violence against women, whether sexual harassment, date rape, or wife assault. Moreover, cross-gender differences in attitudes in many countries are stronger than differences
associated with other social divisions, such as socioeconomic status or education.

Most men and women share the belief that violence against women is unacceptable. Yet there is a gender contrast in their understandings of and attitudes toward violence against women. This does not reflect their biological sex, but their socialized gender orientations. There is a powerful association between attitudes toward violence against women and attitudes toward gender. Traditional gender-role attitudes are associated with greater acceptance of violence against women, particularly for men. Conversely, egalitarian gender-role attitudes are associated with less acceptance of violence against women. This was also corroborated by the recent Australian survey.

The relationship between adherence to conservative gender norms and tolerance for violence has been documented among men in a wide variety of communities and countries, both Western and non-Western, including ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel; men in Cape Town, South Africa; Arab men in Israel; and males ages twelve to twenty in Australia. This relationship holds among women as well. At the same time, the relationship between gender-typing and victim-blaming seems to be far weaker among women, perhaps because of their low levels of attributions of blame overall.

Attitudes to violence against women are grounded in wider attitudes toward women, gender, and sexuality. Globally, wife-beating is seen as justified in some circumstances by a majority of the population in various countries, most commonly in situations of actual or suspected infidelity by wives or their "disobedience" toward a husband or partner.

In the United States, women who dress less modestly and more suggestively are more likely to be seen as responsible for and deserving of sexual assault. Among U.S. undergraduates, women are seen as more likely to "provoke" sexual harassment if they are attractive, and to be more culpable for date rape if wearing a short rather than long skirt, while stereotypically attractive male perpetrators are judged as less harassing.

Female victims of domestic violence are judged more harshly where they are perceived to have "provoked" aggression, for example by being verbally aggressive or in situations that might inspire their husbands' jealousy. Assumptions about men's rights of sexual access in marriages and sexual relationships also shape judgments. When a man rapes his wife or girlfriend rather than a stranger, he is seen as less responsible, the behavior is viewed as less harmful, and it is less likely to be considered rape.

In fact, common norms regarding sexuality and intimacy can make sexual violence either invisible or "normal." Studies among adolescents in the United States, New Zealand, and Britain find that for many boys
and girls, sexual harassment is pervasive, male aggression is normalized, there is constant pressure among boys to behave in sexually aggressive ways, girls are routinely objectified, a sexual double standard polices girls' sexual and intimate involvements, and girls are compelled to accommodate male "needs" and desires in negotiating their sexual relations.

**Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Other Forms of Social Differences**

There is some evidence that attitudes toward violence against women vary with socioeconomic variables such as labor market participation and socioeconomic status. The recent Australian survey found that the relationship between indicators of socioeconomic status—education, occupation (white collar or not), and employment—and violence-supportive attitudes was not as consistent or strong as those of sex and support for gender equality. However, they did predict agreement with certain beliefs. For instance, white-collar workers were more likely than members of other occupational groups to agree that "women rarely make false claims of being raped," and unemployed workers were likely to hold that "domestic violence can be excused if there is genuine regret afterward."11 We will return to the issue of education under "Organizational Factors" below.

Attitudes toward violence against women vary across different classes and cultural groups and communities in any one country and from one culture to another. Various studies in the United States and Australia find ethnicity-related differences in attitudes. For example, Hispanic men have been reported to be more likely than African American, Asian, and Caucasian men and women or any other gender/ethnic combination to support the myth that women provoke violence toward them.

The recent Australian survey included a sample of 200 men and women from each of four countries: Greece, Italy, China, and Vietnam. On average, respondents in this sample were more likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes than those in the main sample, particularly men. There were significant associations between violence-supportive attitudes in this sample and being born overseas, speaking a language other than English at home, having arrived in Australia more recently (since 1980), and cultural background (Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds).

Asian students in the United States and Canada have been found to be more likely than non-Asian students to believe that women are responsible for preventing rape, that sex is a motivation for rape, and that victims precipitate rape. This perhaps reflects Asian cultural attitudes emphasizing female chastity and framing rape as a sexual matter between individuals. However, significant interethnic differences in attitudes have been reported within Asian communities, pointing to
the differential influence of particular cultural systems, patterns of immigration, and other factors.

Apparent differences in attitudes among ethnic groups may reflect other demographic contrasts between them. For example, in a U.S. study, apparent differences between white and African American people’s attitudes toward victims of rape disappeared once differences in socioeconomic status and education were taken into account.

Attitudes toward violence against women are constructed in particular cultural contexts. In Beirut, Lebanon, perceptions of rape are structured by the centrality of marriageability in determining a women’s status. Women seen to be unmarriageable, because they are separated, divorced, or disabled for example, are perceived to have “nothing to lose” and thus as legitimate targets of sexual predation. Notions of male “honor” and female purity and modesty can be used to justify and excuse violence against women. Honor cultures involve emphases on male honor and dominance, strong familialism, and norms of female chastity and male sexual freedom. It appears that men and women from honor cultures are more tolerant of men’s violence toward female partners. For example, men’s violent responses to infidelity may be seen as more excusable and less stigmatizing. In a very different context, in a Dayak community in West Borneo (Indonesia), the idea of forcing someone to have sex is almost inconceivable.

Thus, community attitudes regarding violence against women also vary from one nation to another. The associations between culture and attitudes toward violence against women are dynamic, however. On the one hand, people who move from a culture supporting the use of violence to a culture less tolerant of violence may subsequently change their attitudes, reflecting, for instance, a “Westernizing” influence on attitudes. On the other hand, violence-supportive attitudes can be “imported” from one cultural context to another.

**Individual Factors**

One of the key mechanisms of attitude formation in relation to violence against women is intergenerational transmission. There is strong evidence that children who either witness such violence or are subjected to violence themselves are more likely as adults to adhere to violence-supportive attitudes and to perpetrate violence. (See the chapter by Cares in Volume 2). Further, the effects of witnessing or experiencing violence are greater for males than females. In other words, boys who have seen or suffered violence themselves are more likely to grow up to tolerate and perpetrate violence against women.

These patterns reflect boys’ social learning and the stunting of their behavioral control, adaptive social skills, and empathy. At the same time,
other argue that there is no link between childhood victimization and the adolescent or adult perpetration of violence or young people's attitudes toward domestic violence. There are diverse pathways to sexual aggression, with some research reporting that the impact of parental violence and child abuse on boys may potentially be mediated by sexually hostile attitudes and emphases on sexual conquest and promiscuity.

Age, and its associated developmental processes and relations, appears to be another factor shaping individuals' attitudes toward violence against women. Studies in the United States and Australia find that younger adults (under fifty-five) are less likely to hold violence-supportive attitudes than older adults. For example, in the recent Australian survey, younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to see forcing a partner to have sex as domestic violence, and as very serious, and physical force against a current wife or partner as less justifiable.

However, among the youngest age groups, and males in particular, younger people have more regressive attitudes than their older counterparts. High school males in the United States, Finland, and Australia show stronger tolerance for sexual aggression and other forms of violence against women than do college males. The greater endorsement by younger men of violence against women may reflect their lack of exposure to the liberalizing influence of late secondary school and a university education. It may also reflect developmental shifts in attitudes, empathy, and moral awareness. Alternatively, it may reflect the greater influence of the peer culture on younger males and the ways in which both gender segregation and homophobia peak in early adolescence.

Organizational Factors

Another cluster of factors shown to influence community attitudes toward violence against women are organizational, namely the social relations, cultures, policies, and other characteristics of formal organizations and institutions. Associations between violence-supportive attitudes and formal organizations have been documented in four contexts: sports, university residences (fraternities), the military, and religious institutions.

Early work noted that male athletes report significantly greater agreement with rape-supportive statements than men in general. Contemporary research documents that violence-supportive norms and behaviors are spread unevenly across sports, can vary even within a particular sport, and are influenced by local and contextual factors. In American universities, rape-myth acceptance has been reported to be highest among male athletes, especially younger athletes and those playing a team-based sport.

Violence-supportive norms are particularly intense in certain residential or organizational contexts known for their emphasis on
stereotypical masculine roles. College fraternities on U.S. campuses are particularly known for their support and perpetration of sexual violence. Fraternities may be characterized by gender segregation, sexism and hostility toward women, an ethic of male sexual conquest, high alcohol consumption, homophobia, and use of pornography.

Similar dynamics are evident in the military, an example of a peer culture involving norms of gender inequality, male bonding, aggression, and sexualized talk. In such contexts, violence-supportive attitudes are shaped by several mechanisms, including socialization into group norms, identification with and attachment to the group, and self-selection by men with preexisting violence-supportive attitudes. There is also evidence that participation in particular occupational, educational, or religious contexts can shape attitudes toward violence against women. Individuals who have received a university education or have higher levels of educational attainment tend to have more progressive attitudes than those who have not. A recent Australian survey found that individuals with lower levels of education were more likely to believe that women make up claims of domestic violence in order to gain tactical advantage in contested child custody cases, although education was only a sporadic predictor of attitudes in general.

While we lack precise comparative information on particular occupational groups, it appears that some workplace and professional cultures encourage attitude shifts away from supporting the use of violence. For example, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and other mental health professionals undergo training that encourages intolerance of violence. By contrast, occupational cultures such as police may intensify violence-supportive norms. When it comes to religious participation, there may be a relationship between fundamentalist religious beliefs and narrower definitions of abuse and more victim-blaming.

Community Factors

Attitudes toward violence against women are also shaped by participation in informal peer groups and social circles, and these influences overlap with the influence of formal institutions and occupations. For example, participation and investment in homosocial male peer groups can intensify men's tolerance for violence against women. Male peer support for sexual assault, including young men's emotional ties to abusive peers and peers' informational support for assault (guidance and advice that influences men to assault their dating partners), may be associated with sexual and physical abuse of women. Similarly, men with male friends and acquaintances whom they perceive to condone, reward, or perpetrate violence against women are more likely to condone or commit it themselves.
Societal Factors

Mass media

There are also numerous societal factors that influence attitudes toward violence against women, including particular forms of media. We take as given that the media does not have simple and deterministic effects on community attitudes or indeed behaviors. Instead, there is a diverse range of responses to media portrayals. Personal and developmental factors influence the impact of exposure. In addition, the relationships between representations and attitudes and/or behaviors are complex.

Pornography

Exposure to pornography has been consistently linked to sexual aggression. These links are strongest for violent pornography, but have also been found for nonviolent pornography, particularly among frequent users. Several types of empirical examination demonstrate this relationship.

In experimental studies, adults show significant strengthening of attitudes supportive of sexual aggression following exposure to pornography. Exposure to sexually violent material increases male viewers’ acceptance of rape myths, desensitizes them to sexual violence, and erodes their empathy for victims of violence. Adults also show an increase in behavioral aggression following exposure to pornography, again, especially violent pornography. Men who view hardcore, violent, or rape pornography in everyday life and men who are high-frequency users of pornography are significantly more likely than others to report that they would rape or harass a woman if they knew they could get away with it.

Television and Other Popular Media

Other media, such as television, music, and film are also effective teachers of violence-supportive attitudes. Children exposed to media violence consistently demonstrate greater rates of aggressive attitudes and behavior. Sexually violent, misogynist, and objectifying themes in music and music videos influence adolescents’ and young people’s acceptance of violence against women. (See the chapter in this volume by Armstrong.) While the issue is still being debated, there is growing evidence that playing violent electronic games is associated with lower empathy and stronger adherence to pro-violence attitudes. (See the chapters in this volume by Dill.) Other aspects of popular culture identified as reinforcing community tolerance for violence against women include advertising and language.
News Coverage

There is evidence that media coverage of and public controversy regarding high-profile incidents of violence against women can increase community awareness. (See the chapter in this volume by Post.) In the wake of the trial of O. J. Simpson for the murder of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, media coverage of domestic violence dramatically increased. During a single year, the percentage of male survey respondents who rated domestic violence as an “extremely important social problem” climbed from 25 to 33 percent. (See the chapter in this volume by Thill and Dill.)

After the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas sexual harassment hearings in 1991, women were more likely to label particular behaviors as harassment. At the same time, media coverage may encourage victim blaming, and commentators in various countries suggest that violence-supportive attitudes are perpetuated by news coverage.

Community Education and Social Marketing Campaigns

The media has also been deliberately used to change community attitudes through education and social marketing campaigns. Such efforts can produce positive change in the attitudes (and behaviors) associated with men’s perpetration of violence against women. Another, more localized form of deliberate education concerns face-to-face community education. Education programs in primary and secondary schools and universities—particularly those which are intensive, lengthy, and use a variety of pedagogical approaches—can have positive effects on people’s attitudes toward and participation in violence against women.

Criminal Justice Policies and Law Reform

There is little consensus on the impact of criminal justice policies on community attitudes. The legal system may have an important symbolic role in shaping what is perceived to be legitimate or illegitimate behavior. For example, legal sanctions have been found to impact attitudes toward violence against women in the United States. Criminal justice policies also may have a negative influence, for example when the criminal justice system fails to respond appropriately to the victims and perpetrators of violence against women.

Social Movements

The last form of influence on community attitudes toward violence against women is social movements. Public recognition of men’s
violence against women as a "social problem" has been a major achievement of the women's movement in particular. While it is difficult to document the impact of social movements on social norms, the women's movement and feminism have undoubtedly had a distinctive, and substantial, impact on community attitudes toward violence against women.

Other collective mobilizations with a potential influence include anti-feminist "men's rights" and "fathers' rights," pro-feminist men's, and conservative religious groups and networks. While evidence of a direct impact is lacking, in Australia, anti-feminist men's groups may have influenced increases in support for the notions that domestic violence is gender-equal and that women falsify claims of violence to gain an advantage in family law proceedings.

**KEY POINTS FOR INTERVENTION**

Our framework for intervention is guided by six assumptions.

First, the process of changing attitudes must be part of a larger project to challenge and change familial, organizational, community, and societal norms that support violence against women.

Second, interventions must address not only those attitudes that overtly condone violence against women, but the wider clusters of attitudes related to gender and sexuality that normalize and justify this violence. Given the close association between attitudes toward violence against women and attitudes about gender, especially males' adherence to patriarchal and hostile attitudes toward women, traditional gender role attitudes must be targeted in educational campaigns.

Third, efforts to address violence-supportive attitudes must also work to provide an alternative set of norms and values centered on nonviolence, gender equality, and social justice.

Fourth, however valuable are social marketing and community education campaigns aimed at the general population or at specific subpopulations, more intensive and local interventions within specific settings and among specific groups also are essential.

Fifth, violence-prevention interventions must be culturally appropriate. This means that they must include sensitivity not only to ethnic diversities but also to local gender cultures and to men's and women's levels of awareness about and willingness to take responsibility for the problem of violence against women.

Finally, interventions aimed at attitudinal change must be accompanied by adjustments in structural relations and social practices if violence against women is to be prevented.

The following discussion identifies targets for intervention to change attitudes.
Children Who Have Witnessed or Experienced Violence and Are in Families Affected by Violence against Women

Intervention in the intergenerational transmission of violence is vital. In the domestic-violence field, there is growing recognition that physical or sexual violence against adult women often is accompanied by violence against their children, and that whether children are witnesses to or direct victims of interpersonal violence, their experience can have profound and long-lasting effects on their health and well-being. To prevent the intergenerational transmission of community attitudes tolerant of violence against women, we must improve service responses to all family members affected by violence.

Youth

Violence-supportive attitudes are already well-established in adolescence. Younger males are particularly likely to endorse violence against women, and some gender norms among adolescents “normalize” sexual coercion. While the influences of education, maturation, and greater experience of cross-sex social and sexual relations lessen adolescent boys’ endorsement of violence-supportive attitudes, substantial proportions of young men continue to endorse such attitudes. Children and youth therefore are a particularly important group for intervention.

Boys’ Peer Cultures and Young Men at Risk of or Already Using Violence

Interventions among children and youth in general should be complemented by peer education and mentoring and other strategies that address the intensive forms of support for violence in the peer cultures and group norms of some boys and young men. When the trajectories of young men who are repeat assailters are compared to those who have sexually coerced girls in the past but have ceased, the latter express more remorse, hold the girl(s) less responsible, and are less likely to describe the violent behavior as “exciting.” Intervention with boys and young men identified as at risk of violence perpetration or who are already using violence therefore may be valuable in changing their potentially lifelong violent trajectories.

Local Contexts and Cultures

Some peer cultures and organizations are particularly dangerous for women. Intensive intervention in such contexts is necessary to address their violence-supportive local cultures. There are inspiring instances of such intervention in sporting contexts in Australia. The professional sporting codes of the National Rugby League (NRL) and the Australian
Football League (AFL) are developing education programs for their players, codes of conduct, and other measures in response to a series of alleged sexual assaults by players in 2004. Education programs should be adopted at both community and professional levels of sport, particularly in the male-dominated, team-based, contact sports. Similar and substantial initiatives in military institutions, universities, colleges, and workplaces also are desirable.

**Religious Institutions and Leaders**

While religious beliefs historically have been used to justify violence against women and church clergy at times have been complicit in this violence, religious institutions and leaders also have a potentially powerful role to play in encouraging an ethic of nonviolence. The spiritual and theological understandings of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and other world religions each contain emphases and values which could serve to lessen community tolerance for violence against women. Spiritual and religious leaders should be encouraged to challenge violence against women and gender inequality, whether as practiced among their adherents or as defended in theological teachings, through public statements, sermons, teachings, and religious materials. Clergy and lay leaders also should receive training in responding appropriately to domestic or sexual violence within faith communities, and U.S. experience suggests that such initiatives have a positive impact on clergy attitudes and responses.

**Mass Media**

At least four kinds of intervention are relevant in relation to the media’s influence on community attitudes toward violence against women: social marketing, better news reporting, improving media literacy, and regulation.

Social marketing is an obvious strategy to encourage community intolerance for violence against women. Experience in relation to other social problems such as drunk driving suggests that comprehensive communication strategies are an effective tool of attitudinal and even behavioral change. Second, interventions among media outlets and journalists should encourage appropriate portrayals of violence against women through news guidelines or codes of practice and other mechanisms. Such efforts can make a significant difference to news coverage. Third, we should be encouraging media literacy, especially among children and youth. Teaching critical viewing and thinking skills improves viewers’ ability to ignore or resist antisocial messages and reduces the negative impact of portrayals of violence. Such skills can be integrated into school curricula, and could even include education to address
harmful aspects of such media forms as pornography. Fourth, the regulation of media content should include initiatives addressing violence in children's television, children's exposure to Internet pornography, and other violence-supportive content.

**Criminal Justice System**

The criminal justice system responds to only a small proportion of domestic violence and sexual assault matters, as there are both low rates of reporting and attrition through the legal process. At the same time, strong legal sanctions encourage community intolerance for this violence. Therefore, strengthening legal responses to violence against women will have positive effects not only for the victims and survivors of this violence, but for community attitudes in general.

**Medicine and Health Systems**

The attitudes of doctors and other health care professionals toward violence against women have wider implications for the trajectories and recovery of the female victims of violence they see (as well as others involved in this violence, such as perpetrators and children). There is increasing awareness of the need to train health care personnel and improve their attitudes through strategies such as routine screening and other case-finding approaches. In relation to other professionals who respond to the women and men affected by violence against women, the need for attitudinal change and the development of intervention strategies are being addressed through the development of materials on violence against women in the curricula of professional training and university courses.

**Community Development and Mobilization**

One of the most powerful ways in which societal attitudes toward violence against women can be transformed is through direct participation in activities, groups, and networks aimed at challenging this violence. These represent powerful and effective ways in which to improve participants' attitudes toward violence against women and transform community norms. The disadvantage of their smaller scale is balanced by the advantage of their significant educational and social impact. Community-development strategies therefore should be central to violence-prevention efforts.

It is important to develop culturally sensitive messages appropriate to the cultural norms of each community. For example, "cultural context models" can be used to educate members of culturally diverse communities about privilege and oppression and build communities
that support nonviolence. This model utilizes male sponsors from the community who support nonviolence to mentor men toward nonviolence and culture circles whereby extended members of the family become involved in challenging men’s violence. Efforts to address violence against women in indigenous and First Nation communities must be community-driven, based on partnerships between and among community and government agencies, and based in holistic approaches to community violence. This is supported by evaluations of “good practice” initiatives documented in North America, New Zealand, and Canada. Similarly, efforts to address violence-supportive community attitudes should be attentive to diversities associated with geography (urban versus rural), class, and other variables.

Community-development strategies are complemented by strategies of community mobilization. We must not only educate men and women, but also organize them for collective action. In other words, attitudinal and behavioral changes also can be fostered by creating opportunities for individuals to mobilize their communities through events, networks, and campaigns. It is particularly important that we mobilize men through such work, because of many men’s greater endorsement of violence-supportive attitudes, their roles as community leaders and gatekeepers, and their relative absence from efforts to end violence against women.

CONCLUSIONS

Attitudes toward violence against women are powerful influences on the perpetration of violence against women, women’s responses to this victimization, and wider community and institutional responses. However, attitudes are not the whole story. Attitudinal orientations are just one aspect of an explanation of an individual’s perpetration of violence against women. When a man physically assaults his wife or sexually harasses his female colleague, his behavior may also be shaped by his affective orientations and other aspects of his identity or subjectivity. For example, in a study of university undergraduates, men’s sense of entitlement, both general and specifically sexual, mediated the relationship between masculine gender roles and sexually aggressive behavior and attitudes. “Entitlement” refers here to men feeling entitled to have their needs met by women and believing that their needs or desires take precedence over women’s.

Focusing on sexual violence for a moment, different factors may be involved in varying forms of sexual aggression or for diverse types of sexually aggressive men, with attitudes playing lesser or greater roles depending on these. Some perpetrators may be highly aroused by sexual violence and likely to commit multiple acts of aggression with different victims, while others may be more influenced by cognitive
motivations (such as rape myths) and more likely to commit assaults in situations where they perceive or can argue for some justification for their behavior.

Men's use of violence against women clearly is shaped by patriarchal, anti-woman, and "hypermasculine" ideologies. However, holding such attitudes may not be sufficient to perpetrate sexually aggressive behavior. Instead, such attitudes can combine with situational factors to predict violence against women. This includes the presence (or deliberate creation) of situations in which coercive sexual encounters can occur, heavy alcohol consumption, and peer pressure and peer support for perpetration.

Indeed, adherence to violence-supportive attitudes in some instances may not even be a necessary condition of violence perpetration. Some men who do not endorse rape myths report sexually aggressive behaviors. These men may become sexually aggressive after drinking or engaging in risky behaviors.

An exclusive focus on individual attitudes would neglect the cultural, collective, and institutional underpinnings of violence against women. Beyond individual attitudes and perceptions, violence against women is shaped by the social, cultural, economic, and political relations of particular contexts, communities, and cultures. While these collective social relations do have attitudinal dimensions, they are not reducible to them. Individual men may hold violence-supportive attitudes but not act on them because of wider social norms, social relations, and social structures that constrain violent behavior or encourage nonviolence. In turn, attitudes that are intolerant of violence may be only weakly held and may be "rendered situationally inoperative" or neutralized by situational variables.

Explanations of violence against women must be grounded not only in attitudes but in social relations and social structures. We must move beyond a strictly cultural emphasis in both explanation and intervention and recognize that "violence has much deeper roots in the structural foundations of interpersonal relationships (and societal arrangements in general)." To stop violence against women, certainly we must change community attitudes. But we must also do more to address the structural conditions that perpetuate violence.

NOTES


REFERENCES

ANOP Research Services Pty Ltd., *Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women: Detailed Report* (Canberra: Office of the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1995).


