

**Practice and Prevention: Contemporary Issues in Adult Sexual Assault in NSW
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**Keynote address: New approaches to sexual assault prevention
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The central question that faces all of us who are committed to non-violence is how can we prevent sexual assault. This is a question that has been a concern of feminist politics for over a century and more recently for the last three decades. We have heard this week about the role of the law as a prevention strategy and the important work being done by practitioners in prevention. My focus in this paper today will be on community and public education. I have several areas that I want to explore with you.

To begin I want to reflect briefly on how community education about rape prevention has been characterised since the 1970s. My method for doing this will be to review a series of community education posters² which highlight the ways in which sexual assault has been understood, identify who are the targets for the messages and the implications of these approaches for prevention. These reflections will I hope provide some insight into the discourses or knowledges regarding sexual assault prevention. I will argue that understanding these past approaches will be important for shaping future prevention strategies. In the second part of the paper I will present an alternative model of prevention which focuses on the development of ethical sexual behaviour in women and men.

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Radical feminists and 1970s

From the very first women's movement meetings in which sexual violence emerged as the a hidden story in the lives of women, education was identified a key political strategy. The key political goal in this period was to make visible the reality of sexual violence in many women's lives. Education was public - it was in the streets in marches with placards, in your face on the nightly news. It was also intensely personal as women we educated ourselves about the links between private tortures and societal structures which silenced women's experiences. Feminists took community education about sexual assault to schools to workplaces to community meetings and to government. Education then and now is accepted as a central strategy in challenging victim blaming attitudes and providing more knowledge to the community. One key preventative strategy was women's self defence. (**Slide 2 - Disarm rapists**). The positive side to this approach was encouraging women to feel more physically powerful and able to disarm rapists. The approach however reflects the early stage of our awareness about sexual violence and is primarily a strategy to encourage women's safety in public not in private when most sexual violence occurs. Community education was confrontational in this period - 'Dead Men Don't Rape' as the archetypal slogan indicates. Prevention in this period need to shock the community out of collective denial about the daily and widespread nature of sexual assault in the community and the way in which women (rarely) men were held accountable for the crime. Women during this period were constructed in universal terms so all women could be potential victims and all men could be perpetrators or benefit from sexual violence.

² It is not possible to reproduce the posters due to copyright restrictions.

1980s - Treating the harm

- ◆ After the flurry of public activity of the 1970s the hard work of gaining government support for victims of violence paid off. This period saw the funding of many more sexual assault services and refuges in rural areas as well as the city, legal centres, a proliferation of community education campaigns, and law reform. Prevention became focused around reducing the harm of existing or new victims of male violence. The strategy involved the establishment of specialist support services who took on a primary role in prevention – through support of victims and their families, education programmes and talks in schools, training of other staff such as police and health and welfare workers. The primary focus was on reaching out to **women** who had experienced violence with the aim of reducing long term harm of the violence by offering support through counselling, refuge, legal advice and education. As such it represented a tertiary preventative model.

Feminist community groups and coalitions formed to press for further reform, participated in government inquiries, ran phone –ins and assisted in the planning of a number of government sponsored community education campaigns. Including (**Slide 3 - No -one ever deserves to be raped 1987**) designed to challenge victim-blaming attitudes in the community. This campaign was a rerun of the 1984 campaign using the same slogan. The 1984 campaign developed by the Women's Co-ordination Unit and the NSW Sexual Assault Committee was the first government sponsored statewide prevention of sexual assault campaign. It's focus was Anglo women but in the second version a specific

attempt was made to reach out to women from culturally diverse communities or NESB as they were referred to then. It was also significant in that it included a phone in, preparation of information booklet on women and rape and widespread media coverage. The contrast between the first and second campaign is evident - glossier presentation, real women rather than line drawings, women of varying ages and cultural background and information in community languages. However this was a limited strategy in adequately coming to grips with the complex needs of diverse cultural groups. However, what this campaign highlights is the beginning of a recognition that a diversity of women may experience rape.

1990s - Diversity and difference

By the beginning of the 1990s many western societies had experienced two decades of the impact of the women's revolution. This had significant impacts on the structure of the labour force, with increased participation of women in paid work, a diversity of family structures and changes in many relationships between women and men in both public and private life. What hadn't changed was the occurrence of violence to women. (**Slide 4 - No means No**) There was also some evidence that sexual assault was being subsumed into a broader definition of violence against women while messages about sexual consent were continuing to be ignored by offenders.

The 1990s also saw increasing critical reflection on the gains of the past and the impact of post- structuralist and post modernist critiques of society. The anticipated changes expected in the 1970s had failed to deliver the much hoped for reduction of violence

against women. There was a growing recognition of the diversity of women who experienced violence and the inadequacy of community and government responses. This expanded prevention efforts to include difference based on culture, sexuality, ability and age and gender. Women from diverse cultural groups were critical of what was perceived as a white middle class dominated feminist movement. (**Slide 5 - Women say no**) This example highlights a culturally diverse group of women and also uses a wider definition of violence than restricting the message to sexual assault or domestic violence. Critiques by Aboriginal women of the endemic violence in their communities added to the voices that had previously not been central to thinking about violence (**Slides 6 and 7 - Deserve respect and everybody's business**). Indigenous voices argued for a family violence model in understanding intimate violence and focused prevention onto whole communities and family groups. This included women and men in a way that was less common in Anglo - Australian communities. At the same time the developing men's movement was arguing that men and boys too experience violence and this needed to be recognised by government and communities.

Increasing recognition of homophobic violence against lesbians and gay men also prompted community education initiatives by the Anti-Violence Project. (**Slides 8, 9,10 Lesbians, homophobia, everyone is a winner**). The 1990s also saw a significant increase on discussion of issue of violence and how they affected women and men with a disability.

This period is therefore marked by an increasing recognition of the complexity and diversity of women and men who experience all forms of intimate violence including sexual assault. This diversity is reflected in the small selection of posters and the increasing use of personal images and well known public faces to carry preventative messages. It was therefore somewhat surprising that the state government produced the following poster as part of the newly launched NSW Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women. (**Slide 11- Violence against women has got to stop**) This image is significantly bleaker than earlier education posters we have viewed. The text '2.6 million Australian women experience violence (no wonder the rest experience fear) - Violence against Women has got to stop' is worth considering for a moment as a preventative message. What we have here is a return to 1970s messages of educating through facts - this is a widespread problem - OK. The rest of the message - 'no wonder the rest experience fear' transposed onto a bleak path through a housing estate provides no hope or preventative message and returns to reinforce a message that violence against women occurs in deserted public places - while sexual assault and other forms of violence do affect women in public we have known for three decades that most occurs within intimate personal relationships. Having been privy to a number of conversations about the development of the poster at the time, I know that many long-standing anti-violence advocates were opposed to it but their advice was not heard.

Much of the community education prevention work in the 1980s and early 1990s focused on sending positive messages to primarily women as the main group affected by

interpersonal violence. Prevention was aimed at reducing further harm and in the later years reaching out to a diverse group of women and men who experienced violence.

A break with this came in 2000 with the *Against All the Rules Campaign* initiated by the NSW Strategy to Reduce Violence against Women. It was aimed to influence the attitudes of men aged 21-29 targeting them through NSW and local sporting organisations with a high membership among young men. High profile male sports spokespeople were approached to promote the campaign (**Slide 12 - Striking a woman**). This campaign is particularly significant as it actively involved men in reducing and preventing violence against women. The campaign had 4 aims:

1. increase the unacceptability of violence against women
2. stimulate discussion among men who may not normally discuss the issue
3. encourage men to understand what violence against women is
4. encourage men to understand the wider effects of violence and abuse, such as its effects on children, increased community fear of men and the social restriction of women

The *Against all the Rules* campaign involved partnership between government departments including the Attorney-General's Department, Department of Community Services, NSW Health, NSW Police Service, Department for Women and NSW Sport and Recreation. In addition it brought together sporting organisations, women's services, men's groups and the general community. This collaboration is crucial to a comprehensive strategy to reduce violence against women and contrary to well

intentioned past efforts that tended to be piecemeal and only focused on a limited section of the community. A range of strategies were used throughout 2001 including a statewide advertising campaign using buses in Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong regions, state-wide radio ads, posters, men's magazine sponsorship, and media coverage of state and regional launches involving regional sporting clubs and their activities. The sporting theme was chosen as it is a popular area of interest for young men and provided the opportunity for positive masculine role models and provided authority, visibility and credibility to the anti-violence message.

Lessons from the past

As we continue to search for answers to that elusive question of how to prevent sexual assault, it is worthwhile to reflect briefly on what these previous education campaigns can teach us. Community and public education continues to be seen as a primary strategy to reduce or prevent sexual assault. However the continued high reporting of sexual assault and the parallel unreported figures suggest that community education will always be at best a partial solution. The impact of these campaigns and the many others we can recall on the attitudes and behaviour of people who are likely to sexually offend is unknown. There are a couple of issues here. First education for prevention is very poorly evaluated generally. Education for prevention of sexual assault even less so beyond process evaluation of individual workshops or activities. Another key factor here is the difference between attitudes and behaviour. Prevention education programmes may provide a crucial set of alternative messages about violence towards women and men but awareness of these does not necessarily alter people's behaviour (see Carmody and Carrington 2000

for a detailed discussion of the evidence to support this argument). This is what we have hoped they would do but living on hope does not make it a reality.

Community education messages have undergone some changes as our knowledge about sexual assault has developed and been refined by an understanding of the diverse kinds of people who experience intimate violence. We have moved from the notion of an undifferentiated woman as victim of sexual assault to recognise her diversity in culture, ability, age and sexuality. We have also begun to understand how sexual and physical violence against men is manifested through homophobia, sexual assault of men and boys and represent the exercise of a particular form of masculinity. The focus of the messages has also shifted from broad primary prevention messages, moved from messages to victims to perpetrators and to engaging male role models to speak directly to men. The acknowledgment of power relations has however remained implicit but ever present.

Prevention for the future

So where does this leave us? And how can we begin to seriously rethink some alternative ways of developing community education? I want to suggest some possibilities of one way to rethink prevention education. Let me say before I get into this in detail that I believe we are facing a life threatening crisis as a community if we do not act radically and soon to challenge the endemic nature of sexual and other forms of interpersonal violence in our communities. What happens between 2 individuals in their intimate relationships has ripple effects into families, communities, workplaces and countries. It may be timely that we capitalise on discussions of war and many people's resistance to

this to widen the conversation to consider all forms of violence. While violence remains acceptable on any of these levels there is little hope of prevention and no community education campaign however flash will change that.

Sexual ethics and violence prevention

In the research I have been doing on preventing sexual violence I have found it useful to think about sexual ethics. I've come to this place because I consider that we desperately need to find alternative ways of thinking about prevention of sexual assault. My central argument is that much community education and legal intervention has been focused almost primarily on tertiary prevention and on attempting to control unethical behaviour usually of men against women. You may well ask why is this a problem? Let me explore some answers with you. Central to feminist theory about male violence has been a biologically determinist argument which assumes all men are inherently violent and women are potential victims. Power is always structurally constituted through a patriarchal system of domination and therefore in intimate relationships sexual consent for example can never be freely given. Following this argument to its logical conclusion there is no way to prevent sexual violence. It assumes all heterosexual sex as primary and that it is inherently violent and exploitative something that I'm sure many of you would reject. It is my concern that these often unspoken beliefs have been actually driving much so called prevention work for too many years. This is a position that I find unacceptable and it flies in the face of much of the daily reality of women and men's lives. Many women and men, lesbians, gay men and families of all kinds do live together and relate intimately without violence. This is often hard to remember when daily you are faced

with clients who have experienced violence at the hands of those they love. But it is crucial we remember this and remember that many of us do live and participate in non-violent respectful loving relationships. This raises a fundamental question we need to ask ourselves if we are serious about prevention. Do we *actually* believe it is possible for women and men to have non-violent, respectful and sexually intimate relationships?

Sexual ethics building on the work of Foucault invites us to consider the importance of self-care and reflection. The care of the self implies complex relationships with others and is also a way of caring for others. This requires us to consider how we develop our own moral and ethical sense of self. Ongoing self-reflection is a crucial part of ethical behaviour. What has been missing from prevention work is I believe information, knowledge and strategies from people who engage in ethical sexual behaviour. How do we negotiate intimate sexual encounters in an ethical manner? How do we understand the power relations between the individuals involved? How do they negotiate this within the context of a highly gendered heteronormative culture? Are there differences and similarities between same sex and heterosexual partners? Is it different between casual sexual encounters and people in ongoing relationship? How does ethical behaviour vary across cultures, ages, level of ability, socio-economic classes? How do men negotiate this and how is this different or the same for women? These are some of the many questions that we know little about. I'm suggesting here that this is territory that has great potential for prevention work.

A consideration of sexual ethics and violence prevention also suggests we need to revisit our conceptions about power relations and the links between sex and violence. This is considered a heresy by many but I consider continuing to deny the sexual element in sexual assault actively inhibits prevention possibilities.

If we accept the proposition that a consideration of sexual ethics may have something to offer in relation to violence prevention, how would this translate into prevention policy and practice? For a start it would require a rejection of universalised assumptions about masculinity and femininity. It would recognise that there are many ways to perform gender which acknowledge that not all men perform masculinity through linking sex with violence and that not all women are nurturing and non-violent. As Jefferson (2002) points out non-violent men are in the majority and as Segal (1994) Jackson (1996) and Hollway (1996) argue heterosexual women do find pleasure in non-exploitative sex with men. The focus of education would therefore be underpinned by a clearly articulated discourse, which acknowledge the multiple subjectivities available to women and men including difference in relation to erotic choice of partners. And most importantly it would involve women *and* men to ensure active engagement in developing ethical gender relations. This would be radically different from focusing on teaching women to learn risk avoidance or leaving men positioned simply as dangerous and denying any other subjectivity.

Secondly, education would be focused on building an understanding of the process of ethical negotiation of all intimate relations whether sexual or not. This creates the possibility of moving away from a punitive education model which aims to achieve

prevention through threat of punishment or controlling risk and promotes a pessimistic view of gender relations with men as always dangerous and women as passive 'victims'. This approach also has potential for challenging homophobia and racism as an ethical person would be required to critically reflect on the implications of their behaviour on themselves and care for others. It would also be important to locate these discussions within the broader socio-cultural and historical context and how these shape our sense of ourselves and our relations to others. Crucial also is a consideration of power relations. Two issues are important here. There is a need to understand how the dominant gender order continues to limit the possibility of more egalitarian relations between women and men, children and adults. Awareness of these factors however does not preclude the possibility of recognising the fluidity of power relations and the role of individual and collective resistance to dominant discourses concerning sexuality and violence.

There have now been almost thirty years of political campaigning aimed at reducing or preventing sexual violence but sexual violence continues. While current prevention strategies continue to focus solely on attempting to control or regulate unethical desire, acts and pleasure they will fail to achieve non-violent communities. Historical reluctance to acknowledge the existence and impact of sexual violence in many women's lives has required anti-violence activists to vigorously resist community denial. However if we continue to essentialise masculinity and femininity and avoid the complexity of sexual relations and sexual violence we leave little hope for primary prevention becoming a reality instead of a dream. Instead we are left with a situation in which interpersonal

violence is increasingly normalised and remains unchallenged. This is deeply depressing and provides little hope for the future.

A challenge

A thorough and extensive critical appraisal of prevention strategies to date is therefore very pressing for scholars, practitioners, feminists of all theoretical perspectives and other individuals and groups committed to non-violent communities. A shift to the links between ethical subjectivity and prevention strategies is one part of what needs to be a very spirited conversation linked with ongoing research and theory development. Integral to these approaches is a need to recognise the insights gained from the material reality of women and men's lives. However, we need to hear much more from women and men who engage in ethical sexual relations, how power relations are negotiated and how our subjectivities are influenced by cultural norms and social practices. How do differently sexed and gendered women and men negotiate casual, short-term and ongoing relationships? Given the myriad of influences which shape our subjectivity how is it that some of us are able to resist using violence in intimate relations while others do not? Exploring these issues will not preclude the harsh reality that some men and women will behave unethically and exploit others for their own pleasure. I am therefore not suggesting that we abandon the social and legal sanctions to hold these people accountable. Rather I'm arguing for a reinvigorated debate about prevention which resists the historical dominance of essentialist ideas about masculinity and femininity and how these have shaped anti-violence policy and practice. Understanding how ethical women and men negotiate intimate relations provides us with an opportunity to use this

knowledge to inform prevention policy. Inculcating ethical sexual practices as a cultural norm sends a very clear message that communities will no longer tolerate intimate sexual violence. However these messages will have little hope of success if the economic and social differences between and within communities fail to be addressed.

It is my hope that a critical reflection of all of these complex issues from a different theoretical standpoint will provide insights into how desire, acts and pleasure are understood from an ethical perspective and create a greater possibility of primary prevention.

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