

Violence

the women's issue that
defines the decade

THE PREMIER'S COUNCIL
FOR WOMEN

New South Wales

2006

The Premier's Council for Women

The Premier's Council for Women provides independent advice to the Premier and the Minister for Women and is a conduit from the community on issues of importance to women in NSW.

Introduction

Following the riots in Cronulla in late 2005, the Minister for Women asked the Council to look at both the impact that violence has on women's lives and the increasing use of violence by women.

The Council undertook to consult women on these issues and to explore their views of the Premier's call for respect and responsibility to be the defining features of our community.

What we did

Premier's Council members consulted groups of women in New South Wales using a common set of discussion questions, and an agreed definition of violence, namely:

..an attempted, threatened or actual action or behaviour that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering. This includes threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private life.

This consultation took place between April & August 2006 and sought women's views on:

- The drivers and triggers of violence
- The reasons for violence
- The beginning of violent behaviour in children
- Where violence occurs
- Issues for women
- Possible solutions

After discussion with the Premier and the Minister, the outcomes of the consultation were presented to the NSW Women's Gathering in Grafton in October.

What we found

We found considerable diversity in the experience of violence across different communities.

To be effective, intervention must be tailored to the needs and experiences of different communities.

Interestingly the issue of violence by women was not paramount; it was only raised by one group of young women.

The following pages are eloquent testimony to the fact that a standardised response is not the best way to counter violence in our communities.

What we learnt



Reasons for violence

- Pressures from work
- Entrenched values that violence is acceptable
- Racism
- Ignorance
- Cultural isolation and cultural gaps
- Family problems
- When people feel frustrated, and disempowered or not coping
- Competition for limited resources
- People seeking power and control
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Modelling the behaviour of others
- Media is instrumental
- Stereotyping at an early age – e.g. boys are brutal, girls are docile
- Experience in childhood of trauma or violence

Drivers and triggers of violence

Emotional

- Frustration
- Anger
- Fear
- Being hurt
- Not accepted by others
- Alienation

Financial

- Poverty
- Lack of work
- Debt
- Unable to keep up financially with peers

Societal

- Cultural
- Media
- Sporting heroes
- Games
- Films
- Entertainment
- Gender stereotypes

Medical

- Mental illness
- Diabetes in teenagers
- Behaviour disorders
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Loss

Where violence occurs

EVERYWHERE

- In the home
- At sporting events
- In nightclubs
- At work
- In schools and educational institutions
- At entertainment venues
- In shopping centres
- On the streets
- In pubs
- On the roads

When violent behaviour begins in children

- Can begin very early
- Increasing in two year olds
- When they start to play organised sports
- At school - bullying
- In the teens becomes more prevalent
- Violence against disabled children escalates in school
- Food allergies can cause problems
- When the media focuses on youth from a particular cultural background
- When children of migrant families take control due to parents' lack of English language skills.
- When they see violence as a means to getting their way



How violence might be stopped

- Teach respect and appropriate behaviour
- Leaders and parents must model the conduct that represents what we expect and want – non-violent & non-abusive behaviour
- Prevention better than intervention
- Pitch the message to everyone, everywhere, that violence is unacceptable
- Media to be more self responsible
- Social marketing campaigns

Soundbites from the consultations



Aboriginal women from a regional city

- Physical, sexual and psychological domestic violence not just 9 – 5. It's not an age thing.
- Insufficient support available; this city had no Domestic Violence Liaison Officer.
- Do not report for fear of further assault or having to leave the family home. The whole family suffers.
- Young mothers often live with their parents in overcrowded houses. Male partners often expect half the baby bonus.
- Constant conflict, not just within communities but also the organisations that control funding.
- Appalling violence by the "heroes" of the sports field, carries over to home, school because it is legitimised.
- Cultural transition results in elders not being respected. They are verbally abused & threatened by the young especially on pension day.
- Describing the rape of young girls by aboriginal men as a cultural practice is wrong, and must not be tolerated. Men must be fully punished.
- Bullying and racism at schools – some children are too scared to go to school. Suspending violent children can create more problems in the home.
- Lack of support, education, self esteem and support all impact on the communities
- Communities cannot get together to discuss what is happening because of lack of transport.
- Money, alcohol, drugs, all contribute to violence in the home.

Arabic speaking women

- New arrivals feel that women's freedom in Australia, linked to the financial support of social services, may lead to violence in families because men feel disempowered.
- Awareness campaigns are needed to educate women on keeping the family together.
- Women feel that the media is always pointing a finger at Islamic youth, exacerbating their feelings of inadequacy; even good kids get aggravated by the relentless media focus
- Multiculturalism should be the framework for schools –there are so many different races in Australia and people must learn to live peaceably together.
- Boys have more freedom than girls so they leave the home to socialise whereas their sisters stay home and study.
- Schools need to teach behaviour/discipline as part of the curriculum; teachers need to be more attuned to racism and dealing with it when it appears.
- Some long term (30+years) Lebanese Australians say that this wasn't always the case but the current Federal Government has fuelled racism.
- Racism and religion can be the drivers of violence; at this time women's views on violence are to some extent conditioned by the crisis in Lebanon.

Women from the Chinese community

Family problems are the most significant triggers of violence including:

- Different views about the ways to raise children
- Wives should listen to their husbands and give birth to sons
- Poor relationships among the extended family (eg. daughter in-law, mother in-law)
- Financial difficulties
- Differences in educational backgrounds
- Bad habits e.g. gambling, alcohol and foul language
- Men have the authority in the family to do whatever they want, including violence.

Some Asian people are traditional, regarding men as superior to women who should not reject men's opinion. Women should be persevering, tolerant and obedient.

Violence to solve problems can be influenced by culture.

Shame attached to exposing family violence - it takes courage for victims to seek counselling or report it to police.

Prevention is better at stopping violence than punishment. It can be done through:

- Family education, adults setting good role models for kids,
- Moral and civic education in schools,
- Better communication and relationships within the family.

Women with a disability

- Women with a disability are used to violence as people are ignorant and need to be taught from primary school about people's differences. Service providers dealing with people with disabilities – Housing, Health and CentreLink - also need educating.
- Ignorance, the speed of life and anger management make people impatient with people who are slower than they are; this results in continual name-calling and rudeness.
- What difference did the Paralympics really make? Everyone broadened their tolerance levels for 2 weeks then reverted to type.
- Carers have an enormous amount of power. They can be do-gooders or they can be punitive to people with certain disabilities who are dependent on them.
- Domestic violence engenders a sense of hopelessness and loss of power and as the disabled community is a small community, everyone knows everyone else's business.
- Mental illness is a whole separate area of disability.¹⁶

Female journalists comment on the media's approach to violence

- In the wake of the Cronulla riots, many events are now covered with a greater focus on ethnicity.
- Deaths of children associated with custody visits are never reported as such.
- New laws that prevent the identification of young victims of crime rather than editorial protocols have changed the way certain violent crimes are reported.
- Violence cuts across age, culture, gender and socio-economic status. The causes are too varied to list but gender stereotyping at a very early age can reinforce notions such as boys are brutal and girls are docile.
- Journalists were divided on whether there is enough analysis in the media of the impact of this violence on our community. One said that this constant theme on many media outlets often makes people who have never been robbed, bashed or otherwise attacked very fearful about being victimised when there is no clear reason to be so. Another said that it barely scratches the surface.
- One journalist concluded by querying why the large and increasing levels of violence against women and children are tolerated and excused by our community and do not attract the level of serious attention that ¹⁷ other forms of violence do.

Women from a migrant background

- Money should be spent on supporting families and restoring their authority rather than on Child Protection. The family unit needs to be strengthened to provide good role models.
- Poverty, homelessness, lack of meaningful work and isolation can all lead to frustration and violence.
- People arrive in Australia with great hope, only to find limited employment and housing opportunities; creating huge stress.
- Men find their accustomed role within the family altered and challenged.
- Children who have trauma/violence in their immediate past are very used to violence and its effectiveness.
- Newly arrived migrants find their children lack respect for their elders as they assert control by quickly learning to speak the language.
- Women are depressed, without community support and isolated because of the language barrier. Their childcare obligations prevent them from meeting others to share their experiences. Women need education and parenting skills to be provided within a community setting that is culturally friendly.

Muslim women

- Women playing sport have a major issue with aggression on the sporting fields as it spills over particularly to insults about their dress.
- Post 9/11 Muslim women wearing the hijab have been verbally and physically abused in the street.
- The media is instrumental in promoting violence.
- Families need to provide the role model.
- A lot more education is needed.
- Harmony should be promoted in a practical way, using the family as it is the foundation of harmony.
- Discipline is needed for children, but so is community support and a feeling of community for young parents. Often parents don't have much time to spend with their children if they are both working.
- People need to understand both their rights AND their responsibilities.
- Young people don't have a sense of belonging and so are alienated from and angry with the community. This then may escalate into violence.

Peak women's organisation

- Violent backgrounds drive young children to violence.
- Games children play, particularly computer games are often violent and children see violence as the norm.
- Lowering moral standards in our society and media focus on violence has desensitised us to violence.
- Models in society, in sport, on TV use violence to win.
- Violence is everywhere in society e.g. even on the roads where road rage is increasing.
- Loss of sense of community and pressures of living in a big city are triggers.
- Intervention is often too late – children and parents need more support earlier.
- Elder abuse becoming more prevalent, particularly from carers.
- Communication is a key factor in addressing violence – more attention needs to be paid to improving communication skills, understanding assertiveness rather than aggression, using conflict resolution rather than using violence as a solution.
- Must also take into account the damage that psychological abuse can cause.

Professional viewpoint

Professionals in the field noted that issues of violence against women should be addressed in a systemic way.

The need for support services experienced by women suffering violence can mask the need for longer term strategies aimed at making violence against women unacceptable behaviour in the community more generally.

It is important to understand the different forms that violence takes; it is not only physical and it is not only domestic. It can be psychological and it can happen anywhere.

There is a view that it would be good to apply social marketing of these issues to achieve the same status of zero tolerance for violence against women as, for example, that now experienced by those failing to wear seatbelts.

Women from a regional city

- Caused by feeling of not being heard or through fear.
- Food allergies can cause it in the very young.
- Not having control of a situation.
- Being hurt emotionally, spiritually , or physically.
- Triggers may be the same for men and women but the violent acts could be more gender specific.
- Drug induced, drug encouraged.
- Workplace violence is very common, particularly for young women, sexually harassed, verbally abused.
- Violence is the norm in movies, books, computer games and in the media.
- Pubs, clubs, nightclubs, sporting events all are places where violence occurs regularly.
- Racism is a major cause.
- Courts need to take a tougher stance on violence.
- Schools can help by educating but the community at large needs to model what is preached – too many double standards.

Rural women

- Alcohol seems to be the main trigger!!!!
- Many women feel isolated and better transport would resolve this to some extent though some also feel isolated from other women.
- Drought creates hardship, financial problems, frustration; this is even worse for single women.
- Everyone knows everyone so women experiencing violence are afraid of gossip.
- Can't break the cycle because of the old fashioned belief that domestic violence is normal so women stay in the situation which appears to indicate that they accept violence.
- Nowhere for these women to go in small country towns – need support groups and a local refuge.
- Education and awareness of options such as those through the police and Salvation Army.
- Less violence in the media.
- More police interaction and stronger AVO's are needed.

Teachers and educators

- Frustration, not feeling respected or feeling disempowered may cause violence.
- Violence occurs in all cultures and some forms of violent behaviour by men have a cultural history of acceptance eg violence in sport.
- In families financial problems or other stress, can lead to aggression and confrontation.
- Parenting skills would assist in seeking help, especially with sons, and focus more on non-violent solutions to problems.
- Parenting ought to be the same for girls and boys.
- Families who use physical punishment are teaching children to be violent- kids model behaviours on the relationship with their parents.
- People need to learn to deal with their anger and communicate it.
- Violence happens everywhere we only see it in public places. Dealing with violence by confrontation – e.g. with tear gas, provokes and exacerbates it.
- Schools do not tolerate violence. It is dealt with expertly. Can happen quietly and secretly.
- Standover and emotional violence is just as significant as the physical violence.
- Educating violence out of our mentality is the answer.
- Women need a sense of self to stay safe.
- Enormous uncertainty about reporting domestic violence for fear of losing control or losing children. Some cultural groups do not have the option of turning to a government agency.

University and college students from diverse ethnic backgrounds

- Women keep their tension and unhappiness within and can “explode” later on.
- Women can be more verbally violent.
- Men show violence in a more physical external way.
- When women want to be more like men they imitate the violent part to be more accepted.
- Violence is a solution when things are out of control and when people aren't coping.
- Cultural isolation works against social acceptance. Frustration with this isolation can be acted out in the home environment.
- Gangs are a similar response as the gang meets the need for a sense of belonging.
- The clash of cultural norms means that children find it hard to know what is and what isn't acceptable behaviour.
- Family problems e.g. financial stress often trigger violent behaviour.

Working women

- Women experience physical violence and low level bullying and harassment at work.
- Women are the majority of the workforce in customer service work and interact directly with the public. Women in hospitality are particularly exposed to harassment due to the environment they work in.
- Women are also the main workers in caring work where they can be exposed to client violence (from children and mentally impaired people).
- The safety of the public transport network at night is particularly relevant to women who are shift workers.
- Women are overrepresented in the more junior grades of most work. This means women workers are in less powerful positions where they may be exposed to internal bullying and harassment.
- Some women work in non-traditional roles in male dominated workforces where their presence may be resented or opposed. Women in these situations are vulnerable to sledging and harassment.
- Where management spells out a clear policy of zero tolerance for inappropriate behaviour and follows it up with sanctions, the risk of violence is reduced.
- Of equal importance is investment in good education/ awareness programmes which spell out clearly what will not be tolerated.
- Occupational Health and Safety regulations now require employers to make a risk assessment of these issues in relation to their workforce; this means that they can be raised prior to actual incidents of violence occurring.

Young women from a regional city

- There must be better ways of dealing with the perpetrators of violence in the courts. Harsher penalties or meaningful and consistent penalties.
- Need to find a way of resolving violence in an individual – does counselling work?
- Communities must look at the cause of violence and not the effect in an analytical way so that men and women understand what is happening.
- Focus on men as perpetrators of violence rather than on the victims (without reducing support to these women).
- Education that is not tokenistic for peers and friends. Needs to be “hardcore and embedded from kindergarten” not 40 minutes in a PDHPE (Personal Development Health and Physical Education) class when you are 17.
- Information should be in the home but current advertising campaign is desensitising.
- Options for women should be more available with higher levels of awareness particularly for women with children and little money.
- There is harassment in smaller workplaces so an independent officer should “pop in” to workplaces.

Young women

- Bullying in schools is a huge problem. Violence in schools seen to be 'cool' and peer pressure creates 'in' groups and 'out' groups. This was thought to be exacerbated by school counsellors who are seen to be unapproachable.
- Inconsistencies exist between the messages children and young people are given at school and at home.
- The women felt that girls were conditioned to be threatened and afraid of men, violence, etc. yet found it common for guilt to arise in situations of sexual violence.
- There is a gap in the legal system as victims of 16-18 years must advocate on their own behalf yet in other situations are still considered to be a child.
- Many young people go to nightclubs regularly, where violence is a huge problem.
- Bouncers are given too much power. Clubs need security cameras and a code for bouncers like that for bar staff (RSA).
- Violence occurs in public spaces; it is a public issue.
- Train transport police stay locked in the guard cabins when fights break out; are they trained to deal with violence?
- Violence in the country is different to violence in the city, i.e. country you know everyone, city violence more random.
- They could not trust authority figures such as police for protection, with police encouraging women in situations of violence to fight back.
- They felt there needed to be more education and intervention at the grassroots level so that the community takes responsibility but how do you make communities take responsibility?

.... and the last word from young women in Newcastle

“Thank you, it is really important that this sort of discussion with real people can occur. [Young] women need to be able to talk about these issues and we hope that this becomes meaningful.”

(our brackets)