



## **Men's Collective Anti-violence Activism and the Struggle for Gender Justice**

MICHAEL FLOOD

**ABSTRACT** *Michael Flood argues that men's anti-violence activism is an important element in the project of ending violence against women (VAW). Men's groups focused on gender-based violence have emerged in over a dozen countries. In such mobilizations, members of a privileged group act in ways which undermine that same privilege. Men's efforts to end men's violence embody partnerships across gender lines and enhance gender justice.*

**KEYWORDS** *men's groups; mobilization; partnership; violence against women*

### **Introduction**

When it comes to violence against women (VAW), men are both part of the problem and part of the solution. Profound changes in men's lives, gendered power relations and the social construction of masculinity are necessary if VAW is to be eliminated. If gender-based violence is to be undermined, men themselves will need to take part in this project, by changing their own violent behaviour and by joining with women in challenging the cultural and institutional underpinnings of violence in their communities and countries. One source of hope therefore is the emergence of collective activism by men on gender-based violence.

In many countries, both developing and developed, groups of men have emerged whose agenda is to end men's VAW and children. They share the fundamental premise that men must take responsibility for stopping men's violence. Taking responsibility begins with individual men taking personal steps to minimize their use of violence (Warshaw, 1988: 161-67; Funk, 1993: 95-111; Kimmel, 1993; Madhubuti, 1993; Weinberg and Biernbaum, 1993). But it goes beyond this, to public and collective action. Anti-violence men's groups engage in community education campaigns, hold rallies and marches, work with

violent men, facilitate workshops in schools and prisons and workplaces, and act in alliance with women's groups and organizations. There are at least two other ways in which men have been involved in anti-violence efforts: as the participants in programmes for perpetrators of violence; and as the targets of public education campaigns which aim to increase men's understanding of and opposition to VAW. However, this article focuses largely on efforts by men which are community-based and often voluntary.

### Men's activism against violence

The best known example of men's anti-violence activism is the White Ribbon Campaign, a grassroots education campaign which spans at least four continents. The White Ribbon Campaign is the first large-scale male protest against violence in the world. It began in 1991 on the second anniversary of one man's massacre of 14 women in Montreal, Canada, and it has now spread to the USA, Europe, Africa, Latin America and Australia. A group of men in Canada decided that they had a responsibility to urge men to speak out about VAW, and they founded the campaign. The idea of the White Ribbon Campaign (WRC) is very simple: to encourage men to show their opposition to men's VAW, by purchasing and wearing a white ribbon. In pinning on the ribbon, men pledge themselves never to commit, condone or remain silent about VAW. Money raised by the campaign goes to services for the victims and survivors of violence and to women's advocacy programmes.

Alongside this international campaign, there are men's groups in at least a dozen countries that share the goal of ending men's VAW. In Mumbai, India, the Men Against Abuse and Violence is a volunteer organization focused on ending domestic violence (Greig et al., 2000: 12). In the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Men Against Violence Against Women formed in 1996. The first educational campaign in Central America aimed at men and tackling domestic violence began in 1999. In Nicaragua, Puntos de Encuentro (Meeting Points) and the Asociación de Hombres Contra la Violencia (Men Against Violence) ran a large-scale campaign encouraging men to respect their

partners, resolve conflicts peacefully and seek help to avoid domestic violence (Solórzano and Montoya, 2001). In Australia, Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA) began in 1989, a national network of MASA groups was established over 1989-92, and marches of 300-500 men were held in many capital cities (Fuller and Fisher, 1998: 3).

Men's anti-violence groups appear to be most well established in North America. There are over 100 such groups in the US, including Men Overcoming Violence (MOVE) in San Francisco, the Atlanta-based Men Stopping Violence, the Men's Resource Center in Massachusetts, and St Louis's Rape And Violence End Now (RAVEN). Men Can Stop Rape (formerly the Men's Rape Prevention Project) in Washington DC mobilizes young men across the USA to behave as allies to women in preventing rape and other forms of male violence. Such groups share the belief that men must act to stop men's violence. As a full-page newspaper advertisement taken out by the Men's Resource Center in November 1999 proclaimed, 'We call on all men to reject the masculine culture of violence and to work with us to create a culture of connection, of cooperation and of safety for women, for men and for children.'

Men's anti-violence groups and organizations have adopted strategies of both violence prevention and violence intervention. Prevention aims to lessen the likelihood of men using violence in the first place by undermining the beliefs, values and discourses which support violence, challenging the patriarchal power relations which promote and are maintained by violence, and promoting alternative constructions of masculinity, gender and selfhood which foster non-violence and gender justice. A recent example is Men Can Stop Rape's campaign, 'My strength is not for hurting'. The Strength Campaign includes presentations to high schools, posters for schools and buses, a handbook for teachers and school staff, and a youth magazine. All address men's role as women's allies in ending violence in dating relationships by encouraging men to practise consent and respect in their sexual relations. Boys and young men in schools are a particularly important target group for anti-violence efforts, and both men's groups and government agencies have developed programmes for the

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school setting (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998: 222–51; Cameron, 2000).

Violence intervention refers to strategies focused on those people who have committed acts of violence and those people who have been subject to violence. Some men's anti-violence groups work with male perpetrators of violence, including men who have volunteered to participate in counselling programmes and men in court-mandated groups within the criminal justice system. Men's anti-violence activists typically share a commitment to the provision of appropriate resources and services for the victims and survivors of men's violence.

What motivates the men who are active in struggles against men's VAW? What inspires men to question sexist cultural values and patriarchal power relations? John Stoltenberg (1990) offers an account of how men come to join the struggle for women's equality, and its themes are pertinent ones for these questions. Some men come to pro-feminist and anti-sexist involvements because their loyalty and closeness to a particular woman in their lives – a mother, a partner, a friend, a sister – has forged an intimate understanding of the injustices suffered by women and the need for men to take action. Some men's advocacy is grounded in other forms of principled political activism, such as pacifism, economic justice, green issues or gay liberation. They have been exposed to feminist and related ideals through their political involvements, their workplaces or their higher education. Others become involved through dealing with their own experience of sexual violence or sexual abuse from other men and sometimes women, perhaps as children or teenagers (Stoltenberg, 1990: 11–12). Men's commitments to the movement against VAW have blossomed in the same soil of deeply felt personal experiences, particular relationships and intimacies and loyalties, and ethical and political involvements. Such sources of inspiration are evident among the men in Nepal and India, for example, who have stood courageously for women's and girls' right to be free from violence (Hayward, 1999: 4–6).

### **For gender justice**

44 Men's anti-violence activism is significant in at least two ways. First, this activity symbolizes the

growing recognition that VAW will only cease when men join with women to put an end to it. The notion that it is desirable to involve men in the movements to stop VAW and girls is rapidly becoming institutionalized in the philosophies and programmes of international organizations. In 1997 at the UNICEF, UNIFEM and UNDP-sponsored Regional Meeting 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in South Asia', the 100 or so men at the meeting added the following statement to the Kathmandu Commitment which was issued:

We men, realizing that no sustainable change can take place unless we give up the entrenched ideas of male superiority, commit ourselves to devising new role models of masculinity. We shall endeavour to 'take off the armour' and move forwards, becoming a more developed and complete being. We urge international bodies to focus on and explore the destructive consequences of patriarchy. (UNICEF 1998, cited in Hayward, 1999: 9)

Also in 1997, UNESCO held an Expert Group Meeting in Oslo on 'Male Roles and Masculinities in the Perspective of a Culture of Peace'. Participants emphasized that the transformation from a culture of violence to a culture of peace is dependent on the development of more egalitarian and partnership-oriented forms of masculinity, as opposed to traditional forms premised on dominance, authority, control and force (AVSC International and IPPF/Western Hemisphere Region, 1998: 66–7). In March 2001, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) announced its new programme, 'Men's Roles and Responsibilities in Ending Gender Based Violence'.

Second, the existence of men's anti-violence activism demonstrates that men can take collective public action to oppose men's violence. The groups and campaigns described here represent successful attempts to create among men – albeit sometimes small numbers of men – a public response to men's violence. More broadly, men can and do organize and agitate in support of gender justice. There are historical precedents in men's organized support for women's suffrage and equality in the 18th and 19th centuries (Strauss, 1982; Kimmel and Mosmiller, 1992; John and Eustance, 1997). In

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### Partnerships across gender

How then should men's anti-violence efforts be organized? Most importantly, it should be done in partnership with women. Most of the men's groups and organizations described here conduct their efforts in alliance with women and women's groups involved in anti-violence campaigns and/or in services for the victims of violence. More radically, many pro-feminist men's groups position themselves as accountable to feminist constituencies: they consult with women's groups before initiating their campaigns, do not compete with women's groups for funding or other resources, and build strong lines of communication and trust (Funk, 1993: 125-6; 132-4). There are debates over the processes through which accountability is established (Hall, 1994), and over which feminism one is accountable to, and given the diversity of feminisms this is an ongoing issue. One New York group argues that activists against men's violence should hold themselves accountable only to those feminists who themselves are accountable to the victims of prostitution and pornography, in effect 'taking sides' in an important feminist debate (Men Against Pornography, undated).

Men's partnerships with anti-violence women's groups are critical. They enable men to learn from existing efforts and scholarship rather than 'reinventing the wheel'. They lessen the risk that men will collude in or be complicit with dominant and oppressive forms of masculinity. They are a powerful and practical demonstration of men's and women's shared interest in stopping violence. Men's partnerships with women are an inspiring example of cross-gender collaboration, a form of activism which reaches across and transforms gender inequalities.

Should men's efforts to end men's violence be linked to wider struggles for gender equality, social justice and human rights? Michael Kaufman writes pragmatically that in order for large numbers of men to unite to end violence, they should put aside their differences over other issues of gender and justice such as abortion (Kaufman, 1997: 9). Keith Pringle, on the other hand, firmly locates men's work against violence within a broader anti-oppressive practice. Men challenging violent

In addition, contemporary men's anti-violence groups are one expression of a wider network of pro-feminist men's activism, represented for example by the National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) in the USA, the European Profeminist Men's Network, and the Men For Change Network in the UK. Thus, 'it is not a question of whether men can take action but how' (Pease, 1997: 76).

Men's collective mobilizations on gender issues are a delicate form of political activity, as they involve the mobilization of members of a privileged group in order to undermine that same privilege. Most if not all contemporary societies are characterized by men's institutional privilege (Messner, 1997: 5), such that men in general receive a 'patriarchal dividend' from gendered structures of inequality (Connell, 1995: 79-82). The danger therefore is that by mobilizing men collectively as men and thus drawing on their shared interests, activists will inadvertently entrench gender privilege (Connell, 1995: 234-8). This potential has been realized among the 'men's rights' and 'fathers' rights' groups in the men's movements, in that this wing of the movements is energetically engaged in an anti-women and anti-feminist backlash (Flood, 1997, 1998). In fact, anti-feminist men's groups in the USA, Canada, UK and Australia typically claim that women's violence against men is as common as the reverse. They have attacked services for female survivors of men's violence and lobbied to reverse the gains made by women's anti-violence campaigns. It is not surprising therefore that some women are nervous about men's participation in campaigns against violence.

However, men can be and are motivated by interests other than those associated with gender privilege. There are important resources in men's lives for the construction of non-violent masculinities and forms of selfhood, such as men's concerns for children, intimacies with women, and ethical and political commitments. Furthermore, given the intersection of gender with other social divisions of race, class, sexuality, nation and so on, men share very unequally in the fruits of gender privilege (Messner, 1997: 7) and men's material interests are multiple and complex.

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masculinities must also address other dimensions of oppression which intersect with gendered domination (Pringle, 1995: 150). Support for Pringle's position comes from the scholarship on cross-cultural predictors of VAW. Levels of VAW are higher in societies showing male economic and decision-making dominance in the family, and wife abuse is more likely in couples with a dominant husband and an economically dependent wife (Heise, 1998: 270-1). Given that men's violence is fuelled by and itself perpetuates gender inequalities (and other forms of injustice), anti-violence work should be situated within a broader project of gender justice.

When men involve themselves in anti-violence efforts, the nature of their participation and the ways in which they are received are themselves shaped by patriarchal privilege. First, men's groups receive greater media attention and interest than similar groups of women (Luxton, 1993: 368). This is partly the result of the former's novelty, but it is also a function of the status and cultural legitimacy granted to men's voices in general. Second,

men acting for gender justice receive praise and credit (especially from women) which is often out of proportion to their efforts. Any positive action by men may be seen as gratifying in the face of other men's apathy about and complicity in VAW. A further factor is that many women have been trained to 'reflect men at twice their natural size' (Cline and Spender, 1987). Third, men are able to draw on their and other men's institutional privilege to attract levels of support and funding rarely granted to women (Landsberg, 2000: 15). This can of course be turned to strategic advantage in pursuing an end to men's violence.

Men's collective activism is a vital element in the struggle to end VAW. As with international efforts on other gender-related issues such as HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health, poverty and development, in working against violence it is critical to involve men. Men's participation must be guided by gender justice and gender partnership, as these principles are integral to men's ability to cultivate a lasting legacy of peace.

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### UNIFEM Launches New Book on Strategies to End Violence Against Women

UNIFEM's new book *With an End in Sight* was launched in New York during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence. The book is a testament to the power of collective action and shows how women's organizations are partnering with judicial and law enforcement systems, community and youth groups, policy-makers and international organizations to respond to the global mandate to end violence against women.

Supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the United Nations Foundation, *With an End in Sight* explores seven projects to end violence against women in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Gaza, Honduras, India, Kenya, Nigeria and the West Bank. The initiatives outlined in the book are just a few examples of the innovative programmes funded through UNIFEM's Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence against Women. Since it was established in 1996, the Trust Fund has awarded over US\$4 million to 105 projects in 65 countries.

*With an End in Sight* is available in English for US\$12.95 plus shipping and handling. To order the book, contact Women Ink at [www.womenink.org](http://www.womenink.org), or you can read the book on-line at [www.undp.org/unifem/public/tfbook/](http://www.undp.org/unifem/public/tfbook/).

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