

National Access to Justice & Pro Bono Conference
Human Rights in the Home – Andrew O’Keefe, White Ribbon

I have two little boys, Barney and Rory, and a little girl, Olive. I know that if Eleanor and I raise them right, our boys will grow up to be fine men who are judged by the world on the quality of their characters and the merit of their deeds. We *hope* that our little girl will be judged on the same things...but we know that there’s a fair chance she’ll also be judged on what she looks like in a pair of denim shorts, or what she’s prepared to do for her boyfriend in the bedroom as a teenager, or whether she can ‘grow a pair of balls’ in the boardroom, or whether she’s happy to play second fiddle to her husband in the family. And we also know that there’s a chance she’ll never feel as safe walking home at night, or being home at night, as our boys will.

It would horrify me to think that my little girl would ever be attacked or belittled by a man she loved, or by anyone. But it would horrify me just as much if either of my boys ever thought it was okay to treat women that way. Because if living with fear and with sexist judgments and shorter horizons is an injustice to Olive, then living under an expectation of entitlement and authority and aggressive control is also an injustice to Barney and Rory.

We know from many studies that there are certain factors that make it more statistically likely that a man will use violence, or a woman will be the victim of violence: drug and alcohol abuse, a history of experiencing violence as a child, financial stress and social isolation are the big ones. But we can’t say that those things cause violence. Because not every unemployed man beats his wife or girlfriend; not every childhood survivor of abuse becomes an abuser. And besides, there are many violent men who don’t experience any of those risk factors. So while those factors may be the catalysts for violence in some situations, they are not the causes of violence.

Violence is ultimately an individual choice. But that choice is hugely influenced by the culture around the individual and how permissive it is towards violence and gender inequality. A culture that minimises the dignity afforded to women reinforces the individual’s sense of power and entitlement towards women. Or to put it another way, a society that normalizes attitudes of disrespect and inequality towards women breeds men who think it’s okay to lord it over women by any means. It’s not a matter of “my culture made me do it” but rather “my culture *allowed* me to do it.”

Now, this basic proposition is in fact borne out by the global statistics on violence: the World Health Organisation has ranked the countries where it is most unsafe to be a woman, and surprise surprise, women are least safe where they have the least economic, political, educational and social empowerment, and also where there is an adherence to rigidly defined gender roles. Australia is right up there near the best of places for women’s safety, but even here we find persistent economic inequality, huge political

underrepresentation, and some really concerning attitudes towards women in the social realm. And so, of course, we find violence against women here too.

We don't know exactly how *many* men use violence against their partners, but we can begin to guess. Just last year, the University of Michigan released the results of a pretty robust nationally representative study in which one in five American men *acknowledged* that they had used violence against a partner, ranging from pushing and shoving, throwing objects, slapping and hitting, kicking, biting, choking, burning or threatening their partner with a weapon. So that's one in five American men who've used violence, and that excludes verbal, emotional, psychological and other forms of abuse. Now, given that the social and cultural conditions in Australia are broadly similar to those of the US (not accounting for general rates of poverty), I think we can at least assume that the number of men here in Australia who have used violence against a partner may surprise us all.

So what specifically are the attitudes that *enable* men's violence against women? Well, last year, VicHealth released the latest five-yearly survey of Australian National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women, and that report showed some good news and some bad news:

The good news was that the majority of Australians have a reasonable knowledge of what constitutes VAW, and that in general terms, we don't endorse it. The bad news is that we still excuse violence far too much, we still trivialize it's impacts, and far too often we still shift the blame for violence onto women. I won't go through all the findings (because the report runs to 600 pages!), but here's a few just to give a bit of a picture:

- One in five of us believe that DV can be excused if people get so angry that they lose control, or if the perpetrator later regrets it;
- Half of us believe that a woman can leave a violent relationship if she really wants to;
- Monster myth;
- One in four of us believe that men make better political leaders;
- One in five believe that men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household.

With those kinds of attitudes of male power so prevalent in Australia, it's no wonder that so many men feel entitled to control or dominate their partners. And that's the key word in all this: control. Because violence is all about power. But that keyword can be challenged by two other words that challenge social assumptions about male superiority and entitlement: equality & respect.

Now, I've been involved in White Ribbon for eleven years now, and I'm still not a paragon of all these virtues by any means. Like all of us, I have a lot of cultural history to overcome. But I *am* dedicated to continually learning more about how to do my bit to change male culture. As the great Irish statesman Edmund Burke once said "No person ever made a greater mistake than doing nothing because he could only do a little."

At White Ribbon, we employ many different strategies to achieve this culture change...You can find out all about those things on our website. But at the heart of *all* our work is an appeal to men *as individuals* to be drivers of change in men's culture, because only men have the choice to end men's violence against women.

Of course, the lessons of respect and equity start at home. I hope we'll have an opportunity to discuss what respect and equity in the home look like in our panel Q&A, but in very short form, we as men can help to end violence, starting at home, by doing the following:

- Demonstrating respect for our partners in all our words and actions so that our sons learn to give respect and our daughters learn to expect respect;
- Demonstrating non-violent means of resolving conflicts in the home;
- Showing our kids what equality looks like by sharing the drudgery, the joys and the responsibilities of parenting equally;
- Defining for them a modern masculinity and a modern femininity by showing them that both men and women are capable of being strong *and* kind, driven *and* nurturing, leaders *and* followers, or better still, collaborators.
- Being opportunistic in talking to our kids about the sexist or violence-supportive messages they're receiving from their society every day.

We are the ones who can show our kids how to make a world where men and women are equal, where they are given exactly the same opportunities for success and happiness, and where they are in the best possible kinds of relationships built upon mutual respect. And if they *do* choose to make that world, then it will be a very different world to the one we were raised in, or that *any* human being has *ever* been raised in. And I think that's exciting, for women *and* for men.