

Prevention spotlight:

Lessons on achieving generational change

On 29 May, more than 200 primary prevention of violence against women and respectful relationships education practitioners gathered for DVRVC's first prevention conference. The one-day event examined Victoria's journey towards embedding and mainstreaming respectful relationships in the education system. This article summarises the key lessons identified through the conference, which can be applied to scaling up prevention activities in other settings.

The state government has made an unprecedented investment to create a new workforce dedicated to embedding respectful relationships education across the entire education system in Victoria. While the community sector has led this work for decades in specific regions and communities, this is the first time a primary prevention initiative has been 'mainstreamed'. The first 18 months of implementation has taught us a lot about 'mainstreaming' something as personal and political as preventing violence against women. It's crucial to consider these lessons as we embed prevention activities across other settings.

Joining the dots between prevention and response

Primary prevention practitioners know that our work creates a space where people feel safe to disclose current or past experiences of violence, which leads to greater demand on specialist family violence and sexual assault services. Prevention initiatives, regardless of scale, should consider at the planning stage how their activity will impact on – and interact with – early intervention and response systems. It's not just about funding response services appropriately, though resourcing to meet increased demand is important. It also means developing new, and strengthening existing, referral pathways, building the capacity of prevention practitioners to recognise, respond and refer where they receive disclosures and exploring new ways of providing services.

The inevitable rise in disclosures not only increases demand on the service system but can also highlight gaps in this system. Addressing these gaps can provide an opportunity for prevention and response sectors, and professionals working in the setting, to work together. For example, in education settings, disclosures can come from school staff, parents and carers, and from children and young people themselves. Over the last decade, respectful relationships work in schools has highlighted the lack of services for young

people experiencing or using violence in their own relationships. While there is not an established or consistent good practice approach for working with young people using violence or control in their intimate relationships, the prevention and response sectors could work with schools and youth services to build the service system to better address the needs of young people.

Lesson

When designing a large scale prevention initiative, consider the implications for victim survivors and perpetrators who may participate in prevention activity. Ensure response services are funded to meet increasing demand, and work collaboratively across sectors to embed specialist response approaches within mainstream settings to support the safe and effective management of this demand.

One size doesn't fit all

While reach, scale and consistency are important reasons to embed prevention across all areas where we live, work, learn and play, there is vast diversity within each of the key settings for primary prevention. One size does not fit all, and large-scale initiatives need to be tailored for different contexts and population groups. This can mean tailoring content for different audiences – such as adapting teaching and learning materials for children and young people with learning disabilities, or adapting elements for different contexts – such as finding new ways to connect when stakeholders are spread across a large geographical area.

Lesson

When designing a large scale prevention activity, ensure the most fundamental elements can be adapted for implementation in all contexts, to meet the needs of different audiences. Evaluate any tailoring and ensure that the tailored approach aligns to the prevention evidence base.

Prevention is everyone's business

The product of a successful advocacy campaign is often major systemic reform, which can change the work – in this case, respectful relationships education – as well as who is responsible for doing it. This can mean government departments and Ministers embedding gender equality and violence prevention into their portfolios – even where this is not 'core-business' or has not been a priority in the past, and it requires strong cross-government coordination.

Large-scale prevention initiatives require a workforce to implement them. The Department of Education and Training created 34 new roles to implement the respectful relationships initiative, in addition to dozens of existing community sector practitioners who provide specialist support to schools. People participating in prevention activity in mainstream settings also need specific knowledge and skills – even if prevention is not the primary focus of their role.

Lesson

Preventing violence against women is everyone's business, not just the gender experts and specialist prevention practitioners. For primary prevention to be effectively mainstreamed, it needs to be embedded across all government portfolios, with strong cross-government coordination. It also needs to be embedded in mainstream sectors, not just the not for profit sector or those tightly regulated by government.

Resistance

One of the challenges of doing prevention work in general, which is amplified when mainstreaming, is the resistance that this work receives. Resistance is inevitable and many consider it a sign that their prevention work is effectively challenging the gendered drivers of violence. However, mainstreaming means reaching more people and this includes people who disagree with, or feel challenged by, work to promote gender equality.

SETTING the SCENE

RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION in VICTORIA

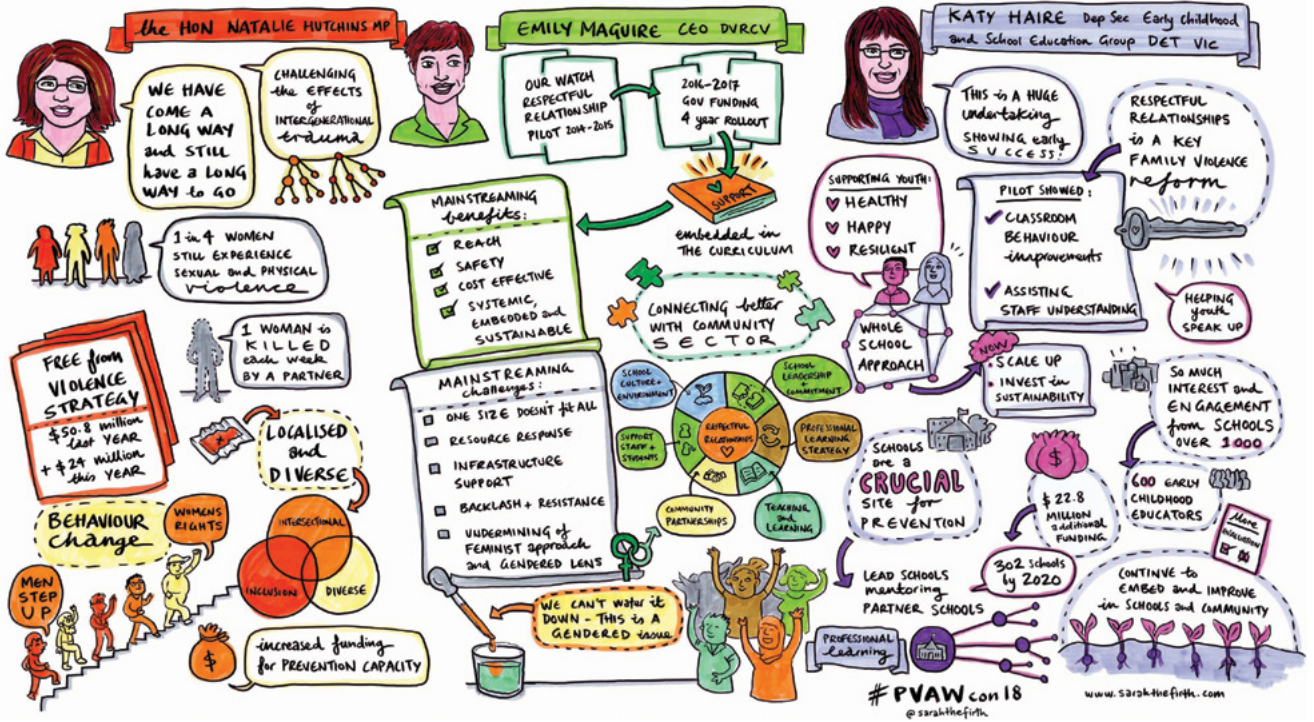


Image: @sarahthefirth

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Resistance, and strategies for mitigating it, can look different depending on the scale. Projects delivered in local or organisational contexts may be challenged by a small number of individuals, and the specialist organisations delivering these projects are well-equipped to respond personally and bring those individuals on the prevention journey. In contrast, mainstreamed initiatives which are often implemented by agencies who don't have specialist expertise in prevention or violence against women may meet resistance from organised groups, on public platforms, and in the media. This creates complex communications challenges for government departments and private sectors seeking to mitigate reputational risk and ensure their staff are safe and supported.

Lesson

Social change generates resistance and backlash. Proactive, positive communications strategies should be incorporated into all large-scale prevention initiatives, as well as capacity building for implementation staff, communications and leadership to respond to and mitigate resistance.

The importance of the gendered lens

Most importantly, when embedding violence prevention into a mainstream or universal system, we need to be mindful of the risk of undermining the feminist approach that underpins this work. Violence against women is a gendered issue and the evidence tells us that promoting respect, safety or ethics without a gendered lens will not reduce its prevalence. The only thing that will ultimately achieve that is designing prevention activities that address the four gendered drivers of violence.

Lesson

Large-scale prevention initiatives must specifically target the gendered drivers of violence against women in order to prevent it. Watering down this approach will not achieve a reduction in violence against women.

Addressing the structures, norms and practices that support the gendered drivers of violence against women is the only way to prevent it. This change will take time. The evidence suggests that to achieve generational change we need to take multiple, consistent, reinforcing actions within whole systems, and these changes will only 'stick' if actions are reinforced across multiple settings, like education, sport and workplaces. This stage of implementing the respectful relationships initiative has taught us that embedding this work at such a large scale is complex and full of challenges, but we're learning about how to do this work well so that we can achieve lasting generational change. ■