

PreventX: Messaging for a Movement

Tips and insights for messaging and advocacy to address the drivers of family and gender-based violence



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PreventX: Messaging for a Movement

Tips and insights for messaging and advocacy to address the drivers of family and gender-based violence

Prepared by Marina Carman

This resource aims to share tips and insights that were gathered as part of the PreventX conference, held 19-20 March 2024. PreventX is the largest national gathering of professionals working to prevent family and gender-based violence.

The theme for the 2024 conference was 'Messaging for a Movement' and focused specifically on how to craft and deliver messages that shift hearts and minds to deliver long-term and sustainable social change to prevent family and gender-based violence.

Up to 400 practitioners from across the country attended the event, and a variety of panel and workshop sessions were held.

Why does messaging matter?

The key to successful primary prevention messaging is engaging people and motivating action. We need messages that address the drivers of violence against women, and the multiple and intersecting forms of power and oppression that affect so many communities. We need messages that shift attitudes, stereotypes and behaviours so that family and gender-based violence are no longer a part of our reality.

Crafting powerful messages is a skill and practice that sits at the heart of prevention. We need messages that speak to evidence of what drives violence, and engages with deeply-held values in all our campaigns, communications, advocacy, policy and our programs delivered in all places where people live, work, learn and play. In addition, we need to focus on messaging in order to respond effectively to resistance and backlash and ensure ongoing and increased investment from state and Commonwealth governments in primary prevention.

The PreventX conference brought a fresh focus on how to frame and communicate primary prevention at every level of the socio-ecological model – individual, community, organisational and institutional and systemic. Drawing from extensive work related to values-based messaging, effective campaigns, grassroots mobilising and advocacy, PreventX showcased and helped to build knowledge about crafting messages that resonate and effect change.

Effective messaging for advocacy will also be crucial as we move forward with a new National Action Plan and a post-Royal Commission era in Victoria. For prevention policy and investment, we need persuasive, relevant and meaningful messages that will ensure government action to truly end family and gender-based violence for all people, in a generation.

Messaging is for everyone

Key insights shared at PreventX:

- Messaging is not just the job of staff working in campaigns and social media; it's key to all primary prevention.
- Our current challenge is to go beyond those already convinced, and reach out to a broader audience.

“Whatever I’m doing, whether I’m running a workshop, whether I’m writing, whether I’m speaking, my first question is ‘who is in the room’? And that’s a literal room or a metaphorical room. It’s critical that we know who we are talking to if we’re going to make a shift ... The very first thing I’m doing is asking lots of questions and finding out about their core values.”

Jac Tomlins, Jac Tomlins Consulting

Messaging the evidence

Key insights shared at PreventX:

- We must rely on the evolving and growing body of evidence that paints a picture of:
 - The problem – prevalence, nature and impacts
 - The underlying drivers of family and gender-based violence
 - What works – research and evaluation that demonstrates the changes we are seeing result from messaging and programs
- There are a range of different forms of evidence, and we must take account of the voices of lived experience, as well as communities that have been marginalised and silenced.
- We can speak to this evidence, and the cost of doing nothing, while also delivering messages that motivate change and inspire hope.

“Finding the right way of communicating research and evidence to people is so important, because otherwise people can say ‘That’s not me’. Finding those resonant practices in communication is really important.”

Stephanie Lusby, Respect Victoria

“*The* single most important strategy for capturing and sharing our practice know-how is to get inside the ‘black box’ of our projects, programs or initiatives, to take a good look at *how* the work is being done, and not just settle for reporting on what’s gone into one side of the box (inputs) and what’s come out the other (outputs, reach, impacts). That means we need evaluators who are prepared to jump into that black box with us, to shape hallmarks of success that can demonstrate how sound practice has happened.”

Wei Leng Kwok, WLK Consulting

“[It’s about] education and two-way learning and deep listening and understanding both worlds, where we are coming from, as experts and our experiences within the community.”

Shirleen Campbell, Tangentyere Women’s Group

Evidence-based messaging strategies

Key insights shared at PreventX:

- Putting forward a shared vision of the future is vital – and this should be grounded in research that shows a majority of the population reject gender inequality and violence.
- We need to find creative ways to reach different audiences where they are at, and these need to be adapted to a range of settings, communities and contexts.
- It is important to think about the message, but also who carries the message – peers and role models can be particularly useful in delivering key messages. We must be aware of both the potential impact and labour involved.
- It is impactful to involve victim survivors in sharing their lived experience, but the messages must be authentic and empowering for victim survivors, and the practice involved in story-telling must be safe and ethical, guided by the victim survivor.
- There is a range of research about what works in messaging for social change, and also research that help us to understand our audiences better.
- We must make sure we evaluate campaigns and messages, and share these results with others.

“There is a role for research in testing our assumptions or even validating our assumptions about what works ... we need to think about who we are talking to, what moves them and what doesn't.”

Sawsan Alfayadh, Plan International

- It is really useful to consider lessons from a range of campaigns and social movements, and share each other's messages in solidarity.

“All of these movements are inter-connected ... but we play a role in supporting one another to articulate these connections, understand them and bring them into our work. And we need to challenge our leaders to be accountable to all of us, to look at justice not just through a siloed lens of domestic or sexual violence, but through a broader social justice framework.”

Amani Haydar, Artist, Activist and Lawyer

- Many people are using values-based messaging, which starts from understanding and using widely-held values to shift the conversation.
- It's important to be specific about our vision, as well as the barriers to achieving this vision and the actions that we are asking people to take.
- We must make sure we are aware of what our opposition is saying, but avoid targeting our messages to them – as our key audience is the unconvinced 'moveable middle'.

“We engage with communities and explore and identify their core values, and tap into those values and see what value makes people more receptive ... for example, in the Sikh community we have a value of gender equality. We take that message from the holy script itself ... and we use that value when we work.”

Saranbeer Kaur, Victorian Sikh Gurdwaras Council

“Naming the source of the problem is really important. You're assigning it an actor and a cause, being as specific as possible ... and a 'credible theory of change' ... breaking that down into small steps towards the final goal makes it feel more achievable.”

Indre McGlenn, Community Legal Centres NSW

“A big part of our thinking is how we tell a story about a minority within a minority that shows not just the threat to trans people but the threat the anti-trans lobby poses to all women, to our democracy, to the entire LGBTIQ community ... a threat from a small but well-funded and organised opposition. And how do we tell the story of an all-encompassing 'we' that brings together people across different contexts and interests to have a shared interest. We call this: 'The biggest us. The smallest we'.”

Jackie Turner, Trans Justice Project

- It's important to use positive messages as motivation – fear, guilt and shame can drive attitudes and behaviour underground, and even inadvertently increase stigma for those most impacted.

“While it's important to inspire people, we cannot ignore the struggle ... it's really important not to ignore this aspect. We want positive messages, and powerful messages, and people relate to human beings who have been through struggle.”

Marcella Brassett, Market Forces

Ensuring inclusive and intersectional messaging

Key insights shared at PreventX:

- Community ownership and leadership are important in creating messages that are authentic, and that connect effectively with communities.
- In addition to tailoring messages for particular communities, we need to ensure the transformation of all primary prevention messaging.
- This means ensuring representation and giving a voice and platform to marginalised and minoritised communities.
- A key principle is to centre the people who are impacted, and ensure that people with lived experience are able to tell their own stories in ways that are owned by them.
- Doing this effectively means building long-term partnerships and relationships with communities, as these help to inform all primary prevention messages.
- We are stronger together: we must ensure our messages are consistent and mutually-reinforcing.

“Because the underlying drivers of injustice are interconnected, we really need to be looking at how movements work together ... some people think that taking an intersectional approach can seem overwhelming, because you have to do everything all at once. But on the flip side if we think about connecting social justice movements, we can have a greater impact with that collective effort.”

Emma Fulu, The Equality Institute

“If we’re looking to create a world with intersectional equality, it means people reflecting on systems of power and privilege, and giving up power ... We know that gender equality benefits everyone, but also that gender equality hasn’t lifted everyone equally.”

Somali Cerise, Elizabeth Broderick and Co

“A western lens of a relationship is transactional. When we think about support and walking alongside, we can’t have this transactional idea. So many times I hear we reached out and asked for a piece of information, or to do a thing and they said no. But did you go and have a cuppa? Did you go and have a chat? Did you present yourself? Did you show your authentic self? Or did you ask for something and then get a little annoyed because you didn’t get it?”

Lauren French, BodySafety Australia

“Values-based messaging is about trust. We are working with the community. We are developing strategies and messages in consultation with the community ... alongside and with the community.”

Saranbeer Kaur, Victorian Sikh Gurduaras Council

Messaging for advocacy

Key insights shared at PreventX:

- It's vital that we continue to build understanding around primary prevention, and the distinct need for programs and policies that address the upstream drivers of violence.
- We must address government's need for outcomes, and interest in achieving a measurable results, but primary prevention is long-term work that requires a long-term investment.
- We need to recognise and value all parts of the prevention continuum – primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery – while looking for ways to work together across these to create and amplify change.
- There is huge benefit in connecting across jurisdictions to share lessons and messaging.
- It's useful to look at international examples and use this to leverage governments.

“I know the critical role that services play in meeting the needs of victim survivors and protecting them from further harm. We also clearly need perpetrator services, and more of an emphasis on early intervention – we have to reach those most at risk and stop violence from escalating. Primary prevention is further upstream – looking at the multiple ways we can bring about social, legal and attitudinal change to stop violence from happening in the first place. It's really important that each part of this prevention continuum is valued, and that we look for ways to work together, to integrate our work.”

Tania Farha, Safe and Equal

“[When talking to government] ... we remind them that prevention, early intervention, response and recovery are different; they're all pieces of the puzzle. And if you look up close you can see the edges between them, but if you step back those edges blur and we are talking about a full picture. They all need funding. They are all vital and they all need continued investment. Government always want to know about outputs and outcomes and when we are going to see the rates drop. We all know that's a challenge. And we have to keep the stories of success as they come, keep putting colour and movement around that as well ... connecting with real people, with real stories, using real language.”

Patty Kinnersly, Our Watch

“We need a bigger investment in primary prevention at a state and a national level, and more time, to really be able to demonstrate that our work has delivered (or accelerated) change in attitudes and norms, and to know that it is doing what it should – contributing to reducing prevalence across the population in the long-term. In the meantime, we need to hold firm in the evidence and in the theory and in our experience as practitioners and leaders in this space – that primary prevention works – and advocate for the funding we need to actually deliver it.”

Marina Carman, Safe and Equal

- It's important to talk about the problem with governments, and make sure that stakeholders understand the size and scope of the challenge. But it's also important to build a shared vision for the future, put forward solutions, and talk about stories of success and change.
- We need to keep in mind that our messages to government are also often seen by our other audiences.

“When I would be going to government, I would be telling them about the deaths ... about how LGBTIQ people experience violence ... and you feel like that's what you have to do to shake down the 'money tree' ... But talking as a service, our approach wasn't working; it wasn't changing the conversation ... if the only thing we are talking about is the violence being done to us, it can be weaponised against us; they can blame us ... And our community is part of our audience so we need to talk about community solutions.”

Joe Ball, Switchboard

- Messaging for advocacy with governments has many parallels and similarities with broader primary prevention messaging used in a range of contexts.

“An important part of engaging with government in a multipartisan way is finding a common ground, both at a government and systems level but also with the individual minister or representative you're speaking to. This issue is, as much as possible, above politics ... it means building relationships with governments, members and ministers so we can connect with their priorities and interests, and understand what drives them.”

Amanda Alford, Our Watch

“Behind the horrific statistics and selective stories that make front page headlines, everyone knows someone who has been impacted by gender-based violence. I don’t think there’s any difference when you’re interacting with politicians and people in power. You personalise it and you listen to where their connection is.”

Moo Baulch, Women’s and Girl’s Emergency Centre

- We should be mindful of building coalitions and partnerships to amplify our advocacy, and ensure that we are avoiding division and competition.

“I’ve seen coalitions work powerfully in different contexts, having organisations aligned around common priorities. What I’ve seen work effectively is elevating the voices of smaller organisations that don’t have the same access to decision-makers ... that’s an important strategy ... and it reduces the division around resources for prevention taking away investment in response, because all organisations are working on all aspects of early intervention, response and recovery, alongside prevention.”

Somali Cerise, Elizabeth Broderick and Co

“I think there is a collective movement, not just a local or a national movement, but a global movement calling for governments around the world to start speaking our language. And we need to start holding them to account for that ... I think the dialogue is shifting ... and it’s going to be more about government coming into that conversation because people are speaking very loudly, all around the world, about gender-based violence.”

Betul Tuna, Point of Difference Studios

Avoiding pitfalls

Key insights shared at PreventX:

- It's best to avoid re-stating myths, as this reinforces these myths rather than moving beyond them.
- We must ensure that we are not reinforcing rigid gender stereotypes and myths about culture. This only serves to amplify the voices of our opposition.
- While making sure we are ready for backlash and resistance, we must also make allowances for people who are learning.
- The problem we are working on is hard, but change is possible.

“My bugbear is negation messages, ‘not’ messages ... ‘Trans people are not a threat’ ... it’s the worst thing you can do when we fight opponents using their frames. We reinforce them. Know your own frames. Know your own story and respond with that instead”.

Jackie Turner, Trans Justice Project

“Some of the most detrimental language we hear is about people with a disability being ‘vulnerable’. It states that violence is inevitable, not the systems and structures that sit around it. It isn’t meant in a negative way but it doesn’t shift the conversation or the focus onto the situation that creates that vulnerability ... it also states we need to be protected, rather than being individual agents with their own rights, autonomy and choices ... teaching and enabling and empowering us to protect ourselves.”

Nicole Lee, Survivor activist

“I look to intent and I give people the benefit of the doubt as much as I can. I don’t assume people are homophobic unless they deliberately show me they are, and being ignorant or getting something wrong is not homophobia. It’s about cutting people a bit of slack.”

Jac Tomlins, Jac Tomlins Consulting

- We should avoid over-using statistics or talking about the problem in ways that make it seem inevitable and unchangeable.
- It's best to avoid using jargon, as this means that people switch off and stop listening.
- It's important to treat people as agents who are capable of making better choices – if you lecture people they stop listening.

“Because we talk about the statistics and how marginalised we are ... I remember having a conversation with a young person and she asked ‘Is this an Aboriginal issue? Are we the problem?’ and that shook me to my core ... This is not an Aboriginal issue. We are not the problem.”

Courtney Ugle, Djirra

“I like to keep it basic. Short sentences, one idea in each sentence. Say things out loud to make sure they make sense. Use your own words, not a thesaurus. Leave it overnight and come back to it. Show it to someone else and get some feedback. And always look for common ground with the people you are trying to engage. Listen to them, rather than just talking.”

Jac Tomlins, Jac Tomlins Consulting

Hope for the future

Key insights shared at PreventX:

- All our messaging must ultimately instil hope and motivate change for a better future.
- Inspiring this in others means ensuring we look after ourselves – to maintain and nurture our hope.
- Celebrating wins can help to sustain us in the work, and to demonstrate that change is possible.

“I think that fatigue around the issues and increasing polarisation are real challenges. So what I’d like to highlight in terms of hope is the focus we have in this sector on self and collective care because that will give us the strength to achieve real progress.”

Somali Cerise, Elizabeth Broderick and Co

“When you are experiencing family and domestic violence and you’re also feeling like you are worthless ... that is a really tough, tough place. I will never stop talking and telling my story and providing our people with the love that we are all yearning for.”

Courtney Ugle, Djirra

“Children and young people are the bits that give me hope ... their view of the world is shaped by their interaction with their peers, the education system and the people surrounding them ... I believe that this generation are the ones who will be engaging with the governments and the decision-makers very soon and their expectations of equality and inclusion and safety are very different ... and they will demand not just one seat at the table but the whole room.”

Moo Baulch, Women’s and Girl’s Emergency Centre

Further resources

Visit the Safe and Equal website for a [list of resources shared during the conference](#).



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