

Overcoming resistance and backlash

A guide for primary prevention practitioners



Safe and Equal acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work. We pay respects to Elders past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded.

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Overcoming resistance and backlash: a guide for primary prevention practitioners

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Resistance describes the various forms of push back against policies, programs and perspectives that aim to create progressive social change. Anyone working to prevent family and gender-based violence through social change will experience resistance.

This resource brings together and adds to existing resources by providing tips on effective strategies and ways of overcoming resistance, and other more extreme forms of backlash.

For additional resources see [Safe and Equal – Facing resistance in your work](https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/prevention/facing-resistance) <safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/prevention/facing-resistance>.

¹ This resource is informed by a panel discussion at the Safe and Equal Members' Forum on responding to backlash and resistance across the continuum, held in July, 2023.

Resistance to social change

Primary prevention of family and gender-based violence is specifically focused on social change. It involves work done across communities, organisations and society in settings where people live, learn, work, socialise and play, to stop violence from happening in the first place.

The national framework for the prevention of violence against women, [Change the Story](#), explains:

A primary prevention approach works to change the underlying social conditions that produce and drive violence against women, and that excuse, justify or even promote it. It works across the whole population to address the attitudes, norms, practices, structures and power imbalances that drive violence against women.²

[Change the Story](#) has established that men's violence against women is driven by:

1. Condoning of violence against women
2. Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
3. Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
4. Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control³

The gendered drivers of men's violence against women are well-recognised and described, but preventing all family and gender-based violence means looking at other drivers of violence as well. These include inequality, stigma, discrimination and marginalisation experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from migrant and refugee communities, people of colour, LGBTIQ+ communities, and people with disability, amongst others.

A number of other complementary frameworks address these issues directly, such as [Changing the Picture](#), [Changing the Landscape](#), [Pride in Prevention](#) and [Intersectionality Matters](#).

Individually and collectively, these resources provide a detailed analysis of the overlapping drivers of violence experienced by particular communities. Put together, they help us enhance prevention efforts targeting violence against women (for all women), and allow us to integrate understanding and action around prevention of family and gender-based violence (for people of all genders).

2 Our Watch, *Change the Story: a shared national framework for preventing violence against women and children* (second edition). (2021). Melbourne: Our Watch, p. 8.

3 Our Watch, *Change the Story*, p. 36.

Understanding resistance and backlash

A number of resources have addressed resistance to gender equality and social change targeted at the gendered drivers. These include VicHealth's [\(En\)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives](#), [Framing gender equality: Message guide](#) and [Framing masculinity: Message guide](#).

Other resources have provided guidance on backlash and resistance experienced by particular communities and overlapping social change movements.

- Rainbow Health Australia's [Pride in Prevention Messaging Guide](#) provides detailed guidance on responding to resistance in the primary prevention of family violence experienced by LGBTIQ+ communities
- Women with Disabilities Victoria have also prepared a specific resource for practitioners, [Resistance and backlash to gender and disability inclusive practice](#)
- [Passing the Message Stick](#) is an evidence-based program for overcoming resistance by developing transformative messaging to build support for self-determination and justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities
- Just as the drivers of violence overlap and intersect, so will resistance to the social change we are trying to bring about. Backlash and resistance to gender equality is experienced together with backlash and resistance to change addressing racism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on.

As attitudes towards gender equality slowly improve, the forces of backlash and resistance are more likely to target 'minoritised' communities – like trans women, migrant communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Attacks on these communities, and stereotyping of particular groups of women, are often part of broader attempts to shift attitudes towards all women and create space for further backlash. This makes solidarity ever more important, as well as understanding the commonalities in our struggles and the strategies we need for effective social change.

Communities that are currently the target of backlash and overlapping drivers have developed highly innovative and effective ways of advocating for change. By building partnerships and coalitions, we can both support and learn from each other in taking our work forward in primary prevention.

The best way to understand resistance is as an indicator of success.

Resistance occurs precisely when existing norms, structures and practices are effectively challenged and threatened.

Where do we see resistance?

The socio-ecological model in [Change the Story](#) is used widely to show how the drivers of violence against women operate at different levels – individual and relationship, community and organisational, system and institutional, societal – and therefore where change needs to happen.

Resistance to change will also occur across the socio-ecological model – within interpersonal relationships, organisations and institutions, and at a broader systemic level, where deeply embedded norms, structures and attitudes are perpetuated.

While primary prevention practitioners are likely to see resistance regularly in their work, anyone working across the family violence continuum is part of a broader movement for social change. So whether we are working in primary prevention, early intervention, response or recovery, we need to know how to respond and address resistance and backlash.

As practitioners, we see resistance in a range of contexts.

External or structural resistance:

- Resistance within organisations and broader sectors we seek to engage
- Resistance in training and workplace programs
- Resistance in public and online forums
- Resistance in policy and in government investment

Internal or interpersonal resistance:

- Resistance within our own organisations and sectors
- Resistance in ourselves

Understanding resistance within ourselves and our own organisations – particularly around addressing the drivers of violence that overlap with the gendered drivers – can be a powerful way to understand how to make change in broader sectors, organisations and public forums. A key distinction here is that while the problem may not directly be our fault – we still all have a responsibility to make change to address it. Otherwise we will remain complicit in perpetuating and reinforcing inequality and exclusion for particular communities.

Types of resistance

Resistance can manifest in a number of ways, ranging from passive to active. While more active forms of resistance are easier to identify, more passive forms can be harder to notice and respond to in a productive way. Familiarising yourself with the different forms of resistance is important for determining how we then respond.

These are described in detail in VicHealth's [\(En\)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives](#). They include:

- Passive blocking to maintain the status quo
- Strategies that aim to minimise or co-opt change
- Aggressive opposition to restore the old order

In further understanding types of resistance, an important distinction is that between organised and disorganised resistance. Resistance and backlash is cultivated, resourced and expressed by organised groups and individuals with substantial political, social and media influence. These messages can be crude and misogynistic, but can also be clever and difficult to counter. One example here includes arguments that equality has substantially been achieved, so 'special' programs for women are now no longer necessary or are, in fact, discriminatory towards men. This is a common tactic – using the success of social movements and support for equality to blunt further change and even drive change backwards.

We need to know and understand the messages of organised resistance, and be able to recognise their origin and source. But we also need to be able to recognise when people are repeating these messages in disorganised ways, which creates openings to convince them otherwise. We also need to make sure we don't target our own messages and energy into arguing with people who cannot be convinced.

Responding to resistance and backlash

As practitioners, we need to be prepared, and anticipate resistance and backlash. Many of the resources mentioned so far include detailed descriptions of how to respond.

There are four common and key elements to this:

Plan for resistance and backlash

- Build it in to the design of programs and messaging from the outset
- Think about what arguments may arise
- Develop a detailed plan for where it might occur and how to respond

Build capacity internally

- Know the evidence base, relevant statistics and key policy frameworks
- Brief all staff and make sure they feel supported and able to respond

Build strategic alliances

- Build alliances with others who can respond with us and alongside us
- Develop partnerships and relationships to support each other

Ongoing learning and support

- Ensure debriefing and organisational responses that care for staff
- Support critical reflection and collective learning about effective practice

There is always more to learn about convincing others towards social change, and context changes constantly. As practitioners and organisations in this space, responding effectively means assessing, reassessing, upskilling as necessary, and changing direction to find the right gap or the right lever to take things forward.

From pushback to flow

As practitioners, what we're looking for are ways to shift people and move through resistance. Moving from pushback to 'flow' is when you find that flicker of interest, attention, uptake or support, and can use that to take people somewhere positive.

First and foremost, this means listening and remaining curious about the blockage that person or organisation is experiencing or expressing. This could be as a result of:

- Lack of information or education on the issue
- Unfounded myths and fears
- Initial reservations about new ideas
- Parroting of ideas heard from parents or other sources
- 'Blind spots' that are a result of social privilege
- Misjudgement of the context and contemporary imperative for change

Practitioners working for social change often have to assess 'the room' and the particular setting to understand whether questions and opinions that reflect resistance are deep or superficial. It is also important to understand if these are isolated or widespread, and whether resistance is coming from organisational leadership or from individual staff or staff groups.

Strategies that can help to unpack this are:

- Establishing 'non-negotiables' as a boundary upfront (i.e. the line where resistance becomes backlash)
- Asking questions back to clarify the concerns or push someone to 'defend' their position
- Naming the dynamic in the room that is creating difficulty in allowing an open and honest conversation
- Switching between different learning strategies to invite connection with the content (e.g. story-telling, role-playing, reflective exercises)
- Taking discussions 'offline' if it isn't clear in the room where the issue lies, or responding to one individual is taking up too much time and energy
- Re-stating the policy, organisational position, or legal requirement that establishes the obligation to support inclusion and equality
- Following up afterwards with organisational leadership to provide feedback and work out next steps

Practitioners often find that silence or polite resistance is harder to deal with in the moment. Options here include:

- Pushing forward regardless, assuming and establishing a consensus but continuing to check for, and flush out, resistance
- Naming silence and inaction and encouraging people and organisations to think through when seemingly positive change isn't 'real'
- Talking about allyship, and the ongoing damage done by denial and exclusion, as opposed to solidarity

Other strategies to think through relate to the positionality of individual practitioners – how we present and are treated in different spaces based on gender, age, skin colour, ability or other visible attributes. Sometimes this can be used to advantage in convincing particular audiences, but it can also be a source of risk for individuals. This needs to be an open topic of conversation in peer and management relationships – and should be negotiated with awareness of the energy and safety of staff day by day.

In addition, when managing organisational resistance it's helpful to gauge organisational readiness and openness – throughout a change process. Undertaking a survey and consulting with staff can be ways to map the level of understanding, as well as key interests and topics for further conversation. This helps chart the best next steps, and allows staff to see themselves as part of the change and the plan going forward.

What if we get it wrong?

Working within systems of power and trying to create change is complex, and sometimes we will get things wrong. It's important for practitioners to know that every one of us will overstep, find a blind spot in ourselves, or accidentally collude with resistance.

A key part of primary prevention is working with men and boys to change attitudes and persuade people of all genders towards support for gender equality and social change. Often this means listening to resistance, and arguing against it in ways that don't immediately polarise discussions or 'turn off' men and boys. There is a fine line here between effective persuasion and collusion – a line that practitioners walk often.

Challenging men and boys to see and understand their own power and privilege is a critical part of social change towards gender equality – but getting there isn't straightforward. In general, putting forward constructive and positive ways forward (what will be better) is more effective than dwelling on negative reflections on the current state.

What works in messaging?

A critical tool for responding to backlash and resistance is strategic messaging – because it's all about shifting the conversation to our advantage. The focus here is using evidence-based social change messaging to convince those who are open to being convinced.

The approach and strategies outlined here are particularly useful in campaigns and communications, but are broadly applicable in any conversations where we are advocating for social change.

Know your audience

VicHealth's foundational work on gender equality messaging outlines a widely used conceptual understanding of 'audience' when it comes to social change. This establishes that the majority of people in Australia are persuadable on the issue of gender equality (the 'moveable middle'). We need to ensure that we are aware of what the 'entrenched opposition' is saying, but we cannot spend our time and energy talking to them. Instead our messages need to engage the already committed, but focus predominantly on persuading those who are not yet fully committed.

For more, see: [Framing gender equality: Message guide](#)

Re-frame the issue

Framing is a set of techniques that can be used to explain why an issue is important. It can influence how people think and feel about an issue and ultimately how they might respond to it.

Framing is how we make the case for gender equality, anticipating and countering resistant reactions, challenging common defences of gender inequality, and 'touching the hearts' of those we seek to persuade. As we repeat and continually strengthen the frame, culture and practice can be shifted.⁴

Examples of framing strategies include using metaphors, associations, contrasts, stories, and so on.

For more, see: [\(En\)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives](#)

4 VicHealth, *(En)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives*. (2018). Melbourne: VicHealth, pg 7.

Appeal to values

A key part of strategic messaging is appealing and connecting to universal and common values in ways that can cut through debates and divisions, and create openings for change. These can be particularly powerful when linked to a particular context – e.g. appealing to specific values in context, like in sporting clubs or trade unions.

Values-based messaging has three key components:

- Put forward a positive vision that appeals to values
- Clearly outline the barrier to change
- Put forward solutions and positive actions

For more, see: [The Common Cause Handbook](#) and any of the other useful resources listed at the end.

What doesn't work?

An important trap in messaging is focussing too much on the problem, or the existing 'frame' for an issue, and repeating this over and over. By repeating myths and stereotypes or overusing statistics, we can actually reinforce the status quo and make inequality seem 'normal', 'natural' or inevitable.

It is also important to be specific and clear who is responsible for the problem and the change required. Examples of pitfalls here include repeating statistics about victim-survivors without a focus on perpetration, or talking about ideas without saying who holds and perpetuates them.

Using angry and negative messages can sometimes be effective if placed within a well-designed overall messaging strategy, but these can't be the mainstay of any strategy. Positive messages and appeals are more likely to encourage and create change.

Looking after ourselves and each other

Responding to resistance and backlash can be a fatiguing part of social change work. Managing this over time means knowing yourself and the limits of your energy. Many practitioners talk about the need for patience and stepping back to see the long game. Each of us is only one person, and while we can do a lot, it isn't our responsibility to change the world on our own.

Sometimes it can really help to make sure we celebrate our successes, and even document and publicise these to spread change further. Other strategies involve connecting with peers, and engaging in collective and learning spaces. Individual development and learning can also help to connect with others and feel part of a social movement that is achieving change.

It also isn't just up to individuals. Organisations have a responsibility to support practitioners, and make sure their jobs are both safe and rewarding. Managers and organisational leaders have important roles to play in supporting individual staff, and in setting the strategic direction of the organisation in a way that limits resistance and backlash. Across organisations, supporting and connecting with each other can be a vital source of support and inspiration in working for social change to address the drivers of family and gender-based violence.

For more information about ways to learn and connect through the Partners in Prevention network see [Safe and Equal – Preventing violence before it occurs](https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/prevention) <safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/prevention>.

Resource list

ILGA-Europe and Public Interest Research Centre, [Framing Equality Toolkit](#). (2017). Brussels: ILGA-Europe.

Rainbow Health Australia, [Pride in Prevention: a guide for communications and engagement to support primary prevention of family violence experienced by LGBTIQ communities](#). (2021). Melbourne: La Trobe University.

Our Watch, [Understanding, monitoring, and responding to resistance and backlash in organisational and institutional settings](#). (2022). Melbourne: Respect Victoria.

Passing the Message Stick. [Passing the Message Stick: Messages that build widespread public support for transformative change on First Nations justice, now and beyond the referendum](#). (2023).

Safe and Equal. [Talking About Change – How to navigate resistance to gender equality](#). (2022). Melbourne: Safe and Equal.

VicHealth, [\(En\)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives](#). (2018). Melbourne: VicHealth.

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