

## **Michael Flood's Speech, Launch of *Be The Hero*, October 6 2009**

### **Preventing violence against women and girls**

In the last decade, prevention has become a central focus of efforts to address violence against women and girls. This reflects the recognition that we must not only respond to the victims and perpetrators of violence, but also work to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. We must address the underlying causes of physical and sexual violence, in order to reduce rates of violence and ultimately to eliminate it altogether.

### **Working with young people**

There are good reasons to focus our efforts in particular among young men and women. First, this is when young people are first having sex and forming relationships, and developing skills in having healthy, respectful relationships now can lay the foundations for positive relationships for the rest of their lives.

Second, we know that violence, and especially sexual assault, is a real problem in some young people's relationships. Large numbers of girls and young women are forced or pressured into unwanted sexual activity, and substantial numbers of boys and young men use physical violence or sexual violence or hold the attitudes which condone it.

Third, violence prevention education among young people works. If it's done well, violence prevention education can make a positive difference to attitudes and behaviours.

### **The need to engage boys and men**

There is a growing consensus in violence prevention circles that to end this violence, we must involve and work with boys and men. There are growing efforts to involve boys and men: as participants in education programs, as targets of social marketing campaigns, as policy makers and gatekeepers, and as activists and advocates.

First and most importantly, violence prevention must address males because largely it is males who perpetrate this violence. Most men don't use violence, but when it occurs, it's largely by men.

Second, constructions of masculinity – ideas and norms about being a man – play a crucial role in shaping violence against women: at the individual level, in families and relationships, in communities, and societies as a whole.

So, really, we have *no choice* but to address men and masculinities if we want to stop violence against women. However, work with boys and men has been fuelled also by a third and more hopeful insight: that boys and men have a positive role to play in helping to stop violence against women.

## **Violence against women and girls is an issue for guys**

Violence against women is often seen as a women's issue, and this makes sense. But I want to stress that violence against women and girls is also an issue for guys. It's a 'men's issue'.

- Young guys have mothers, sisters, female friends, and girlfriends. Violence hurts the women and girls that we love. It limits the lives of the people we care about.
- Violence against women and girls is fuelled by rigid norms of manhood – that men must be the dominant one in relationships, that men have uncontrollable sexual drives, that being a real man is about sexual conquest and power. These norms hurt women and girls. But they also limit guys, socialising guys into shallow, callous and predatory ways of relating.
- Often it's guys' mates and peers who condone violence or make jokes about it. Do we stay silent and look the other way when our male friends and relatives insult or attack women, or do we speak up?
- Some men's violence gives all men a bad name. Violence by a minority makes all men seem a potential threat. (Walk down the street at night behind a woman and you'll know what I mean.)
- At the bluntest level, violence against women is a men's issue because when this violence occurs, it's nearly always perpetrated by men. A minority of men treat women and girls with contempt and violence, and it is up to the majority of men to help create a culture in which this is unacceptable.

So, men, including young men, have a deeply personal stake in helping to end violence against women and girls.

### **Men's positive roles**

There are simple, positive steps any guy can take to be part of the solution. Find out about the violence that many women and girls experience. Don't condone the view that the victim is to blame. Check out how we treat the women and girls around us. Speak out when friends, relatives, or others use violence or abuse. Be a good role model, whether you're a mate, a brother, a dad, a boss, or a teacher. And beyond this, join in collective action, to change the social norms and power inequalities that feed into violence.

### **Be The Hero**

The work engaging men and boys in preventing violence is growing in both theoretical and political sophistication. And Be the Hero is a good example of this.

Be the Hero is firmly directed at the positive roles which young men can play.

It uses new media to engage boys and young men.

It uses real-life situations and issues:

the routine forms of sexual harassment which girls and young women experience;

the sexual double standard where girls are punished as 'sluts' if they are perceived to be too sexually active;

situations where young men and women are drunk and high and the risks of sexual coercion are higher;

and situations where sexual photos are being circulated without the girl's consent.

Be the Hero creates the space for discussion and reflection. And it teaches skills in challenging the attitudes, situations, and behaviours which breed violence against women.

Be the Hero invites young men to play a role in building healthy, respectful relationships: by examining their own attitudes, by understanding the very real harms caused by violence and abuse, by confronting abusive peers, and by fostering gender equality in their daily lives.

Be The Hero is a very promising initiative in violence prevention, and I am delighted to give support to its launch.

## **Contact**

Dr Michael Flood