

# Engaging men and boys in preventing violence against women: The role of businesses and workplaces

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**45**  
young  
men

There is growing recognition that in order to prevent violence against women (such as domestic abuse and sexual harassment) from happening in the first place, and to effectively foster gender equality within organisations, we need to engage more men and boys to take up these issues. Recent Durham University research has shone a light on work seeking to do this in England.

## What did the research involve?

The project was made up of two main strands: Firstly, 14 interviews were carried out with experts playing a key role in developing violence prevention work with men and boys in England. Secondly, eight focus groups were conducted with 45 young men in university sports teams, to explore their views specifically on domestic abuse and campaigns to prevent it. This briefing paper applies the findings from the research specifically to the role that businesses and workplaces can play.



**14**  
interviews

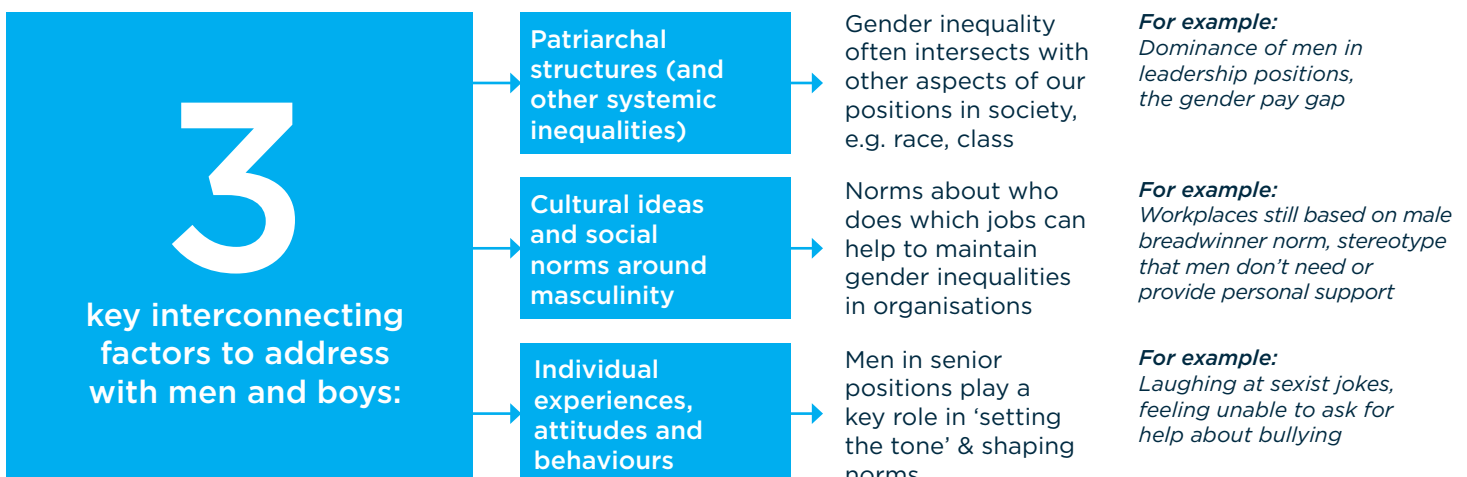


## Findings from interviews with experts — Why engage men in violence prevention?

- Most (but not all) violence and abuse in society is perpetrated by men. This is closely connected to harmful ideas and expectations about *masculinity*.
- Masculinity refers to what it means to be a man in society — which we often still associate with being tough and in control, and having more power than women.
- However, most men do not use violence. They are therefore uniquely placed to bring unhealthy ideas about masculinity into question with each other and, crucially, with boys and young men. By pushing back against these kinds of rigid and harmful masculine norms, men can model healthier behaviours to other men and boys.
- Ideas about masculinity — or ‘what men are like’ — can harm men in a variety of ways too; they can make it difficult for them to open up about their emotions or seek help when experiencing problems (such as with their health), and can hold back their potential to care for other people in their lives, or for themselves.
- Masculine norms can also shape peer group dynamics in ways which can create unhealthy and oppressive environments and cultures, including in the workplace, both for men and boys themselves and for the people around them (such as women or younger, less experienced colleagues).
- Men are often silent about these matters, partly because it may not be seen as very ‘manly’ to talk about problems such as domestic abuse, poor mental health, or sexism in the workplace. However, we all have a lot to gain if more men speak out about issues of masculinity, violence, and gender equality.
- This can powerfully challenge some of the victim-blaming myths which still influence conversations about violence and abuse — because we can only stop the problem if we address who is responsible for it, and change their behaviour.

## What does this have to do with businesses and workplaces?

- Experts in the field point to the need for change across society in order to prevent violence against women and build gender equality — and the significant role that the business sector and workplaces can play in this regard.
- Businesses can help create change among their own staff (some of whom are likely to be personally affected by these issues), among people who come into contact with the organisation such as customers and clients, and in the wider community.
- This can help to create healthier, happier, and more successful businesses and organisations, and demonstrates to the broader community that you are socially responsible and leading the way in fostering a more equal society.
- At the root of violence, harassment and abuse is often unequal power relations, based around gender and other forms of social inequality. Violence prevention is therefore closely connected to building gender justice, and shifting harmful gender norms in our organisations and communities.
- The research demonstrated the need for a three-pronged approach, illustrated below, to engage effectively with men and boys about preventing violence against women. As the examples show, each of these aspects of society affect businesses and workplaces and are in turn influenced by them too.
- The individual experiences of men and boys vary a great deal, but all of our lives are influenced to some extent by gender norms and gender inequality, which we also all contribute towards reproducing — and challenging — in a range of different ways.



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## Findings from focus groups with young men – The value of discussing gender issues

Many of the young men who took part in the focus groups for the research appeared to genuinely appreciate and enjoy having the opportunity to sit down and discuss issues about domestic abuse, masculinity and gender inequality, showing that men and boys value having discussions about these issues yet rarely get the chance to do so.

- The young men had typically received little education about domestic abuse to date, which they were critical about as they saw this as being crucial to tackling the problem.
- They were critical of campaigns using overly-simplistic, trivialising or patronising messages, suggesting that simply telling people what to do is unlikely to change behaviour, and that it's important to foster a dialogue in order to have real impact.
- They wanted to see more of a focus on the subtleties of unhealthy and abusive behaviours, and the ways in which society can normalise these in everyday life.
- They discussed the need to address ways in which men who don't perpetrate violence against women can still be complicit in it, such as by going along with or staying silent about sexist and misogynistic behaviours among their peers. One young man, Bruce\*, said: *"Everyone, whether they're actively abusing someone or not, has a part to play in stopping it."*
- As one example of this complicity, the young men themselves at times responded defensively to some of the campaigns. This included:
  1. Deflecting attention away from men's behaviour, and shifting the focus solely onto men as victims
  2. Viewing domestic violence as a 'natural', inevitable and unpreventable problem
  3. Disassociating themselves from the problem by suggesting that it is something which happens 'elsewhere', with 'other' men, and which therefore has little to do with them.
- It is important to overcome these kinds of defensive responses, as they presented barriers to the participants reflecting on their own lives and behaviours and how they could play a positive role in creating change.
- The dynamics and responses of the groups often appeared to be shaped by masculine expectations, demonstrating the influence these can have on peer group environments. For instance, many participants seemed reluctant to openly express empathy with women's experiences in front of each other.
- Some of the young men expressed frustration when campaigns attempted to use stereotypical ideas about masculinity in order to try to reach out to men (e.g. the notion that 'real men' don't hit women), seeing this as contributing to the problem rather than helping to solve it.
- Sometimes within the focus groups, the participants did challenge sexism and harmful masculine norms amongst one another, demonstrating the potential men have to instigate change in their day-to-day lives.
- They felt that prevention campaigns can illuminate and galvanise opportunities to speak out and take positive action to stop violence towards women. As one young man, Ugo\*, said: *"You're not gonna change that unless you sit someone down and go, this is what you think, is it actually right? As a society, if it's normalised, you have to challenge it to change it..."*

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## What could my business or workplace do?

Work to prevent violence and abuse from happening in the first place can take a range of different forms, and can be implemented in any setting, organisation or workplace.

- For example, you could: Instigate training and development programmes for staff on violence prevention and gender equality; Initiate workplace and advertising campaigns to raise awareness and change attitudes; Mobilise members of the organisation and wider community to take collective action; Foster structural change, e.g. introduce workplace policies that address the needs of victim/survivors and the behaviours of perpetrators of abuse, within the workplace and in their personal lives.
- It can be particularly important for men to play an active role in these activities.
- The most impactful forms of violence prevention work are not 'one-off' interventions but ongoing efforts implemented at multiple levels of an organisation or community.
- There are things we can all do in our everyday lives, too — such as reflecting on our own behaviours, challenging sexist and misogynistic attitudes when we encounter them, and using platforms we have to speak out about violence against women.
- Some men have more power to create change than others, and it is particularly important that those in senior positions take a public stance on these issues and lead the way in supporting organisational change and modelling healthy behaviours.
- There are number of organisations doing this work in England. For instance, the Good Lad Initiative and the White Ribbon Campaign engage specifically with men and boys in workplaces and other settings. They are part of the MenEngage Alliance, a global movement working with men and boys for gender equality.

## About the researcher

Dr Stephen Burrell is an Assistant Professor in Research at Durham University's Department of Sociology, and a member of the Durham Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse (CRiVA). He has produced this briefing paper as part of a Postdoctoral Fellowship funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which is exploring the role the business sector can play in engaging men in violence prevention and building gender equality.

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## Key recommendations from the research

- There is an urgent need to invest in and develop more work to end violence against women. Young people are calling out for this. However, it can't be down to them alone to create change; we all have a role to play, including businesses, workplaces and other organisations.
- It is particularly important to engage men and boys in violence prevention, because if men are primarily responsible for the problem, then they can also be a crucial and positive part of the solution to it.
- A central focus of this work should be ideas about masculinity — how these contribute to violence and other social harms, and how they can be shifted in healthy directions.
- At the same time, it is vital to recognise that anyone can be a victim/survivor of abuse, including men and LGBT people, and signpost support for them too.
- It is important to personalise these issues and show how they relate to all of us. We are all influenced by gender norms and stereotypes over the course of our lives, which means we can all take steps to challenge and change them.
- Work with men and boys needs to be relevant and relatable to their lives. This means recognising the many differences among men and boys; some have more power than others, and some already challenge dominant gender norms in various ways.
- It is vital to model gender equality when developing this work. This means actively consulting with, involving and being accountable to women when delivering it.
- Violence prevention campaigns should think carefully about how they represent ideas about gender, and avoid idealising (or demonising) specific forms of masculinity, or reinforcing pressures on men and boys to conform to certain ideas of manhood. The goal should be reducing these gendered expectations rather than simply creating new ones.
- Face-to-face conversations and programmes are vital, but creating long-lasting change also requires tackling the gender inequalities rooted in the structures of our organisations and communities which help to perpetuate violence against women.

If you would like to find out more about the research, go to:

[www.menspeakingout.co.uk](http://www.menspeakingout.co.uk)



[durham.ac.uk/sociology/  
research/briefings](http://durham.ac.uk/sociology/research/briefings)

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