



## Editorial Introduction

Existing data on domestic and sexual violence focuses on victimisation—on how many women, men and children have suffered violence and the kinds of violence they have experienced. Although it is equally important to know about perpetration, this area remains under-researched. Little is known about what proportions of people have used violence against an intimate partner or family member. Who has perpetrated violence and when, how and why? Mapping the extent and character of violence perpetration is vital. It provides invaluable data to guide efforts to prevent and reduce domestic and sexual violence and help change how these problems are understood.

Domestic and sexual violence is framed often in ways that make the perpetrator invisible—in media accounts, community views and even in the violence prevention field itself: ‘a man killed a woman’ becomes ‘a woman was killed by a man’ becomes ‘a woman was killed’.

Violence is a problem for victims but not a victims’ problem. Instead, domestic and sexual violence is the perpetrators’ problem. As well as protecting and supporting victims and survivors, we must hold perpetrators and potential perpetrators to account to act safely and respectfully. To do this, we need good data on who uses violence and why.

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## Putting perpetrators in the picture

### Michael Flood and Lula Dembele

It is time to reframe the problems of domestic and sexual violence in Australia: to put perpetrators in the picture and to focus more on preventing and reducing the perpetration of abusive behaviours.

There is widespread agreement in Australia that domestic and sexual violence are serious problems, and there is significant momentum in violence prevention advocacy, service provision and policymaking (Our Watch, 2020). Simultaneously, however, there are limitations: first, to how domestic and sexual violence has been described or framed; second, to the data we have on violence perpetration; and third, how prevention and reduction efforts have been guided.

### How violence is described or framed

Domestic and sexual violence is framed often in ways that make the perpetrator disappear, as if the victim or survivor were attacked by an unseen force. This framing is evident in media accounts (Sutherland et al., 2015, p. 17), community views and even in the violence prevention field itself.

Let us take the bluntest example: a man kills his female intimate partner or ex-partner. What happened? ‘A man killed a woman’ becomes ‘a woman was killed by a man’ becomes ‘a woman was killed’. Likewise, ‘John raped Mary’ becomes ‘Mary was raped by John’ becomes ‘Mary was raped’ (Keren, 2012). By this point, the perpetrator, his actions and his role have disappeared.

Institutions typically report how many women were assaulted last year, not how many people assaulted women last year. The language is passive, moving the focus away from those responsible for the egregious behaviour (Tabachnick, 2013, p. 60).

Even in the phrase ‘violence against women’, this violence ‘just happens’, and the agents of this violence are invisible. The phrase ‘men’s violence against women’ is better in naming the people, men, who are the vast majority of the perpetrators of this violence.

The language used in violence prevention has sometimes shown the same problem. A passive framing has been common: ‘preventing violence before it occurs’ (Flood, 2007) or preventing violence ‘before it happens’. Yet violence involves agency: a person uses violence against someone else.

There are signs in violence prevention circles of a growing emphasis on the need to address perpetration. This is visible in legal advocacy for a standard of affirmative consent (in which individuals must seek explicit and ongoing consent to engage in sexual interaction), shifting the burden from the potential victim to say 'no' to the potential perpetrator to receive a voluntary 'yes'. Recent community mobilisations have demonstrated an increasing emphasis on preventing perpetration, with placards urging a move from 'Teach: Don't get raped' to 'Teach: Don't rape' and from 'Protect your daughters' to 'Educate your sons'.

### *Assessment: Why it matters*

Framings of domestic and sexual violence that obscure the agents of violence matter in three ways.

*Perpetrator accountability:* First, this language removes perpetrators' accountability—for their choices and actions. Perpetrators' agency and responsibility for the impact of their violence is hidden, reducing societal obligation for them to be held to account.

The argument is not that we should stop addressing victims and listen and work only with perpetrators. A 'victim lens' is vital to centre victims' experience and improve responses to domestic and sexual violence (Domestic Violence Victoria, 2020, p. 19).

From a public policy perspective, understanding domestic and sexual violence as what happens to victims (as a 'victim's problem') may limit effective programmatic outcomes for reducing perpetration. Problem representation that absents the perpetrator or makes them peripheral to the issue being resolved can inadvertently place the burden on victims to stop the abuse or violence being done to them (Bacchi, 1999, p. 168).

In Australia, state-based domestic and sexual violence service systems have been resourced to respond to incidents of violence reported by a victim or bystander (ACT Government, 2018, p. 9). This focus may exacerbate community expectations that it is a victim's responsibility to seek help and poor community understanding of the obstacles women face leaving violent relationships (Webster et al., 2018, p. 82). Focusing attention on interventions only after harm is done and primarily on efforts to aid the victims of violence situates victims as if they are the 'problem' that needs 'fixing'. It orients attention towards the victims' responsibility to avoid victimisation (Meyer, 2016), rather than the perpetrators' responsibility not to use violence.

However, as survivor advocate, Lula Dembele, has put it, 'violence is a problem for victims but not a victim's problem. Instead, using domestic and sexual violence is the perpetrators' problem'.

*Community responsibility:* Second, a passive framing removes responsibility from the communities surrounding these individuals (Tabachnick, 2013, p. 60). We lose the opportunity to ask questions about why the perpetrator chose to behave this way or identify how other people could have intervened.

*Drivers of perpetration:* Third, the language or framings we have described lessen attention to the drivers of perpetration. The language we use means that we are less likely to ask questions about the social conditions that drive people's perpetration of violence.

Perpetrators are *made*, not born. When a man assaults a woman, in many ways this is the unsurprising outcome of widespread social conditions. His use of violence is the predictable result of lessons about manhood he and other boys absorbed as they grew up, the sexist

peer cultures in which he participated, and the gender inequalities woven into his and other men's everyday lives (Jewkes, 2012; Webster & Flood, 2015).

If we want to stop creating perpetrators, we must change the social conditions and settings that produce them. That is what defines primary prevention (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; DeGue et al., 2012). So, when it comes to language, what can we do? We must keep the perpetrator and the perpetrator's accountability in view, naming their active use of violence. Use the language of 'when a man killed a woman' and 'when Rowan Baxter killed Hannah Clarke and her three children'. Further, when talking about prevention, we must use the active voice: preventing the perpetration of domestic violence and preventing harm before it is perpetrated (Tabachnick, 2013, p. 60).

There is growing support for this approach. Our Watch's guidelines on media reporting of violence against women recommend, 'Keep the perpetrator in view. *Do:* Use active language to emphasise that someone perpetrated this violence against a victim' (Our Watch, 2019). Campaigns such as Jane Gilmore's 'Fixed It' initiative seek to correct media portrayals, again to make visible the perpetrators and their acts of violence (Gilmore, 2019).

### *How domestic violence is measured*

There is also a problem with how domestic and sexual violence are measured.

In Australia, about 1 in 6 women (17% or 1.6 million) and 1 in 16 men (6.1% or 548,000) have experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or previous cohabiting partner since the age of 15 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019, p. 8). We could say this using a more perpetrator-focused language. Cohabiting partners perpetrated violence against 1.6 million women and 548,000 men since

the age (the victims' age) of 15. But what remains unknown is *how many* men, or indeed women, perpetrated violence.

Existing data on domestic and family violence focuses on victimisation experiences, that is, how many people have suffered violence and the kinds of violence they have experienced. While this information is vital, it is equally important to know about perpetration. What proportions of people have used violence against an intimate partner or family member? When, how and why have people in Australia perpetrated domestic and family violence and sexual violence? We simply do not know.

### How domestic violence is prevented and reduced

If we do not know how many people are perpetrating domestic and sexual violence and why they are perpetrating it, how can we prevent it? If we do not know the conditions, contexts and drivers for the perpetration of violence, how can we prevent it?

Research among victims and survivors and others has generated important insights about domestic and sexual violence, including the typical dynamics of perpetration, the impacts of violence and, to some extent, the risk factors or drivers for perpetration. Survivor and stakeholder-focused research and advocacy have been a rich source of knowledge.

Yet the lack of perpetration-specific data inhibits our ability to have a meaningful influence on domestic and sexual violence levels. We do not know enough to effectively target those people at risk of perpetrating such violence. Nor do we know enough about people who are beginning to use violence and who, without intervention, might continue to perpetrate and escalate violence until they come into contact with the

justice system. We do not know enough about who to target and the protective factors on which we will need to build to divert people from perpetrating.

### Mapping perpetration

One key way to put perpetrators in the picture is to map perpetration – to gather data on violence perpetration. This is the goal of the Perpetration Project, a national research project on the perpetration of violence in intimate, domestic and family settings in Australia. It is intended to contribute to the reduction and prevention of domestic and sexual violence in Australia.

The project includes an Australia-wide perpetration survey that will measure the extent, character and drivers of violence perpetration. The Perpetration Project is being coordinated by people from the Equality Institute, the Accountability Matters Project and the Queensland University of Technology.

#### *What we do and do not know about perpetration*

What do we know already about violence perpetration? A growing body of international scholarship focused on what proportions of men, and sometimes women, use violence. These studies include major multi-country studies and many smaller-scale studies of the perpetration of sexual violence and dating violence, often among American university and school samples.

It is encouraging to report that there are effective and ethical ways to measure the extent and character of violence perpetration. There is growing experience in measuring perpetration, and there are established protocols for conducting this research safely and ethically (Jewkes et al., 2012).

There is a growing body of knowledge about domestic and sexual violence perpetrators themselves. We know

a reasonable amount about typical risk factors for perpetration—the factors at the individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels that make perpetration more likely (Costa et al., 2015; Jewkes, 2012; Tharp et al., 2012).

We know that there are contrasts in men's and women's perpetration of domestic violence. Men are more likely than women to physically assault, sexually assault or murder an intimate partner (ANROWS, 2018). Men's use of partner violence is more likely than women's to be motivated by power and control and less likely to be motivated by self-defence (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). Male perpetrators are more likely than female perpetrators to use coercive and controlling strategies (Johnson et al., 2014; Myhill, 2015) and far more likely to use sexual violence (Cox, 2015).

However, there is much we do not know about the risks for perpetration of different forms of violence or the respective influence and interaction of risk and protective factors at multiple levels of the social ecology (Tharp et al., 2012). We know more about male perpetrators of violence against women and less about female perpetrators and same-sex perpetrators (Gilchrist, 2013, p. 160; Tharp et al., 2012).

There is no national or state data on the extent of violence perpetration in Australia. We know very little about what proportions of men or women use violence against their partners, ex-partners or others, the kinds of violence they use, why they use violence, whether the numbers of perpetrators and victims are similar or whether a small number of perpetrators assault multiple victims and so on.

By measuring the extent, characteristics, and drivers of violence perpetration, the Perpetration Project is intended to

make four key contributions. First, it will provide vital knowledge of domestic and sexual violence, mapping who uses violence, why, when, how and where. Second, it will help change how domestic and sexual violence are framed in policy, media and community understandings. Third, it will guide prevention and reduction efforts, including highlighting the agents of, contexts for, and drivers of violence perpetration. Fourth, it will provide a benchmark for progress by tracking the use of violence over time.

## Final reflections

As part of named violence and abuse, it is important to name those who perpetrate the violence, not just its

victims. If we do not put perpetrators in the picture, we miss the opportunity to describe what is taking place, hold perpetrators accountable, examine the social conditions that make that use of violence possible and address these conditions.

Reframing domestic violence as the perpetrator's problem and responsibility is not a cure-all. There are risks in doing so, such as inadvertently normalising perpetration. However, framing violence as a perpetrator's problem does help us to understand the problem more clearly. It helps us address both the 'what' and the 'who' of the problem in order to target and reduce the perpetration of domestic and sexual violence.

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