

# **Respecting Women and Leading Men, White Ribbon Foundation, Annual White Tie Dinner Four Seasons Hotel, Sydney**

17 September 2008

E&OE

Violence against women is difficult to talk about.

But for those who find it difficult, let us be clear – however uncomfortable it is to talk about, it is degrading and damaging to experience.

We often prefer silence to the confronting truth that nearly half a million Australian women have experienced violence from their partner or former partner.

Well, we can be silent no longer.

Because for too long, silence has been seen as tolerance.

This is just plain wrong.

And the time has well and truly come to turn this around.

As a nation, the time has well and truly come to have a national conversation – a public national conversation, not a private one – about how it could still be the case that in 2008 half a million Australian women could have experienced violence from their partner. And the objective is to turn this terrible statistic around.

Because each of these statistics is a human face.

And it is my gender – it is our gender – Australian men – that are responsible.

And so the question is: what are we going to do about it?

Analysis of Bureau of Statistics figures indicates that<sup>[1]</sup>:

- In any year, nearly half a million Australian women experience physical or sexual assault by a current or former partner.[\[2\]](#)
- One in three Australian women have experienced physical violence.
- One in five Australian women have experienced sexual violence.[\[3\]](#)
- Less than one third of all physical and sexual violence is reported to police.
- Approximately 90 per cent of women who experience sexual assault do not access crisis support, legal help or other support services such as telephone helplines.

Violence against women is the great silent crime of our time. It is the silence that makes it the most insidious.

Because it prefers the darkness. Because if it stays in the darkness, it cannot be discussed, debated – let alone dealt with.

To begin with, we need to change the attitudes of Australian men.

From birth, it must be drilled into the conscious and the subconscious of all men that there are no circumstances – no circumstances – in which violence against women is acceptable.

There are no circumstances in which the threat of violence against women is acceptable. There are no circumstances in which the thought of violence against women is acceptable.

That on violence against women, we have simple, clear policy in two words: zero tolerance.

That needs to be heard from every husband, every father, every partner.

From every celebrity.

From every business leader.

From every football player.

From every brick layer.

From every bus driver.

From every factory worker.

From every office worker.

From every lecturer.

From every teacher.

From every student.

And from every politician of every political persuasion.

And it needs to be heard in every place.

In our parliaments.

In our work places.

At our barbeques.

Violence against women needs to move from the great silence to be part of a continuing national conversation.  
Why?

Because we need to change the way many men think.

We need to change the way some boys think.

And that cannot be done in silence.

Before coming to office, we said we would implement a national strategy against violence and sexual assault.

That strategy includes three things:

- supporting women who have been the victims of violence;
- ensuring that the legal system is effective in handling cases of violence against women; and
- ending the cycle of violence for future generations.

To develop this strategy, the Government has brought together a group of experts and community leaders - the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women, chaired by Libby Lloyd, one of the driving forces behind the Australian White Ribbon Foundation.

I was pleased to be able to join the Council in June this year at its first meeting.

And I'm pleased to see so many Council members here tonight.

I'm looking forward to seeing and supporting the National Plan that the Council will be presenting to Tanya Plibersek, the Minister for the Status of Women.

I understand that the Council has now received 370 submissions from organisations and individuals contributing ideas to be included in the Plan.

Once finalised, the plan will allow the Government to pursue the most effective, evidence-based approach that can help prevent violence and assist women who are still its victims. The truth is, we can't reduce violence against women unless we change the attitudes of future generations.

On their own, all the laws in the world can't stop violence against women unless there is a genuine change in the way that Australian men think.

If we are going to be effective in changing community attitudes we need a better understanding of those attitudes now, and how those attitudes change over time.

We need to understand how those views are formed, so that we can target our efforts towards the most effective measures that cultivate respect for women.

We know that men who tolerate violence towards women are more likely to perpetrate violence than those who do not.[\[4\]](#)

For example, some believe that violence can be excused in certain circumstances; that women sometimes "ask for it" or "deserve" violence; or, that violence is a trivial matter. According to a Victorian study,[\[5\]](#) almost one in four people believe domestic violence can be excused if the perpetrator genuinely regrets what they have done afterward, or if the violence results from a temporary loss of control.

It's those attitudes that lie behind the continuing high incidence of violence against women.

We need to get to the bottom of those attitudes, and find the best way of changing them.

That's why I am announcing tonight that the Australian Government will invest up to \$2 million in research and analysis of Australian community attitudes towards violence against women.

This project will be carried out in partnership with VicHealth, the Social Research Centre[\[6\]](#) and the Australian Institute of Criminology.

This research will help us to track changing community attitudes over time to give us the best evidence base for changing the attitudes of men.

This will help shape the practical recommendations of our National Plan for the future.

To change attitudes, young men need to grow up with positive role models in their communities.

During the election, the Government committed to a comprehensive high school education program to help young men and young women to develop respectful relationships.

I am pleased to announce tonight that at the start of next year, we will be testing several programs to measure their effectiveness in both schools and youth organisations.

One model that the Government is testing is the Victorian Centre Against Sexual Assault's Sexual Assault Prevention Program for Secondary Schools.

This is a program that engages the whole school community and helps all students and teachers to take responsibility for their part in preventing violence against women.

There are a number of very promising educative models operating across Australia that are building positive values and ethical relationships amongst young people.

These programs are a valuable contribution to the development of our National Plan.

The White Ribbon Foundation is also doing great work in providing positive community role models to challenge and change the attitudes of men and boys.

The Government has provided \$1 million to extend the reach of White Ribbon Day educational activities into rural and regional communities, particularly in high schools.

One of the unique features of White Ribbon is how it has brought together such a diverse range of male leaders, from judges to football players to academics, media personalities, police and politicians.

Tonight's White Ribbon Ambassador Award is a way of recognising the excellent work of those ambassadors.

There are many people here tonight whom I know have made extraordinary contributions to the White Ribbon campaign.

But there can be only one winner, and he is a very deserving one.

I am pleased tonight to announce that the 2008 Winner of the White Ribbon Ambassador Award is Mark Burgess, CEO Police Federation of Australia.

Mark has been a White Ribbon Ambassador since 2004.

His long career in the NSW Police gave him a deep understanding of the brutal reality of violence.

But it is in his role leading the Police Federation of Australia since 2000 that Mark has provided such strong leadership to promote awareness and understanding of violence against women.

Mark's efforts are making a real difference among the 52,000 police officers who are on the front line in dealing with violence.

Mark has given enormously of his time and energies to this campaign, and he's always willing to help out more.

So I am delighted to be able to present Mark with tonight's Award and to support the excellent efforts of White Ribbon in making a difference to the lives of hundreds of thousands of Australian women.

The White Ribbon Foundation is an outstanding initiative – men and women coming together and saying that we cannot tolerate violence any more. That we will not tolerate violence any more.

That the time has come as a culture, as a country and as a nation to draw a line in the sand, once and for all.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] ABS, Personal Safety Survey 4906.0 2005

[2] Exact figure is 443,300 (or 6 per cent of the female population)

[3] Some women will experience both domestic violence and sexual assault

[4] Flood and Pease (2006). The factors influencing community attitudes in relation to violence against women: a critical review of the literature – Paper Three of the Violence Against Women Community Attitudes Project, VicHealth, Melbourne.

[5] Victorian Department of Health (2006). Two steps forward, one step back – Community attitudes to violence against women: Progress and challenges in creating safe and healthy environments for Victorian women.

[6] The Social Research Centre is a Victorian based research company that specialises in social and health policies.