

Changing conversations about family violence in regional Western Australia: A primary prevention communication case study

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Abstract

Objective: To illuminate the enablers and challenges of implementing a communication strategy designed to support Community, Respect, Equality (CRE) and a family and domestic violence (FDV) primary prevention plan in a regional Western Australian town.

Method: This research draws on documentation and interviews with members of Leading Lights, an advocacy group arising from a collaboration of local organisations to communicate the goals and priorities of the CRE action plan. Interviews explored how primary prevention messages were promoted to foster supportive community attitudes toward addressing the drivers of FDV.

Results: The initiative fostered a learning community that coordinated public messaging about the drivers of FDV for organisations pledged to the CRE values. The diffusion of messaging was affected over time by inconsistent staffing, discontinuities in resourcing and individual organisational commitment, and concerns about gender equality messaging.

Conclusion: The communications strategy increased awareness of the drivers of FDV among the members of the Leading Lights. In turn, this group produced media content that made visible each organisation's commitment to addressing the attitudes and behaviours that enable FDV.

Implications for public health: Community collaborations need time, resourcing, and coordination to sustainably prompt changes in social norms that underpin violence.

Key words: family and domestic violence, primary prevention, gender equality, strategic communication

Introduction

Family and domestic violence (FDV), comprising intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual violence, and domestic violence, results in pervasive physical, social, and mental harms, predominantly affecting women and children. In Australia, on average, one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner,¹ 1 in 3 women has experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and women are nearly three times more likely than men to experience violence from an intimate partner.² Psychological violence is at least as harmful to women's physical and mental health as physical violence.³ Children who are exposed to FDV have been found to be almost five times more likely to have contact with a mental health service by the time they turn 18 than children with no known experience of physical or psychological violence.⁴

During the 1990s, FDV became recognised as a major global public health problem amenable to prevention interventions at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.⁵ A landmark World Health Organisation evidence review identified that intimate-partner violence and sexual violence are driven by gender inequality and social norms regarding violence, masculinity, gender roles, and relationships, along with poverty and other drivers.⁶ In 2011, Australia developed a strategic primary intervention approach to FDV through the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, taking as its starting point the gendered nature of FDV.⁷ Primary prevention works across the entire population and aims to prevent violence before it happens by addressing underlying factors.⁸ *Change the Story*,⁹ the theory of change underlying the *National Plan* developed by Our Watch, works on the evidence that FDV is driven by gender inequality, "a social condition characterised by unequal value

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afforded to men and women and an unequal distribution of power, resources, and opportunity between them”.⁸

The Geraldton Community Respect and Equality (CRE) plan was launched in 2017 as a primary prevention of FDV initiative.⁸ Led by Desert Blue Connect (DBC), a provider of women’s health services that include family violence and sexual assault victim support services in Geraldton (<https://desertblueconnect.org.au/>), the plan utilizes the *Change the Story* theory of change.⁹ It was developed through a significant number of stakeholder consultations including one-on-one meetings, presentations, and workshops with service providers and community members. Initially funded by a one-off grant to DBC, its goal was “to inspire and connect community leaders, sectors, service organisations, and government to work together on sustainable strategies for the primary prevention of family violence in Geraldton”¹⁰ through the promotion of nonviolent and nondiscriminatory attitudes and social norms; education on what constitutes family violence; development of safe, inclusive, and gender-equitable workplaces, community, and sporting organisations; and promotion of healthy and respectful relationships by facilitating learning and awareness opportunities. A CRE reference group was established in the formational stages to help drive the concrete actions that demonstrate commitment to the CRE.¹¹ The reference group consisted of volunteer representatives from agencies with a strong commitment to the CRE including government departments, agencies including Aboriginal family law services, parenting services, sporting organisations, the local Shire Council, Midwest Ports, and Aboriginal employment and development services.¹²

The CRE utilises the concept of organisations and workplaces as sites of intervention, education, and social change and was coordinated by DBC. By mid-2020, more than 20 local organisations had signed on to support the aims of the CRE, and the CRE website was developed to curate content communicating the initiative.

To support the CRE, the Western Australian Centre for Rural Health (WACRH)—a CRE signatory—attained an intervention research grant from the Western Australian Health Promotion Agency, Healthway. The Conversations for Change (C4C) intervention included three Geraldton-based projects. One was the development and implementation of a communication strategy to change community attitudes and norms through education about the extent and impact of family violence and identifying concrete actions that will help disrupt the drivers of violence.

Background

Communication campaigns in FDV prevention

Given the range of factors that shape the formation of individual worldviews, communicating to change gendered attitudes and social behaviours that produce violence is neither a simple message nor a simple conversation.

Campaigns like the Federal Government’s *Let’s Stop it at the Start* (2018) and *Doing Nothing Causes Harm* (2016–2022); the Queensland Government’s *Do Something* (2018); the Victorian Government’s *Respect Women: Call it Out* (2020); and Our Watch’s *Change the Story*^{9,13} all seek to prevent gendered violence. They do so primarily by (1) explaining and challenging the complex structural, cultural, and behavioural drivers of FDV; (2) reinforcing the role of others in intervening in the process of disrupting the attitudes, behaviours and stereotypes that legitimate violence against women; and (3)

encouraging communities to convey consistent and coordinated messages at all levels of society about the drivers of violence and the social, health, and economic impact of violence on women and children.¹³

By exposing how FDV is driven by deeply entrenched gender inequality and the role of others in preventing violence, these campaigns adopt a gender and social norms approach to change. We use Cislighi and Heise’s (2020) definition: “Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society. They are embedded in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction. They play a role in shaping women’s and men’s (often unequal) access to resources and freedoms, thus affecting their voice, power, and sense of self.”¹⁴ This operates on the theory that individual, group, and population-level beliefs, attitudes, and actions can reinforce each other and that social networks may maintain destructive social practices (e.g. a man should be the head of the household and exercise dominance), collectively creating outcomes that individuals may not desire (e.g. the use of violence to assert male dominance).¹⁵ In this context, communication emerges as an essential enabler of primary prevention within a coordinated set of mutually reinforcing strategies including advocacy, policy change, training, mentoring, public events, and so on.¹⁶ Our Watch, established in 2013 to drive the national strategy, identified that communicating FDV primary prevention required both a public relations role to challenge the drivers of FDV and a facilitative role around the formation of the community relationships necessary to prompt strategically planned actions and coordinate the messaging that makes visible support for gender equality and safer communities.

The Conversations for Change communications strategy

The C4C communications strategy had three objectives: (1) promote best practice reporting of FDV and related issues in Geraldton by engaging and supporting journalists; (2) support key staff in CRE organisations to enable them to lead by example in creating engagement opportunities and innovative content focused on primary prevention of FDV; and (3) foster community attitudes that support gender equality and family violence prevention through proactive educational messaging. The strategy identified the importance of targeting multiple media channels, including the individual CRE organisations’ social media and communications, the CRE Facebook page, radio, local newspapers, and communication groups within organisations.

An analysis of local print media reporting of FDV prior to and after the implementation of the CRE showed that while there had been a gradual transition from reporting on support services for victims of FDV to more focus on primary prevention of FDV, the high volume of court reporting that frames FDV as single episodes unrelated to broader social issues tends to reinforce myths that minimise the impact of FV and obscure its roots in deeper social issues related to the place and treatment of women.¹⁷

To support the other objectives of the communication strategy, WACRH convened a communications advocacy working group, the Leading Lights (LL), which first met in July 2020. The group was originally intended to “engage senior management and key staff in CRE organisations to clearly articulate organisational commitment to preventing family violence by implementing actions that challenge the drivers.”¹⁸ It was envisaged that this would be a group with

expertise in strategy and communication and would be highly engaged in CRE messaging to drive messaging around primary prevention to increase awareness and knowledge of the primary drivers of family violence among staff, stakeholders, and the community, and create media content to publicise messages (internally and externally) that communicate organisations' commitment to stopping violence against women and children. The strategies that informed the LL were developed by Our Watch (<https://media.ourwatch.org.au/>).

It is the repetition and consistency of messages and actions over time that galvanises the social momentum to disrupt institutionalised and deeply embedded cultural attitudes and structures that normalise violence towards women. Following the National Strategy's theory of change, messages must: express support for women's decision-making and independence in public and private life; reject rigid gender stereotyping and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance, and control; and promote respectful, equal relationships. Messages must also acknowledge the intersectionality of gender inequality and discrimination against others—those with disabilities, Aboriginal, refugee, and migrant women, and LGBTIQ people.¹⁹

Social media has become a key site for public health discourse because it enables the discussion of ideas and alternative sources of information.^{20–22} Social media can provide an alternative source of information to the dominant discourse circulated by the mainstream media. Alone, it does not change attitudes and behaviours,²³ but it enables messaging in a range of contexts, targeting a variety of audiences who are differentially impacted by the issue and with varying levels of knowledge and receptivity to the message. Content can be shared, liked, and commented on to build engagement and establish communities that become audiences for more complicated educational information. These communities consist of followers who are sufficiently interested in the topic to take action, and whose views can be changed through further information and educational messaging. Engaging multiple organisations to amplify messages is a low-budget strategy that relies on the organisational commitment of human resources with adequate knowledge of the underpinning framework, strategy, and social media to maintain active engagement.

With ~50% of the Geraldton population using Facebook, the CRE Facebook page was adopted as a key means of social media communication from the LLs to the wider population, while LL organisations could create and share from their own social media pages. Many LL members were not regular Instagram users in their work roles, and limited resources meant the CRE Facebook page was the most viable option for regular monitoring of messaging and comments. The goal was for messages to be coordinated and distributed as widely as possible. Social media communities of interest such as LL can assist in the diffusion and speed of adoption of ideas and help make visible the message preferences of the targeted audience.²⁴ Diffusion of innovation theory in a digital media context describes how an idea is spread before a tipping point is reached.²⁵ The tipping point indicates when the message has become sufficiently familiar to influence behaviours and attitudes and produce new norms.

This evaluation seeks to illuminate the enablers and challenges of implementing the Communication Strategy by exploring the perspectives of LL members regarding the operation and contribution

of the LL to promoting the CRE and the key messages and approaches used around gender equality and prevention of FDV.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with LL members to capture their expert or specialised knowledge given a close affiliation with the project over an extended period. We also reviewed actions undertaken between July 2020, when the C4C project established the LL, and July 2022. The minutes of the LL meetings were reviewed to track attendance by representatives over time, and an analysis of a log of media releases and radio interviews provided information about the uptake of print and broadcast messaging.

Interviews

Nine interviews were conducted with representatives of the seven organisations regularly attending LL in June 2022. These organisations were from a range of industries, including transportation, state and local government, and not-for-profit providers of social services. Representatives from two large employers (over 100 staff) were included, as were three participants from one organisation. Of the remaining five LL organisations with intermittent attendance, no representatives had attended more than two or three meetings and were not interviewed due to their lack of knowledge of the LL activities over time.

Interviewees were selected based on organisational attendance and were included if they were available and consented to provide feedback. All interviews were conducted in person and were undertaken by an experienced non-Geraldton-based C4C investigator who understood the CRE and C4C but was not immersed in the day-to-day operations. Interviews explored whether and how LL functioned in meeting its goals of raising awareness of the drivers of FDV, enhancing awareness of the CRE and signatory organisations' commitment to FDV prevention, and shifting attitudes and social norms relevant to FDV prevention. A conversational approach prompted participants to reflect on their own experience of the LL group, make connections between elements of the project, and critically reflect upon and analyse the benefits and challenges of the project. Interviews were not voice-recorded; the interviewer took extensive notes, which were written up after the interview and returned to each participant to check the accuracy of meaning and context. Participants were invited to add additional written comments, which prompted deeper insights into the operation of the project and its challenges. The interview notes, verified by each participant and then anonymised, provided the raw data. A systematic framework approach was used by analysing the text of the nine interviews, coding each element in the text, and then grouping the codes into categories. Key themes were derived based on the frequency of categories found in the data. A second investigator who was involved in the design of the C4C and who had chaired the LL meetings during 2021 and 2022 independently coded and analysed the interview notes before investigators agreed on the final key themes.

Findings

We first present process indicators of LL meetings and then findings from the analysis of interviews with LL members.

Leading Lights membership and attendance

As a part of the communications strategy, the LL group was convened by inviting senior members of CRE organisations and/or their communications officers to attend the first meeting in July 2020. The period covered by this evaluation (July 2020 to July 2022) was impacted by COVID-19-related restrictions on movement and disruption after Cyclone Seroja in April 2021 caused widespread damage and increased demand for services, impacting some organisational members of the LL group.

Despite these disruptions, between July 2020 and July 2022, the group met for an hour every month except during summer recess (23 meetings in total). Between July 2020 and October 2020, twenty organisations attended at least one meeting. A further organisation attended just two meetings in 2021, and another joined the LL in March 2022. Of the twenty that participated up to October 2020, thirteen were in health, education, legal services, community education, and other human services. The remainder included organisations whose core businesses were commerce, transport, sport, local government, and land care.

By July 2022, twelve organisations were sending a representative to the monthly meeting on a semi-regular basis, with about seven attending every meeting and the remainder frequently sending apologies. Of the original attending organisations, nine human services organisations remained semi-regular attendees, along with two organisations from other sectors. One new human services organisation joined and began attending in March 2022. Of organisations that ceased attending, many were not in the human services sector, and lack of staff was given as the key impediment to attendance, with five organisations ceasing to attend after a few meetings and a further five gradually withdrawing completely by October 2021.

Within the organisations making up the LL in July 2022, seven had maintained a consistent representative or occasional alternative representative over the two years, while the remaining five had sent several different representatives due to staff turnover.

Description of Leading Lights operations and actions

An events calendar was updated at each LL meeting, scheduling announcements of the actions taken by various CRE organisations to promote commitment to preventing violence and to coordinate these messages with other community events and activities to amplify impacts.

In response to media releases from the C4C team, interviews relevant to the CRE themes were aired on local ABC radio and on Radio MAMA (local community radio in the Midwest). For a time, there were regular interviews on Radio MAMA talking about issues related to the CRE, which covered trauma arising from FDV, women's political leadership, actions organisations can take to commit to the primary prevention of FDV, and gender bias in the workplace. Media releases were taken up by the local newspapers, resulting in five print articles on similar themes to the radio interviews.

Facebook content

An analysis of CRE Facebook posts between July 2, 2020 and June 2, 2022 (n=246) provided insight into the translation of FDV primary prevention into topics of conversation around gender equality as a part of establishing new norms. Content was based on the Our Watch framework, focusing on addressing the drivers of FDV, including: concrete actions to promote women's independence and decision-making in public life and relationships; challenging rigid gender stereotypes; strengthening positive relationships between women and men; supporting boys and men to develop healthy masculine identities and supportive male peer relationships; and normalising gender equality.⁹ The CRE Facebook page had several communication functions, ranging from promoting awareness of the drivers of FDV to fostering engagement and creating communities of interest by posting photos and videos that would prompt follower comments or sharing.

CRE Facebook content promoted partnerships and alliances, announced accreditations, and invited organisations to join the CRE. An example of using social media to engage people beyond the immediate network of the CRE is provided in [Box 1](#).

Interview themes

(i) Enablers

Personal value: Learning community contributing to awareness raising

All interviewees valued the LL as a learning community, providing a platform for conversations about FDV that would not be occurring elsewhere. The LL was particularly valued for educating its members, especially those who had little or no previous exposure to or knowledge of the relationship between FDV and gender inequality. Even for those members with some familiarity with FDV, the LL group provided the knowledge, skills, and structures for talking about violence and inequality within their organisation and to their communities, publics, and stakeholders.

Five interviewees believed that there was improved awareness within their organisations about the drivers of family violence over the life of CRE and that the LL group had helped to publicise these. In two participants' organisations, there was a standing CRE agenda item at team meetings, and participants cited informal conversations with co-workers about violence, equity, and gender roles, plus incorporating gender equality into discussions with clients in formal programs. The participants were confident that they had extended the reach of the messaging for 16 Days in WA, the annual WA-wide event to raise awareness of FDV. Despite these efforts, participants were unclear as to whether the LL initiative had helped raise awareness of the CRE among the wider Geraldton community.

(ii) Challenges

Gender equality messaging and fear of backlash

Several interviewees noted the challenges of explaining to their staff and stakeholders the primary prevention message about the gendered drivers of FDV. In organisations with a majority female workforce or a gender balance, messages around gender equality

Box 1: An example of social media engagement initiated by the Leading Lights

The C4C Father's Day campaign was well-supported by LL members, and the meeting notes show the group discussed: 1) how prevention messaging can be delivered in a positive and engaging manner that meets the requirements of the communications policies of individual organisations; 2) how organisations could support this campaign by recording messaging with staff and stakeholders; and 3) how to best communicate the messaging to community members via engagement opportunities, including the Men Against Violence (MAV) football round, a related initiative.²⁶

Subsequently, videos were created by members of the LL and posted on social media. The Geraldton Guardian reported the Facebook campaign in print and online, and several videos, posts, and radio interviews promoted MAV and picked up on the themes of the Father's Day posts.

An extract from the CRE Facebook page in September 2020 shows an extended conversation between the CRE coordinator, two Geraldton residents who had joined the CRE Facebook, and the coordinator of the MAV project. The conversation begins with thanks from the CRE coordinator to supporters of the annual MAV football round. A member of the CRE Facebook group (JF) comments "*What about men who are victims of violence by women?*" In the Our Watch theory of change, this theme is identified as a way of minimising FDV and not recognising it as a gendered problem overwhelmingly affecting women and children. Both the CRE coordinator and the MAV coordinator then engage in conversation with JF, outlining the facts about FDV and acknowledging that violence against men is also a problem. The interchange remains respectful, with JF making four comments and the MAV and CRE coordinators together responding with four comments, finishing on the theme of '*breaking down barriers that men experience when they want to open up about their experiences and break free of outdated ideas of masculinity*'. JF responds that he has '*taken on board your notion*' but feels the media should report more on violence perpetrated against women on men. This interchange demonstrates how the C4C communications strategy attempted to use social and other media to engage in conversations about the gendered drivers of FDV.

were unproblematic. Conversely, in male-dominated organisations, there was a reluctance to engage with messages that promoted gender equality or questioned traditional gender stereotypes. Some interviewees suggested that messaging about primary prevention should focus on promoting equality in general rather than messaging about gender equality, which could be seen as "man-bashing." They suggested framing violence in the context of power differences, not just gender inequality, to create a less controversial and more socially acceptable message embracing ideas of safety and resilience in the workforce. One representative from a large organisation with female executives and an 80% male workforce commented on the potential for backlash and said their organisation had framed the CRE goals as equality and respect for all.

"These initiatives are labelled under health, but they also come back to messaging around organisational culture and are part of an effort to produce a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable work culture."

In addressing the challenge of creating messages about gender inequality, the LL focused on two drivers seen as relatively easy to publicise: challenging rigid gender stereotypes and promoting women's decision-making in public life.

Participants noted that personal local stories play an important role in prompting audience identification with the issue and encouraging empathy and understanding of FDV. However, obtaining the attributed personal stories and content was difficult.

"Most people don't understand the backlash that can occur in a small town, and people don't want to have that sort of heat. It takes real bravery to stand up and expose problems in small towns, and for this reason, it can be difficult to engage clients and stakeholders in conversations about family violence."

It was also observed that few people want to disclose their identity to create a local story about FV out of fear of trolling on social media.

Varying organisational capacity to engage in the CRE/LL

About half of the organisations that maintained attendance at the LL over the two years were represented by up to five different individuals (sometimes multiple representatives attended one meeting), resulting in an uneven understanding of and commitment to the goals of the LL. New representatives often received little or no briefing from the previous representative on the theory of change underpinning the CRE and purpose of the LL, necessitating frequent revisiting of primary prevention and gendered drivers during meetings and a sense of 'starting all over again'.

Several interviewees noted the challenges of communicating the drivers of violence in FDV services, where attention is often focused on incidents, victims, and perpetrators. It was difficult to talk about gender equality when priorities are on clients who are escaping violence or on trying to hold perpetrators to account. Two interviewees suggested that organisations need to build actions fostering gender equality and respectful relationships into organisational key performance indicators.

Although originally conceived as a group with high-level engagement and support from CRE organisations, changes in representation over time meant the LL came to include members with varying levels of knowledge and agency in initiating conversations within their own organisations about FDV and the organisation's CRE commitments. This was especially difficult for representatives of organisations where human services were not core business. The staff of human services organisations whose client base may have experienced FDV or whose services are focused on social issues were more amenable to engaging with the prevention of FDV. Organisations whose core business was, for example, transportation or public services were less likely to see the relevance of preventing violence at the population level (primary prevention).

A disconnect within organisations between the senior management and the LL representative, frequently more junior, reduced capacity to

identify opportunities within the organisation for communicating messages around primary prevention or reconciling gender equality and FDV messaging with their own organisational branding and promotional activities. This was particularly an issue for those organisations with a head office in Perth that exerted control over organisational communication, as frequently occurs in a small regional city.

Loss of CRE momentum and leadership

All respondents reported a decline in the momentum of LL over the two-year period. In addition to the challenges listed above, the most frequently cited reason for the loss of momentum in LL was a perceived lack of strategic direction by the CRE itself, with erratic meetings of the CRE reference group. The CRE reference group had been convened by the CRE coordinator since it was established; however, there were three changes of the CRE coordinator over the two years of this study, and recruitment difficulties created long gaps between coordinators, severely reducing the lead organisation's capacity to engage the CRE reference group in strategic planning or coordinated action.

Despite the challenges and loss of momentum, participants noted that the LL helped to improve the capacity of some of the organisations with less staff and capacity to focus on primary prevention, and regular attendance at the LL became the main way for organisations to show commitment to CRE in the absence of higher-level CRE activity.

Disagreement about the theory of change

The interviews surfaced contradictions in assumptions and expectations within the LL about the drivers of FDV, how communication contributes to social change, and the function of social media in this process. Two interviewees referred to multiple drivers of FDV including poverty, homelessness, mental ill-health, and racial disadvantage, and the limits of focusing on the gendered drivers without addressing the other drivers.

“You cannot fix one problem without addressing all the other issues.”

Three participants spoke of disagreements within the group driving the communications strategy, leading to the loss of momentum for individual initiatives. Some wanted to use print, radio, and social media to follow the essential actions recommended by Our Watch, such as ‘build new social norms that foster personal identities not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes’ while another member was *“looking for opportunities to challenge the man who is violent but doesn't identify as a perpetrator and to address misunderstandings about family violence”*. There were also concerns about reaching out to the wider community.

“We reinforce the existing attitudes of a limited number of people, but do we increase understanding of what constitutes FDV?”

Discussion

Despite disruptions to life and business caused by COVID-19, a destructive cyclone, and ‘churn’ in staffing and representation, a core of ~7 organisations maintained regular commitment to the LL group over two years. Members valued the group's role in educating about the relationship between FDV and gender inequality and in providing

knowledge, skills, and structures for talking about violence and inequality within their organisation and their networks. That fact that two of the larger organisations in the group do not have human services as their core business shows that the LL has maintained relevance to a range of organisations, and the interviews confirm that it continues to be seen as a key strategy of the CRE.

Our Watch recommends that a coordinated and collective response is required to effect social change, with consistent actions in many forms occurring at multiple levels of society to communicate new social norms. *Counting on Change*, the Our Watch guide on measuring population-level progress towards the prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia [ref 21], identifies indicators of change over the short, medium, and long term, including structural, institutional, and policy changes and progressive shifts in attitudes.²⁷ The need for high-quality infrastructure in the form of processes, systems, activities, and strategies in order to support consistent and comprehensive action is highlighted. The LL group and the CRE Facebook can be considered a part of this infrastructure.

Interviews exposed a range of challenges in implementing the communication strategy including fear of backlash, resistance to change, and a lack of a strong overarching strategy from the CRE. Participants surfaced different assumptions regarding the drivers of FDV, the role of communication, and the utility of social media in creating social change.

The finding that organisations with a largely female staff were more open to ideas about the connections between gender inequality and violence is consistent with Australian research showing that three times as many men as women are opponents of gender equality. Encouragingly, the same research found the majority of men and women are ‘persuadable’ and can be persuaded to become either supporters or hard opponents.²⁸

Backlash in small towns has been noted elsewhere. A report on Facebook groups in regional towns found that digital arguments tend to spill over into the real world and can amplify hostility.²⁹ The finding that the CRE Facebook was appealing largely to supporters with messages that would also appeal to persuadables is consistent with research that has found that *“...identifying allies (others who are committed to equality) to work closely with and focusing on the ‘moveable middle’, is where change can most effectively begin. Only by shifting the existing social norms will the entrenched opposition start to modernise, recognising how outdated and ill-informed they have become”*.²⁸

The interviews found that to avoid controversy and backlash in male-dominated workplaces, messaging tended to focus on equality and respect in general, in some cases framed as workplace health and resilience, rather than on gender equality. A cultural shift away from valuing traditionally masculine traits can lead men to view this kind of social change as a zero-sum project, with gender equality seen as a loss to their status as men.³⁰ Several interviewees alluded to anticipated resistance and hostility towards gendered messaging, commenting that it alienated men from supporting change and created reluctance among some LL members to communicate their commitment to challenging the drivers of FDV. This resistance and fear of backlash is a recognised phenomenon in social change efforts. As Flood and colleagues state, *“Whenever there are efforts to make progress towards gender justice, there is resistance: individual and collective, formal and informal... [which tries] to delegitimise efforts*

to address men's violence against women by characterising it as "male bashing" and "demonising men"... Backlash and resistance are more likely among individuals who hold sexist norms and in contexts characterised by sexism gender segregation, and male dominance".³¹ Our research shows that in the absence of strong organisational leadership and ongoing planning to manage backlash and resistance, messaging tends to lose salience to gendered violence and primary prevention.

It is evident that leadership is vital in a long-term, community-led initiative around a complex social problem. Lack of specific actions or organisational strategies and limited engagement of senior management within several CRE-affiliated organisations affected the public's visibility of the need to ignite wider conversations for change around the prevention of FDV. The suggestion that organisations build actions fostering gender equality and respectful relationships into organisational key performance indicators warrants greater consideration.

Promoting awareness of the drivers of FDV was impacted by wide differences in member organisations' ability to take action; workplaces are not homogenous places, so messaging needs to be nuanced for the audience. The LL group played an important role in building knowledge, providing guidance, and advocating for consistency of messaging across diverse CRE members; however, it was not the lead agency for coordinating the CRE.

There were different views amongst the interviewees about the effectiveness of the communications strategy in raising the profile of the CRE within Geraldton. The CRE Facebook content publicised the CRE, raised awareness of the drivers of family violence, explained concepts, reinforced messages, challenged stereotypes, and advertised support and resources as a part of a series of messages communicating the new norms necessary for reduced violence. However, the extent to which these efforts reached beyond health and human services organisations to organisations not part of the CRE and engaged the wider population of Geraldton is unclear.

Conclusion

Communication plays an integral role in transforming the social norms and structures that drive FDV. This study demonstrates the processes, enablers, and challenges of implementing a regional communication strategy focused on raising awareness of the drivers of FDV through prompting conversations to challenge the social norms that contribute to the use of violence within organisations and some segments of the community.

Future research could examine ways that organisations can create support for gender equality in male-dominated contexts. Several organisations' preference for couching messages in power relations generally and in workplace health and safety emphasises the importance of male champions to ensure that messaging using an intersectional lens to acknowledge multiple inequalities and oppressions also highlights the gendered aspects of inequality that contribute to FDV. The lack of consistent CRE leadership significantly adversely affected the momentum and scale of messaging.

The LL supported CRE organisations with expert information and specialist knowledge to promote messaging that communicated the importance of gender equality and respectful relationships. The LL

group played a role in explaining the links between FDV and its key drivers including the importance of addressing gender inequality and coordinating messaging across the CRE organisations. Of note, *Counting on Change* suggests that changing attitudes is a medium-term (6-10 year) goal, and shorter-term strategies should establish the social infrastructure required to show support for change.²⁷ Data collection for the study covered a two-year period in the context of a three-year research grant. The finding that the LL established a learning community and created social infrastructure while encountering several barriers to changing social norms reflects the need for significantly greater resourcing and sustained efforts over a longer timescale to achieve such social change.

Ethics

The research intervention project of which this study is part was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Western Australia (RA/4/20/4860, 13/10/2019).

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Conflicts of interest

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