



**WOMEN'S HEALTH
IN THE NORTH**

Responding to Myths

Common beliefs about family violence often have practitioners focussing on the victim, on what she could have done differently, on her complicity in the abuse perpetrated against her. These common beliefs are dangerous as they absolve the perpetrator of responsibility. They ignore the gendered nature of family violence and the social and political context within which it occurs.

These common beliefs are held by many practitioners, including support workers, police officers, the broader community, victims and perpetrators. They are often used to excuse the abuse and serve to reinforce it. They create barriers to safety for victims. They fail to name family violence as a crime.

Myth: It's because of the alcohol / drugs

Alcohol and other drugs are often used by perpetrators to excuse their use of violence. For example, 'I didn't know what I was doing, I was drunk' or 'it's not my fault, I couldn't control myself'. But this myth doesn't explain why a perpetrator employs other tactics of control such as financial, social and psychological abuse when he isn't effected by alcohol or other drugs. Nor does it explain why he can go and drink with friends at a pub and not use violence against them.

There are many men who drink and don't abuse their families. There are many men who drink and abuse *only* their families. There are many men who don't drink but do abuse their families.

Alcohol can be a risk factor, but it is *not a cause*. Alcohol can be a risk factor in that it can increase the unpredictability of an already unpredictable person.

Myth: His father was violent

It is important that we understand that family violence is a gendered crime and a choice. A male perpetrator uses violence in his family because of his belief system, which often involves male entitlement, gender role expectations and a violence supportive attitude, rather than it being a specific learned behaviour.

Whilst many perpetrators have experienced violence as children, it is also true that many childhood victims choose not to use violence. Likewise, many perpetrators did not experience abuse as children.

Focussing on his experience of violence as a child ignores the risk of his current behaviour and the impact on his family. We can care about the fact that he was a victim of family violence, whilst not excusing his current behaviour.

Myth: He can't control his anger

This myth stems from gendered stereotypes about men and their anger, and is tied to a belief that the problem is 'impulse control'. Perpetrators of family violence use targeted tactics of coercive control, much of which does not occur when the perpetrator is 'angry'. Indeed, the perpetrator will have many examples of managing his anger in other situations.

Anger is an emotion, and one that we all feel. Violence is a behaviour, a choice made in context.

Perpetrators may have particular triggers for their violence, and anger may then present itself, but anger is not the problem. Anger is a red herring. The problem is power and control and the tactics through which it is maintained.

Many responses to men in relation to family violence focus on him getting 'control of himself'. However, his problem is not that he loses control of himself, it's that he takes control of his partner. In order to change, he doesn't need to gain control over himself, he needs to let go of control of her.

Myth: It's a working class issue / it's cultural

The common factor for those who experience family violence is not class, education, culture or religion – it is *gender*.

As a community, we are well practiced at seeing abuse in particular cultural groups or family types, but this is often because of stereotypes that we hold, often without realising it.

It is gender inequality that sets the necessary context for violence against women to occur, and unfortunately, the myth that family violence is a class or cultural issue creates barriers for women.

Myth: It's because of his mental illness

Not only does this myth depend on negative stereotypes about mental illness, but it also overwhelmingly excuses the perpetrator. It pathologises violence against women and children. There is no evidence that men with mental illnesses perpetrate family violence at higher rates.

There is no mental or psychiatric illness where 'family violence' is a symptom. If he has been diagnosed with a mental illness that includes violent behaviours, this is likely to be a risk for all who know him, rather than just his immediate family. Family violence is a pattern of coercive control, not a symptom of a mental illness.

Myth: She 'chooses' violent men; what did she expect?

Many women who have experienced violence from multiple perpetrators begin to believe they are a 'magnet' for violent men, and we often hear others suggest that there is truth to this. This belief focusses on the victim and absolves the perpetrator from responsibility. Women don't 'choose' violent men; perpetrators will target women who they believe they can gain and maintain control over.

Women are often blamed for experiencing family violence, and if they partner up with a man who fits the stereotype of a perpetrator, we ask 'well, what did she expect?' Campaign facilitators can consider what it might be like for a woman to disclose her experience - or multiple experiences - of family violence, knowing this is the likely response.