

BUILDING BRIDGES:

Principles for work with men and boys to
end violence against women and girls

A GUIDE TO TALKING ABOUT THIS WORK



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RETHINK MASCULINITIES



INTRODUCTION

People of all genders have the right to not only live their lives free from violence, but to thrive. And we all have the power to make this a reality.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is widespread across society – causing immeasurable harm to women, girls and society at large.¹ At its root, VAWG is driven by harmful gender norms arising from gender inequality and intersecting structural inequalities such as those based on race, disability, wealth and social class, and sexuality.

These same gender norms and systems of power are also harming men and boys in myriad ways, contributing to high rates of male suicide, creating stigma around help-seeking for their own experiences of sexual violence and other forms of abuse, and playing a role in reducing boys' educational attainment.²

Organisations supporting women, girls, trans and non-binary people harmed by men's violence and those engaging and supporting men and boys are doing incredible work every day. Because this work is intrinsically connected around a vision of safety and freedom for everyone, the [End Violence Against Women Coalition \(EVAW\)](#) and [Beyond Equality](#) have created a set of principles that seek to ensure, and celebrate, work that is gender transformative,³ intersectional, systemic, and human rights and hope based.

These principles – endorsed by leading men's and VAWG sector organisations – also ensure that organisations doing this work can recognise and avoid unhelpful and sometimes dangerous narratives that are platformed, even when inadvertent or well-meaning.

This guide is designed to support men and boys' and VAWG sector organisations to put the principles into practice in how we talk about our work publicly. How and when they are applied will depend on the specific context and scenario. This guide has not been developed as a toolkit for frontline delivery.



1 EVAW (2026) [Snapshot VAWG-Coded](#) [includes recent data on scale of VAWG experienced by women and girls]

2 EVAW (2025). [New Paths to Prevention: Engaging more boys and men in ending violence against women](#)

3 UN definition: *Gender transformative approaches seek to challenge gender inequality by transforming harmful gender norms, roles and relations, while working towards redistributing power, resources, and services more equally.* [Gender Transformative Approaches to Achieve Gender Equality and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights - Technical note](#). United Nations Population Funds

OUR SIX PRINCIPLES

Below are our six principles in summary. The full principles can be found at endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/beyond-equality-men-and-boys-principles/

- 1. Gender transformative and feminist** – restrictive gender norms harm everybody, while feminism and gender equality benefits us all.
- 2. Intersectional** – gender inequality is compounded by other structural oppressions and forms of discrimination. These inequalities have a significant impact on people's lives, and should not be flattened in work focused on any one gender.
- 3. Systemic** – it is essential that our work recognises the systemic and structural nature of gender and intersecting inequalities and calls for systems-change.
- 4. Relational, connected and accountable** – it is vital to create space for difficult conversations and difference, and to recognise that our lived realities and the issues we face are intertwined.
- 5. Hopeful** – a different world is possible and we are all agents of change in the work of creating that future.
- 6. Inclusive** – honouring our universal human right to safety and dignity.



Applying the principles to how we talk about our work

The words we use and how we use them matter. Values-based framing is a tool to help us to talk about the issues we care about and work on in a way that persuades people to think, feel and act differently. In this context, over time, this could mean the idea that gender equality (and the policies that enact it) is good for everyone being seen as common sense, rather than questionable.

Framing is being intentional about what we say and don't say about an issue. Below are some key principles of framing, followed by some specific pointers on how (and how not) to frame your work to avoid some common traps that can pit men's and women's rights against each other, and to promote freedom, equality and wellbeing for all genders.

We drew on and are grateful for existing messaging guidance in this space – in particular from [Zero Tolerance](#), alongside Common Cause Australia, Equimundo, MenEngage, Movember, PathForge and Reframing Race. We also recognise the long history of the women's movement in calling out harmful narratives to help raise awareness of and prevent VAWG.

The focus of most framing work is the 'conflicted' public or 'moveable middle' – that sizeable and influential section of the public who are swayed by dominant negative narratives and who have the potential to think and act more progressively if we speak about social issues in the right way.

This evidence-based way of messaging will be unfamiliar to some people and may not be as relevant to some audiences and contexts. It will mostly apply to how we talk about the work in public messaging. While it may be helpful for practitioners, frontline delivery and targeted interventions are likely to apply their own specific approaches.



Six key principles of framing

- 1. Lead with the 'good' values we all share** to find common ground, appeal to people's better selves and bring everyone in. Because our hearts rule our heads (even if we think they don't), we're more likely to respond to and take on messages that are rooted in values like freedom from harm and to live as we choose, mutual care and concern and equality. If our starting point is the facts of an issue and these facts don't fit with someone's existing beliefs about the world, they'll be ignored, questioned or rejected.
- 2. Tell a new story about the issue.** When we refute misinformation and harmful narratives – or myth-bust – we reinforce them in people's minds. For example, saying, 'Gender equality doesn't mean a regression in men's rights' strengthens the association between 'gender equality' and 'regression of men's rights'. Instead, we need to tell or pivot to the truth about the issue, using our own language. If we can't avoid repeating the harmful narrative – for example, when we're responding to a claim in the moment – we can try using a 'truth sandwich'. That means starting with the truth, briefly indicating the lie, and ending with the truth to give the truth prominence.⁴
- 3. Foreground hope.** Remember that hope is a powerful motivator. Fear, on the other hand, can cause us to turn inwards and look for simple answers to complex problems. For example, believing that migrant people are responsible for everything that's wrong in people's lives. And framing everything as a crisis can make us feel that an issue is too big, too complicated or too late to solve so we needn't bother. Instead, we need to centre hope and focus on the future we want. For example, that we can live in a world without violence, or that we can all be free from the gendered stereotypes that keep us stuck.
- 4. Offer concrete and realistic solutions.** Hope without a credible plan can lead to cynicism and fatalism. So, we need to give concrete and realistic solutions to the issue – and describe the real-life impact of these – for people to believe that change is possible and to get behind it. And to say who's responsible for enacting those solutions – the 'agent(s) of change'.
- 5. Tell the structural story.** Personal stories are powerful. They bring an issue to life and create an emotional connection to it. But we need to make sure we tell the structural story behind the personal one, so that it's not dismissed as a one-off. And, to avoid fatalism, we also need to show that those systems and structures aren't fixed – that they were designed by humans and can be re-designed by humans.
- 6. Expand the sphere of concern** to promote unity and to show how everyone is both harmed by an issue (be it not equally) and can be part of the solution to that issue.

A note on messengers

A credible and authentic messenger is as important as the message. Relatable men embodying pro-social values are incredibly powerful and persuasive – particularly in online spaces.

Common pitfalls to avoid and things to try

Gender norms



Avoid framing that implies that boys and men are inherently violent or pre-disposed to be abusive. For example, demonising boys, using phrases like, 'boys will be boys' or suggesting there's an inevitability to VAWG and wider violence.

Such framing removes individual accountability for actions, ignores the structural nature of problems and solutions, and closes the space for positive ways to be a boy or man.

This framing also implies all men are the same, which can make it more difficult for men to differentiate themselves from abusive men, and lead them to disengage. Shaming and demonising boys and men is more likely to lead to defensiveness and withdrawal than a willingness to be part of the solution. The term 'toxic' masculinity is an example of this.



	What this looks like in practice
When we talk about masculinity – expand not attack it. Present vulnerability, connection, care and the universal need for support as viable and desirable ways of being a man.	“There are so many ways of being a man, of loving the people in our lives and of being strong. Being free to talk about what's on our mind and how we feel, being true to who we are and having each other's backs.” “What harms women harms us all. Equality goes hand in hand with respect, and we all have a role in achieving it.” “Many men were taught – by their Dads and the men around them – that boys don't cry. But expressing how you feel is an important and healthy way to be a man.”
Use values of love, honesty, responsibility, equality and mutual care and respect to appeal to men's desire to be good partners, friends, colleagues, and fathers. And show how embodying these values makes for happy, healthy and enriching relationships.	“Most of us want to be loving partners and good role models to our kids.”
The value of social justice can help make ending VAWG feel relevant and motivating – that men have a stake in building a safer, more just world for everyone.	“Most of us want to do the right thing by one another.”

Language



Don't assume people understand terms like gender norms, misogyny, feminism or patriarchy, many of which have become polarising ('woke'). Explain these concepts, using simple language, to expand understanding.



	What this looks like in practice
Explain gender norms are socially constructed, box us in and are harmful to everyone. And explain how freedom from gender norms and stereotypes is good for us all – it's empowering to choose not to be restricted by them.	“We all want to be free to be ourselves. But what we learn about being a man, and how we think we should behave, restricts us and boxes us in. And it can pressure us to behave in harmful ways, to ourselves and those we care about. Things like bottling up stress, not asking for help when we need it and needing to be in control.” “There are so many different and highly valued ways of being a man, of loving the people in our lives and of being strong – like being a good dad, partner and son. This is freedom and growth, and it's a healthy way for us all to live.”
Use the power of social norming – people are more likely to accept an idea if they believe other people accept it, too.	“Most people believe that gender stereotypes restrict us and would like to be free of them.” “So many men already enjoy caring, mutually supported relationships.” “Most of us agree that equality between men and women is a good thing.”
Frame change as freedom and gain rather than loss, using tangible, concrete examples of what this looks like in different aspects of people's lives and for personal and collective wellbeing. That means <i>showing</i> (not stating) how gender equality benefits everyone and that an expansion of women's rights does not mean a regression in men's – gender equality means greater freedom for us all to be who we want to be.	“Changing some of the old ways of doing things can be a good thing for us all. Take equality between women and men. When things are more equal at home, they can be a team – sharing the load.” “That equality is good for us is backed up by evidence, too – people in equal relationships are happier at home and work, and equality improves men's mental health and makes for healthier and safer communities.”

Causes of VAWG



Avoid framing perpetrators as 'monsters' or 'bad apples'.

This 'othering' of perpetrators sets them apart from wider society and the systemic and structural ways that gender inequality allows for and produces individuals who commit harm to women and children. And it draws attention away from the fact that this type of violence is widespread.

This framing can also suggest that such men are somehow identifiable, and should have been recognisable to victims, and society, when that is not the case.



	What this looks like in practice
Always tell the structural story of VAWG. That men of all backgrounds and walks of life harm women. That the root cause is gender norms and gender inequality. And that, because gender norms and gender inequality are socially constructed rather than 'natural', we're all part of the solution.	“Men who harm women come from all backgrounds and walks of life.” “Men's violence against women is caused by things in society being unequal between men and women and the enduring belief that men and women should behave in particular ways. We are free to change this.”

Speaking out



Don't be silent on the harms of VAWG or ignore the importance of accountability.

Avoid being drawn into the 'not all men' narrative. This detracts from recognising the harm and allows individual men to distance themselves from needing to challenge VAWG.



	What this looks like in practice
Be clear that systemic VAWG benefits all men – even those who consider themselves 'good' men – and is therefore relevant to all men.	“Violence against women and girls is relevant to all men – including men who believe in equality and would never dream of harming anyone.” “That's because simply being a man brings privileges, like being able to go about your day with more freedom and less fear and being rewarded as the 'good guy' just because you don't harm women.”

Dynamics of harm



Avoid positioning men solely as injured and vulnerable victims of a 'crisis' of masculinity.

And avoid suggesting that if we heal men, all other problems will then be solved.

VAWG is about men's power and entitlement, not only a man's response to or enactment of their own trauma and pain – and violence, discrimination and misogyny are never acceptable responses to men's needs.



	What this looks like in practice
It's vital to both call out the immeasurable harm to women and girls alongside showing compassion for and addressing the issues men and boys also experience, like loneliness and poor mental health. Restrictive gender norms harm everyone. And anti-gender narratives are more harmful than narratives that promote gender equality.	“Violence against women and girls causes serious and life-long harm.” “What men learn about how to be a man can shape them to cause serious harm to others and to themselves. Things like controlling and intimidating women, bottling up stress and resisting asking for help when they need it.”

Impacts of VAWG



Avoid focusing on the consequences of being a perpetrator on a man's life and future, as this shifts thinking to who is harmed the most – perpetrator or victim/survivor – and reinforces the idea that the value of women's and men's lives are relative.



	What this looks like in practice
It's important to name the harm and who's responsible for it. Also, make sure you talk about men's role in the solution. That they have the agency to choose to support gender equality, prevent violence against women and girls, and act as a role model for other men on these issues.	“Men's abuse of women and girls is commonplace. And there are many ways for men to play a part in ending it. For example, calling out a friend's sexist jokes, modelling respect to their sons and the other men in their lives, and being clear on the rules of sexual consent.” “Most men believe that violence against women and girls is reprehensible, but they witness it every day – in the media, online or in real life.” “Men have the power to challenge this harm when and where they see it. Calling things out can feel small or inconsequential but being vocal about it shows it's not normal or OK and this can make a huge difference.”

Male victims and survivors



Avoid erasing the experiences of male survivors, and the homophobia and dismissal they can often experience.

But don't allow men's experiences of domestic abuse and sexual violence to be used to try and discredit the structural and systemic nature of VAWG and gender equality.

Be mindful that counter-allegations are common in cases of domestic abuse and are a form of abuse – one often experienced by women and the most marginalised survivors who are least likely to be believed and supported by state bodies. The weaponisation of counter-allegations also undermines the real harm experienced by men who are survivors.



	What this looks like in practice
Speak openly about men's experiences of sexual or domestic violence against them, the barriers to support (like shame and not being taken seriously), and the importance of this support, to encourage help-seeking. But talk about men's experiences alongside the structural story, highlighting how the data overwhelmingly points to higher rates of perpetration by men.	“While domestic abuse is most commonly experienced by women and overwhelmingly perpetrated by men, men can also be victims, and their experiences are real and important.” “Because men are expected to be strong, it can feel shameful to recognise and admit to what's happening and to reach out for help. Men worry that they won't be believed or will be laughed at and that help and support won't be there for them.”

Beyond gender



Avoid focusing on gender alone as this ignores intersecting inequalities, like immigration status or race.

	What this looks like in practice
Any meaningful work to tackle VAWG must also recognise that intersecting inequalities, such as a woman's immigration status or race, can drive victimisation and mean some women are less likely to have access to justice and support.	“Because the system makes it harder for migrant women to work and get support when they need it, they can be more dependent on their partners and vulnerable to abuse.”
Work to address boys' educational attainment must also look through the lens of race, social-economic status and disability to gain any real understanding of boys' reality. It's also important to consider how homophobia may impact someone's experience of abuse, including men of all sexualities.	“How boys get on at school can depend on things like where they live, the colour of their skin and whether they're disabled. For example, because of the system of ideas, laws and customary ways of doing things, Black boys are often disciplined more harshly than white boys.”

As mentioned earlier, how you use this framing will depend on the specific context and audience. For example, some of the above examples wouldn't be appropriate if you're sharing a survivor's story or commenting on a specific case in the media.

For advice on how to talk about VAWG in the media, please see EVAW's guide on [Reporting on Rape](#) and [Level Up's Media Guidelines for Reporting Fatal Domestic Abuse](#).

For framing guidance on the weaponisation of VAWG, see ['Not in Our Name': How to talk about the weaponisation of violence against women and girls – a practical guide](#).

And for guidance on using data, see [Women's Aid's blog on the importance of data](#).

Next steps

It's essential that we not only put these principles into practice in how we talk about our work, but in how we *do* the work – ensuring we meaningfully live these values in our actions. We'll be running a series of workshops on applying these principles in different contexts – from funders to sports bodies, policymakers, charities and schools, and we'll share learnings from these sessions in future guides.

We also invite signatories to share examples of how they're putting these principles into action, and call on sectors to work together in the spirit of these principles. This means ensuring we don't pit needs against each other or sideline the realities of VAWG, which includes the chronic underfunding of survivor support services. It also means honouring and crediting the long history of feminist and social justice movements, centering marginalised voices, and working collaboratively.

To read our guide to applying these principles to your work and to sign up to implementing them, please

[click here](#)



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