

The Auckland Coalition for the Safety of Women and Children



A Way Through The Thicket:

Why Understanding Gender and Colonisation is Key to Eliminating Family Violence in Aotearoa New Zealand

Key Points

June 2020

The Auckland Coalition for the Safety of Women and Children¹

In order to effectively respond to social ills, we need to understand their key contributing factors. *The key drivers of family violence include gender inequity and ongoing colonisation.*

New Zealand's family violence problem is endemic. One in five women (21.4%) in New Zealand have experienced intimate partner violence and/or threats at some point in their lifetime (MoJ, 2019, Fig 4.60), and 2019 was our worst year for intimate partner homicides in a decade (Ensor et al, 2020). Family violence predominantly involves certain men using their power to control women, often in ongoing patterns of physical, psychological and/or financial abuse (FVDRC, 2017, 2020; Orr, 2007).

Recognition by leadership that gender inequity and ongoing colonisation are causal factors for family violence – and that family violence involves long-term patterns of control – can increase the safety of women and children by leading us to:

- Identify and discontinue gender biases and structural racism within agencies, including discontinuing the excusing of male coercion and violence. For example, agencies currently blame women for “failing to protect” their children while the agencies themselves fail to hold men responsible for their behaviour (FVDRC, 2020; see, for example [police communications](#) which mention victim and agency responsibility, but not perpetrator responsibility, for victim and tamariki safety (NZ Police n.d.), an omission supported by the Police euphemism of family “harm” for family violence (“violence” requires a human agent to cause it; “harm” does not).

¹ The Auckland Coalition for the Safety of Women and Children is made up of 12 preventing-violence groups. This summary of “A Way through the Thicket” (a paper to inform the development of the national strategy and action plan for the Joint Venture leading the Government's work on family violence and sexual violence) was commissioned by the Coalition Coordinator and Auckland Women's Centre manager Leonie Morris and was drafted by Janet McAllister. Thanks to all reviewers and other advisors including Debbie Hager, Deborah Mackenzie, Puawai Rudman, Alison Towns and Geraldine Whiteford. All correspondence to Leonie Morris akcentre@womensz.org.nz.

- Decrease the severe deprivation levels suffered by Māori (serious family violence is more strongly correlated to serious deprivation for Māori than for tauiwī; and Māori deprivation is related to ongoing discrimination (FVDRC, 2017)).
- Resource “By Māori – for Māori, with Māori” decision-making and initiatives (Kaiwai et al, 2020, Action Point 3), for example to assist wāhine Māori who are afraid of reporting abusive partners because they have reason to mistrust government and social agencies, and fear their children will be taken away from them (Parahi, 2019; 1News, 2020).
- Lower rates of abusive relationships by educating young people about how to critically assess popular culture which sexualises women for male consumption, treats women as male possessions and limits men’s identities (Towns & Scott, 2008; Towns 2009).
- Stop minimising and trivialising the experience of survivors, and instead prioritise the safety of women and children in the criminal and civil justice system, for example by actively responding to abusers’ protection order breaches, instead of ignoring them with sometimes fatal consequences. (Backbone Collective, 2017; MacLennan, 2015; Brown, 2016).
- Address social norms that inform family violence such as those associated with sexism, racism and the marginalisation of minority groups such Rainbow people and people with disabilities.

Gender

Gender influences the perpetration and outcomes of family violence.

- Most men do not use violence against their families; however, most family violence – and almost all family violence leading to serious injury and death – is perpetrated by men (MoJ, 2020; FVDRC, 2017, 2020; Mackenzie, 2009).
- If a relationship between a woman and a man leads to death, it is almost always the man who has been the lead family-violence perpetrator – even if he is killed by his partner (FVDRC, 2017).
- Men who perpetrate family violence do not do so in a social vacuum; they are influenced by entrenched expectations about gender roles (such as male = powerful/controlling; women = passive/submissive), and long-term gender and ethnic inequalities and discrimination, and discrimination against people with disabilities.²
- The social and cultural norms that inform family violence are embedded in our language, institutions, entertainment media, judiciary, sports, education and employment patterns. They may be so embedded that they appear to be commonsense. We cannot prevent family violence by pretending that these gendered and colonising practices do not occur.

² Such social expectations influence family violence against Rainbow people also. “Dynamics of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and gender policing underpin intimate partner violence and sexual violence in Rainbow communities” (Dickson, 2016).

Ongoing Colonisation

Wāhine Māori experience family violence at a greater rate than non-Māori, and a key causal factor is colonisation as role model and enforcer.

- Patriarchal norms (including men not being involved in child-rearing, and women not usually owning land) were imposed on Māori society by British colonisers (FVDRC, 2017; E Tū Whānau, 2018; Salmond 2018) who introduced male dominance and entitlement, which has been associated with men's violence against women (Adams et al, 1995).
- Family violence has been exacerbated by New Zealand's well-documented (and continuing) history of government harassment and neglect of Māori over generations (Pihama et al, 2019). This harassment and neglect cause deprivation, intergenerational trauma, and mistrust of social services, which fail to appropriately support and protect, and are often seen as threatening to break-up whānau (Kruger et al, 2004; FVDRC, 2017; Kaiwai et al, 2020; OCC, 2020).

Concerns regarding CTS research

The false assertion that "men and women perpetrate family violence similarly" has been popularised by *one* flawed research methodology.

- The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) is a quantitative research instrument used in multiple studies worldwide in several iterations, including in the longitudinal Christchurch and Dunedin Health and Development Studies (e.g. Fergusson et al, 2005; 2008).
- Virtually all other studies (of various methodologies) have found men perpetrate more harmful violence against women than women do against men (Hamby, 2016; Orr, 2007)
- The CTS is not fit-for-purpose as a research tool for gender comparisons of intimate partner violence. As the research and evaluation agency of the United States Department of Justice cautions: CTS "does not measure control, coercion, or the motives for conflict tactics; it also leaves out sexual assault and violence by ex-spouses or partners and does not determine who initiated the violence" (US NIJ, 2010). Around a third of all intimate partner violence in New Zealand is perpetrated by former partners (MoJ, 2019) – this violence is excluded from most CTS samples (Johnson et al., 2014; Orr, 2007; Walker et al, 2004).
- Importantly, the CTS does not distinguish between "horse play" – or fooling around – and harmful violence, and therefore the scale lacks construct validity: it does not measure what it purports to measure (Hamby, 2015; 2016).

Conclusion

There is a need for men as well as women and non-binary people to be freed from harmful gender-role expectations; and Pākehā as well as Māori and other cultures, to be freed from harmful colonising practices. The way forward through the thicket is to unite all women and men in their contempt for the norms and justifications that support family violence, and increase their pride in supportive, positive and caring relationships and practices.

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