Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol](#) ar [Atal trais ar sail rhywedd drwy ddulliau iechyd y cyhoedd](#)

This response was submitted to the [Equality and Social Justice Committee](#) consultation on [The public health approach to preventing gender-based violence](#)

PGBV 19

Ymateb gan: Dr Stephen Burrell, Prifysgol Durham | Response from: Dr Stephen Burrell, Durham University

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Submission to Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament
Consultation: The public health approach to preventing gender-based violence
28th April 2023

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1. About

I am an Assistant Professor (Research) in the Department of Sociology at Durham University, currently undertaking a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship. My research focuses on men, masculinities and violence. My PhD, completed in 2019, was on primary prevention work with men and boys to end men's violence against women in England, and I have subsequently conducted several other pieces of research related to this topic. This includes a project for the UK Government Equalities Office (Burrell, Ruxton and Westmarland, 2019) on the impacts of masculine gender norms in the UK and how to engage men and boys in shifting them.

2. What works in preventing gender-based violence before it occurs

There is a growing body of evidence about what works in preventing gender-based violence from happening in the first place (Burrell, 2019; Burrell, Ruxton and Westmarland, 2019). Some of the common key findings of research in this area include that primary prevention work must:

- Be holistic; operate at multiple levels across an organisation or community, addressing its culture and structures as well as individual attitudes and behaviours, in an ongoing, in-depth way.
- Start from as young an age as possible (in an age-appropriate way), and continue across the life-course in a range of different settings.
- Be gender-transformative; actively addressing and working to change the gendered norms and power inequalities which are at the roots of gender-based violence.
- Recognise and tackle the intersecting social inequalities which shape different people's experiences of violence and abuse and influence their ability to play a role in preventing it.
- Foster ongoing dialogue, reflection and critical thinking, and empower individuals to play an active role in prevention, rather than simply 'lecturing' people in what they should/should not do.

Gender-based violence primary prevention work remains under-developed and under-supported in the UK context, especially when considering the different aspects of good practice described above, and compared to the pervasive scale of the problem (Burrell, 2018).

A key aspect of gender-based violence primary prevention work is engaging with men and boys (Flood, 2019). Given that the vast majority of violence and abuse in society is perpetrated by men, that means men also have a vital role to play in tackling the problem – and are often in particularly significant positions of power and influence to do so. Of course, all members of the community benefit and have much to learn from primary prevention work. But a focus on engaging men and boys as part of this helps to get to the roots of the problem, shift the onus onto those primarily responsible for the abuse, and challenges victim-blaming narratives.

Furthermore, when delivered effectively, with a gender-transformative focus, this work can be of much value to men and boys themselves. This means highlighting and opening up conversations about the patriarchal gendered norms and expectations which lie at the heart of violence and abuse (Flood, 2019). For example, the idea that men should be 'active' and women 'passive' in (hetero)sexual interactions. Or that men should be 'in control' of most decisions within relationships. Or that violence and aggression are normal, expected, even desirable ways for men and boys to solve problems and get what they want. Research illustrates that these norms surrounding masculinity continue to be highly influential in the lives of young men – and cause much damage in holding men and boys back themselves (Heilman, Barker and Harrison, 2017).

Working with children and young people to discuss the problems with these expectations, the fact that they don't have to conform to them, and that there are many different ways of being a 'woman' or a 'man' (or neither), should therefore be a key aspect of relationships and sex education. For instance, by highlighting that men and boys can and should be allowed to develop deep, caring, emotionally-expressive relationships with other people and with themselves. Indeed, learning about and encouraging critical thinking on gender norms and inequalities should also be embedded more widely through different parts of the curriculum and teacher training, and in settings beyond education too. Regular discussions which unpack rigid and restrictive gender norms could help to improve health and wellbeing and bring into question harmful behaviour in the workplace, for example. Key to engaging men and boys in these discussions is a positive approach which builds on the assets they already possess, highlights examples where men and boys are already challenging restrictive masculine norms and putting into practice caring, connected ways of being, and offers positive routes forward in terms of the positive role everyone can play in building gender equality, and how we all benefit from doing so.

3. How effective is a public health approach to preventing gender-based violence

There is much value to a public health approach which places an emphasis on the *prevention* of gender-based violence (Burrell, 2019). This is one of the biggest public health problems we face, with devastating long-term impacts on the wellbeing of women and girls, and ripple effects well beyond the immediate victims too, which have significantly deleterious effects on society as a whole. Public health offers

many useful frameworks, concepts and tools for preventing different social problems. It helps us to understand the scale of violence and abuse as a multifaceted phenomenon, grounded in the interplay of personal, situational and sociocultural factors. For example, the 'social ecological model' has become increasingly influential internationally in helping to make sense of the complexities of how different interacting levels of society influence the behaviour of individuals (and vice versa) and contribute to the perpetration of abuse – and that interventions are therefore also needed at each of these levels in order to prevent the problem (Fulu, Jewkes and Lang, 2014). Public health demonstrates that gender-based violence is not inevitable, and that it can be prevented, if sufficient resources and commitment are invested in tackling its causes.

However, it is crucial that within a public health approach, the gendered roots of violence against women and girls remain front and centre. Ultimately, this violence is founded in, and plays a significant role in reproducing, gender inequalities in which women's lives are valued less and men are encouraged to expect to have more power. This cannot simply be seen as one among many factors contributing to gender-based violence – it is the central factor. A public health approach which lacks this kind of sociological, gendered analysis will therefore be highly constrained. For instance, violence and abuse is not the same as a disease, and framing it in these terms risk painting it as something inevitable and uncontrollable, rather than a phenomenon based on human actions and choices, which can and should be changed. Similarly, whilst categorisations of 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary' prevention are useful, they also have limitations, in that some of those participating in a primary prevention workshop in a school for example may have already engaged in some form of abusive behaviour.

4. **What is the role of the public sector and specialist services in identifying, tackling and preventing violence against women**

Violence against women and girls is a society-wide problem, which requires active involvement across the whole of society in order to prevent it. Whilst educating young people is a crucial aspect of prevention, this cannot be the only area of focus – because young people have limited power to create wider change in society. This also neglects how children learn much from observing how adults behave (Fawcett Society, 2020). Prevention efforts are therefore needed across all organisations, institutions and communities. For instance, my research has highlighted the importance of more primary prevention work to be developed within businesses and workplaces (Burrell, 2020). These are also a vital environment in which to engage with men 'where they are', for example through 'allyship networks', and encouraging men (especially at senior levels), to speak out about violence against women and for gender equality, among their peers and more broadly in society. Gender-transformative primary prevention efforts can help to create workplace cultures which are healthier and more inclusive and supportive for everyone, which in turn has a beneficial impact on the organisation as a whole. Public sector organisations are a crucial environment for this kind of work, and can provide an example for other employers to follow.

It is vital to collaborate with specialist services in the development and delivery of primary prevention work. For example, there are organisations specialising in engaging with men and boys in spaces such as schools and workplaces, such as White Ribbon UK and Beyond Equality. More broadly, organisations delivering specialist services in the violence against women and girls sector are not only the experts in the problem itself, but often in how to prevent it. It is therefore beneficial to collaborate with these organisations wherever possible, also as a way of listening to and being accountable to victim-survivors and ensuring that their voices are heard within prevention work. It is vital too that preventative efforts do not take resources away from frontline support services – both of these are crucial components of a whole-system, public health approach to tackling gender-based violence, and properly investing in all aspects of this is important in order to demonstrate that we as a society take gender-based violence seriously and are committed to ending it.

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