
The international drive to achieve gender equality and the elimination of gender-based violence against women and girls

Inaugural Asia-Pacific Conference on Gendered Violence and Violations

Opening address by Emeritus Professor Anne R. Edwards AO | 10 February 2015

Abstract

We are all too well aware of the seriousness, the pervasiveness, and the apparent intractability of gender-based violence against women and girls in all countries of the world. Our media constantly reports on particularly horrific instances whether in armed conflicts, in terrorist raids, in particular cultural groups or localised settings, or in everyday life and in private homes. The UN Commission on the Status of Women has produced a comprehensive and authoritative analysis of the historical and structural causes of gender-based violence and discrimination and an ambitious program of actions for governments and for civil society to counter such violence. What can we learn from this and how is Australia tackling this complex and deep-rooted phenomenon?

In every known society differences between males and females at all ages from birth to death are a fundamental component of social organisation. While observable biological differences are a significant factor, social roles and functions are assigned to the members of these two categories of human beings with associated personality characteristics, abilities, needs and desires, which derive more from culture than biology. It is gender, and the culturally-defined attributes and aspects of gender, that are the dominant forces in shaping the lives of women and men, girls and boys, and in determining the power relations and inequalities between members of the two sexes.

From the late 1960s modern feminists have focused attention on the greater impact of gender than of sex in the social structure as a whole and on the differential experiences, positions, opportunities and access to resources provided to females and males. They point to the negative consequences of the gender-based power imbalance in causing women's oppression, manifested in male control over women's bodies, sexuality and reproduction, domestic violence, rape and sexual exploitation, women's

economic dependence on men and a pervasive culture of gender stereotypes that reproduces, perpetuates and legitimises the inequalities. It is within this framework that research has been undertaken and practical campaigns for social and political change have been conducted over the last nearly fifty years. In the current discourse in Australia and other western countries, however, this interpretation is still not universally recognised or accepted. There is still a preference for explanations in individual biological or psychological terms rather than sociological.

Over this period, the theories about inequality and its relationship to male violence against women have broadened beyond the focus solely or mainly being on gender and patriarchy to encompass other sources of social division – class, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality (recognising interectionality) – and to entertain the notion of multiple and intersecting social systems, in particular capitalism, colonialism, and globalisation as well as patriarchy. This has extended the analysis so that poverty, lack of education, limited or no access to income, property or employment, are seen as being core features of particular economic systems. The absence of recognition and protection of individual rights and freedoms for all is a condoned or at least unchallenged feature of the operation of many official legal and other institutions including government agencies. Far from being a protector of universal individual rights and a source of mechanisms for redressing societal inequalities, the so-called liberal-democratic modern state has operated alongside and in conjunction with, existing power structures, often without questioning their roles in perpetuating social divisions and systemic social disadvantage. This in societies where, for at least the last hundred years, by contrast with many non-western societies, neither religion nor secular belief systems, have provided moral justification for gender and other forms of discrimination.

The prime targets of 1970s western feminism are the very same targets as those of the more recent international efforts to mount a concerted attempt to tackle discrimination and violence against women in all its forms within a framework of human rights and gender equality. This is most clearly represented by the 2013 report of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

These days we are all too well aware of the seriousness, the pervasiveness, and the apparent intractability of gender-based violence against women and girls in all countries of the world. Our media constantly reports on particularly horrific instances whether in armed conflicts, in terrorist raids, in particular cultural groups or localised settings, or in everyday life and in private homes.

Entitled ‘Elimination and Prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls’, the UN Commission on the Status of Women document is a sociologically sophisticated and comprehensive analysis of the causes and consequences of gender inequality. Despite variations in the nature, scale, settings and circumstances of the range of types of violence perpetrated on women and girls across and within societies, the common underlying features are the cultural and structural bases of gender and gender-based power relationships. Pointing to the complex, deeply-entrenched and inter-connected institutions, cultural beliefs, values, and social practices that underpin gender and power, the report offers a fundamental critique of the structural arrangements that continue to exist in all countries. It goes on to advocate a range of strategies and mechanisms to address these deep-rooted problems.

According to this analysis, the mechanisms that reinforce and reproduce gender inequality operate at multiple levels: at the level of political and legal systems; economic systems and market forces; belief systems, including religions as well as cultural norms; at the level of institutions, organisations and professional bodies; as well as civil society and local communities. The report recognises many of these mechanisms operate at the international as well as the national level, highlighting the growing importance globally of technology, trade and environmental pressures, and the dramatic impact of recent armed international and national conflicts and terrorism, in contributing to increased incidence and new forms of violence against women and girls. If we are to more effectively address such violence, the report argues, we must develop strategies that tackle the multiple levels of structures and processes that are responsible for producing and perpetuating this violence, as well as those that protect and assist women directly exposed to such violence; and strategies that work through both national and international agencies and

instruments. It presents a plan of action under three broad headings: strengthening the implementation of legal and policy frameworks and accountability; addressing structural and underlying causes and risk factors so as to prevent violence against women and girls; and strengthening multisectoral services, programs and responses to violence against women and girls. The report also calls for a greater emphasis on ‘strengthening the evidence base’: conducting research, developing indicators and collecting and disseminating data and findings.

This provides a comprehensive overview but the responsibility for the actions that need to be undertaken lies with various international bodies and with national governments taking leadership. This conference is designed to give participants who are closely involved in theory, research and practice in the field of violence against women and girls, and who are working within this broad framework, the opportunity to share knowledge and experience from different countries in the Asian Pacific region. We have a diversity of papers, covering a wide span of topics including: revisiting the theory and the relationships between gender and other forms of structural inequality; exploring methodological questions; and examining the evidence relating to the effectiveness of interventions of various kinds.

I would like to conclude this opening address by describing in general terms what approach Australia has taken domestically in recent times, which aligns closely with the strategic approach of the 2013 Commission on the Status of Women document, and then finally acknowledge the challenges we all face to making progress in seeking to overturn the historical and structural causes of gender-based inequality, discrimination and violence.

In 2011, following a nation-wide consultation initiated by the federal Labor government, all nine governments in Australia agreed to take a national approach to domestic, familial and sexual violence against women and committed to a twelve-year national plan for the period 2010-2022. A detailed Implementation Plan for the first three-year action plan was issued in 2012, and, notwithstanding a change of federal government in 2013 and changes in other jurisdictions, the second action plan was issued in 2014. The commitment reflected in the National Plan, and its related activities, and the associated visibility have significantly increased

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political and public attention to this major social issue across the states and territories, recent examples being the announcement of a Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria, a task force in Queensland and the choice of a highly articulate domestic violence survivor Rosie Batty as Australian of the Year for 2015.

The National Plan has six outcomes:

- Communities are safe and free from violence
- Relationships are respectful
- Indigenous communities are strengthened (recognising specific cultural and community issues for Indigenous Australians)
- Services meet the needs of women and their children experiencing violence
- Justice responses are effective
- Perpetrators stop their violence and are held to account.

There was an explicit emphasis given to primary prevention as well as intervention and to overcoming structural and cultural barriers to gender equality. The plan also recognises the need for more effective means of achieving service coordination and system integration within and across the states and territories and for supporting research and building a strong evidence base to inform policy and practice. A specific proposal was that a research centre, the National Centre of Excellence to reduce violence against women and their children was to be set up as part of the first action plan. Also during the life of the first action plan, a separate organisation, Our Watch, was established to lead national efforts in the field of primary prevention and to complement the ongoing work with men of White Ribbon Australia that predates the Plan.

My involvement with the National Plan started early in 2013 when I was appointed the inaugural chair of the research centre, now renamed ANROWS - Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety. I came to this role as a feminist,

sociologist and researcher with university management experience, all of which have proved to be invaluable to the task of setting up this new organisation.

In 2014 ANROWS produced in consultation with funders, service providers, practitioners and the research community, first a three to five year comprehensive National Research Agenda and then the first round of its Research Program of priority projects to be funded to the total value of \$3.5 million. This year there will also be a set of research projects which are to be undertaken for the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of male perpetrator programs across the country.

ANROWS has been given a key role in assisting the realisation of the National Plan. It is responsible not only for initiating and managing research projects designed to advance the objectives of the plan but it also acts as the principal source of research commentary, research translation, knowledge dissemination and exchange not only on the subject of the causes and consequences of violence against women but also on strategies, policies, programs and services to reduce violence and to assist women affected by such violence. This is a developing area of increasing value with the widespread use of new media and communication technologies.

We are all fully aware that we are tackling a formidable task. Social structures that have been around for a long time and are well-embedded are very hard to dislodge. Cultural attitudes and beliefs that are part of people's everyday world and often taken for granted rather than being deliberately or rationally developed are not easily brought to consciousness and exposed to critical assessment. Not only men but some women continue to subscribe to precisely the same traditional gender expectations of men's and women's roles and capacities that can limit women's spheres of life and access to independence at the same time as enabling and excusing physical and sexual violence by men including by male partners. Changing attitudes and stereotypes is an essential but slow and difficult process and will meet resistance. The current power imbalance between men and women is built into the way our institutions and our organisations function and serves the interests of those with more power. And this applies

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in the political system, business, the law and public administration, the professions, the media, etc. It has to be continually challenged in each case.

Some enlightened policies, a few well-intentioned men in leadership positions and the pressure of women's organisations and public campaigns are not enough to force fundamental change. But we have to believe it can and will happen. We have seen some significant change in countries across the world. We have international commitment to enforcing the principles of individual rights and social justice and adopting comprehensive plans of action. We now have a sophisticated understanding of how societies work and we have experience of successful movements and strategies that have led to social change including shifts in the power relations between men and women. So we know more about what are effective levers to pull and we are better equipped to plan and implement coordinated strategies and campaigns to achieve specific ends. I look forward to learning from what I hear at this conference and hopefully applying it. It may seem a contradictory position to hold, but I remain a realist and an optimist.

Emeritus Professor Anne R. Edwards AO is Chair of the ANROWS Board. Anne is a sociologist whose research interests include social policy, power and social inequality, women and gender issues, and ageing. She is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Since retiring as Vice-Chancellor of Flinders University, Anne has taken on several Board positions, including Council on the Ageing South Australia (President), the Australian Centre for Social Innovation (Deputy Chair), the South Australian Premier's Council for Women (Co-Chair), and Our Watch (Board Director).