

An open letter to Joe Hildebrand from a psychiatrist who treats victims of violence daily

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- Dr Karen Williams
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As a psychiatrist who works with victims of violence every day, I feel compelled to respond to your recent article on the subject of violence against women.

When asked about the comments by the Assistant Commissioner Luke Cornelius after the murder of Courtney Herron in Melbourne that “Violence against women is absolutely about men’s behaviour,” on TV you said this.

“I thought it was a really nonsensical thing to say. I don’t see how me reflecting on myself is going to stop women being bashed or murdered.”

That struck a chord and in the middle of storm you were asked to write a piece explaining what you meant.

I am confused by your response. You admit men are more violent than women, commit more murders than women, deliberately cause injury to others more than women and are jailed more than women... and yet you argue that being male has nothing to do with it?

It is worth noting that men don’t just commit more violent crimes, it is all crimes. 92% of the prison population is male but you wrote that gender has nothing to do with it.

In 2017 alone at least 170 Australians were the victim of homicide. A female was the offender in just 12.5 percent of the cases.

You talked about how women being murdered is a relatively low phenomenon.

You know what is lower? Single punch assaults. In the years 2000 to 2012 there were 90 deaths from single punches.

You know what else is lower? Fatal anaphylaxis.

Between 1997 and 2013, 324 people died from anaphylaxis in Australia.

You know what else is lower? In the 16 years between January 1st 2001 and December 2016 – 373 Australian Defence Members suicided.

And as a result we have introduced strict lock out times, we have introduced strict labelling on food packaging, and we actively treat veteran mental health. As we should.

I am confused by the statement that *‘we already have powerful disincentives against murdering – namely jail’*

As you noted, murder usually follows other violent behaviours. Whilst our justice system may deliver relatively long sentences for murder, (though certainly not always) we don’t have disincentives towards violence against women in general.

Did you know that between 2009 and 2014 of those found guilty of serious DV assault in NSW, only 14.4% received a prison term?

Did you know that the percentage of perpetrators who completed their full term of the sentence was only 1.5%?

Did you know that the mean sentence length for perpetrators of domestic violence is just 370 days?

You talked about domestic violence being concentrated in areas of poverty, and have based assumption on postcodes of offences from the NSW Bureau of Crime and Research Statistics rather than any true evidence that poverty is causative.

There is a phenomena in health described as the 'social drift', where those who are suffering from various conditions such as mental illness 'drift' into poverty. Men that are in and out of jail and traumatised women are often unable to afford to live in the suburbs you describe because of these conditions. Consequently they and their families drift further into poverty.

If someone noticed that mentally ill people live in drains and stairwells, that person might potentially believe that drains and stairwells cause mental illness. Or alternatively, they could recognise that our care of the mentally ill is woefully inadequate.

Postcode data is not enough to describe causation and whilst poverty is certainly linked with increased domestic violence, domestic violence effects women from all socioeconomic spheres, including those in Sydney's north shore. In fact, you may remember the tragic murder of Jennifer and Jack Edwards by their accountant father in the northern suburbs of Sydney just last year. Or the murder of the lawyer Maria Lutz and her 2 children in Davidson, in October 2016.

Yes, the risk of being a domestic violence offender is higher in those living in poverty. But the highest risk factor for being an offender of domestic violence is actually being male. I don't say this to stigmatise or demonise males: I say it so we can focus on the actual risk factors and truly investigate why men are responding to internal distress with violence.

Joe, you end by saying how "good men", presumably with yourself included, "don't need to be told".

But why would good men want to discredit a legitimate call to arms to address the major risk factor for perpetrating violence or murder? To take attention away from the senseless and unnecessary loss of life of a young woman? It's hard to reconcile.

There are programs on television that call for Australians to consider the use of plastics, the wellbeing of chickens, how we impact cows and their calves when we milk them. There are campaigns to consider our use of electricity, water and fuel consumption.

Yet amongst us exist vegans, vegetarians, environmentalists and animal rights activists. There are campaigns to address the risky behaviours of driving whilst on our mobile phones, yet there are people who don't own even either of these things. There have been campaigns about racism.... yet there are people in society who embrace the multicultural fabric of our society.

There have been campaigns to reduce stigma of mental illness as well as campaigns to address the bigotry from people with gender and sexuality differences, despite the fact that not everyone needs to hear those messages.

Good people are aware that there are people who do need to hear those messages.

Even if Luke Cornelius's message does not reach the 'bad men', his message may reach plenty of good men in positions who have the power to make positive change – in all the areas you mentioned – employment, health services and housing.

It's hard to imagine many of the 'good ones' would even need to be asked to lend their voice towards advocating in those spaces, and being a positive influence. Why any good man would seek to detract from that is beyond me.

Yours sincerely,
Dr. Karen Williams
Doctors Against Violence Towards Women