

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Community attitudes to violence against women:

Progress and challenges in creating safe, respectful and healthy environments for Victorian women.

Part of a program of activity to address the impact of violence on women's health and wellbeing, the "Violence Against Women Community Attitudes Project" aimed to gauge community attitudes, assess changes since 1995; and improve understanding of the factors involved in attitude formation and change. The findings of the project are summarised in *Two Steps Forward, One Step Back*. The project involved.

- A telephone survey of a random sample of 2000 Victorians 18 years and over, with a booster sample of 800 people from selected culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The survey was based in large part on one conducted nationally in 1995 by the then Federal Office of the Status of Women. Findings from the 2006 random sample were compared with those from the 1995 survey. Qualitative research involving the general community and Indigenous communities was also undertaken.
- A review of theory and evidence relating to factors influencing attitude formation and change.
- A critical review of past social marketing strategies to address violence against women, including identification of good practice strategies

Attitudes are important as they can influence the perpetration of violence as well as the ways in which communities, victims and services respond.

The survey indicates that despite improvements, attitudes that condone, trivialise or work against addressing violence persist. For example:

- Two in every five Victorians believed that rape results from men not being able to control their need for sex
- 15% believed that, in relation to sex, "women often say no when they mean yes"
- Nearly one in four are prepared to excuse domestic violence if it results from a temporary loss of control or the perpetrator later regrets what they have done
- Despite evidence to the contrary, 20% believed that domestic violence is equally likely to be perpetrated by men and women and the number holding this belief has increased since 1995 (when it was 9%)
- One in four respondents *disagreed* that "women rarely make false claims of being raped".

Given the prevalence and consequences of violence against women there is a need to complement current efforts to support those affected by violence with strategies to prevent violence *before it occurs*. While attitudes are important they are not the only contributing factor. This suggests the need for a comprehensive approach to primary prevention, similar to that used successfully in reducing tobacco use and motor vehicle accidents. This approach would be implemented across sectors and settings (such as schools and faith based communities) and would involve multiple and reinforcing strategies (such as communications campaigns to address attitudes, professional development to change organisational norms and responses). In addition to strengthening current 'whole of population' campaigns, there is a need for better targeting to men and to those born overseas, both groups found in the survey to be more likely on average to hold violence supportive attitudes.

The summary, along with more detailed technical reports of the project components, are available on the VicHealth website at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/cas