

Preventing violence against women: Community of practice reflections

Promoting respectful relationships and gender equality



These reflections were collected at the VicHealth Community of Practice Forum held in December 2013: *Evaluating PVAW: the good, the bad and the ugly*.

The forum aimed to generate discussion among advanced practitioners of primary prevention of violence against women (PVAW) about the challenges and opportunities emerging from their evaluation practice, and start identifying ways of building a stronger culture of evaluation. (All the quotes you'll read here are from PVAW practitioners, many of them advanced in their practice.)

The purpose of this paper is to make some of the reflections on the day available to an audience beyond the forum. It is just one of the ways VicHealth is capturing and disseminating practice knowledge within the emerging PVAW field.

Why is evaluation important?

Evaluation is building our community of practice

Evaluation helps assess the needs of stakeholders and participants, helps develop the project, monitors uptake and delivery, assesses the impacts, and ensures we are being responsive.

In an emerging sector like PVAW, evaluation is not just useful – it is vital. Evaluation is a core process for continuous learning and practice improvement. Through evaluation, we are building our knowledge as an emerging community of practice.

Evaluation tells us what we are doing and asks, 'Can we do it in a different way?'

Evaluation asks, 'Is this actually of benefit to the people we're delivering to?' There's no point going into schools and delivering programs if they're not meeting the kids' needs.

Why evaluate? Because we want to know what difference we are making – and is this the difference we want to make?

We were attracting only a certain cohort to our program because we didn't have an evaluation in place – we didn't have that pre-thought. We didn't know what difference we were wanting to make, so there wasn't anything to evaluate apart from numbers of people who arrived and whether they were happy with the program. I think the implication was that we ran the risk of reinforcing inequities.

Evaluation is also fundamental to innovation. The evaluation process can release energy and creativity.

In addition to continuous improvement and collecting knowledge, what I find in evaluation is new project ideas.

We need to capture different perspectives on the work. You know, it's easy to think we know what's happening, when actually we don't.

By privileging the participants' point of view in evaluation, we can catch unintended impacts. The evaluation process also helps develop a sense of professional contribution – the knowledge that, as PVAW practitioners, we really are making a difference and that we are feeding broader, long-term change.

If we actually know that what we're doing is working, it means we're not operating blindly. It contributes to the pride of the practitioners who work in this field.

Contributing to the mosaic of cultural change

In primary prevention, evaluation helps us understand the progression or evolution of change and the change process. It is showing us the most promising practice in prevention.

Evaluation tells us how we are contributing to a much larger story of attitudinal change, behaviour change and cultural change – as one PVAW practitioner calls it, “the mosaic” of change.

It's a long-term story. It's about a 20 to 30-year cultural change process. So being able to show how your piece of that mosaic is contributing to that change is really important.

There's a bigger picture. When we do evaluate, we can make innovations for big system changes such as media reporting, government policies and the way that organisations develop. So there's a social value to the evaluation – changes in social attitude, in advocacy, and education of children – the really big-picture stuff.

Evaluation helps ask important questions

- Are we meeting our objectives?
- Is what we are doing, working? In what ways? For whom? With whom?
- Is this actually leading to effective outcomes for those to whom it matters most?
- What impacts can we show?
- What difference are we making and is it the difference we want to make?
- What evidence is this providing?
- What are the problems or weaknesses?
- What can we improve or do differently? What changes do we need to make? What can we work on for next time?
- Is there a positive difference we might be missing out on?
- Are we being responsive?
- Are we meeting the needs of stakeholders? Participants? Funders?
- Are we inadvertently doing harm or contributing to inequality?
- What do we need to do next?
- What recommendations can we make?
- How can we build evaluation capacity?

Small steps lead to long-term change

The well-recognised fundamental determinants of violence outlined in *Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria* (see 'Useful resources' at the end of this paper), such as the unequal distribution of power and resources and an adherence to rigidly defined gender roles, are deeply nested in all levels of influence. So our steps toward long-term outcomes in preventing violence are incremental.

Evaluation builds our knowledge of the potential for change across all levels of the ecological model – individual, relationship, organisational, community and societal – so we can understand the contributors to violence as they are experienced and where prevention efforts can best be directed.

Advanced PVAW practitioners say that what we need for now are realistic and reasonable indicators of success.

The work we're doing contributes to population change, so how do we show that we're a significant contributor to those changes in attitude but also in the longer-term reduction in the rates of violence?

PVAW is such a young and innovative area of practice that it's possibly too early to be looking at big outcomes. We really need to focus our evaluation 'lower' to where the work is currently being done. So evaluation is finding out about the impacts we are making now while we're looking to the outcomes in the future.

Being able to report that "Sixty percent of X has occurred" is a very different proposition to saying, "We want to understand how we impact on this problem and learn about it and have effective programs." There's a big bit of thinking needed in that space.

This is such new work and such difficult work that we really need to address everyone's expectations and the reality that while we are making small steps, these are crucial for us to make inroads. The funding organisations need to understand the importance of evaluation and incorporate it in the way that they fund. It has to be a positive, feel-good experience.

What are the ingredients for good evaluation? Key themes from practitioners

The importance of courage and safety

Courage is a powerful and important part of the evaluation process.

It takes courage, on behalf of funders as well as practitioners, to create a safe environment in which unintended impacts and unintended changes can be allowed to surface.

Courage means allowing the space for mistakes and the ability to discuss them, report on them and learn from them. It means having the safety and freedom to fail – and to succeed.

We need, say advanced PVAW practitioners, to have funders who will accept there will be successes and mistakes and share those stories because that is some of the greatest learning available to us.

It takes courage and integrity to actually look at the results and say, "This isn't working" – and have the courage to own up to that. Then we can also make a suggestion about what will work, rather than just continuing a project for the sake of continuing a project.

It's great because, in the project we are doing at the moment, the funders want to know the learnings – they want to know what's not working. It's actually what we have to report on. Together we have set up that safety to reflect.

I've experienced evaluations where we've kept the report in a box and no one's allowed to read it and we can't share it with anyone and we just don't talk about it. Failure needs to be accepted.

We used the 'most significant change' technique. We didn't have any predetermined percentages to reach – we actually allowed stakeholders and participants to determine what is meaningful success to them. We needed to think about safety for the funder; it actually required a reconfigured role for them.

In our evaluation we drew on some big ideas around action research – making great, fabulous mistakes and actually talking about those and learning from them. We were drawing from good evidence and being a bit creative at the same time."

It takes courage for both funders and practitioners to be creative in evaluation: to explore the myriad approaches, methods and tools available; to be innovative in selecting what is fit for purpose; to closely engage participants, capture their stories and privilege their experiences – and take a flexible approach.

Relationships and the importance of alignment

Relationship is key in evaluation, and alignment is critical, say advanced PVAW practitioners.

When people want different things out of an evaluation, they're going to be looking for different markers of success.

When there's alignment, there's a shared commitment and a shared understanding. Ultimately, alignment leads to an evaluation that is more likely to be used.

Ensuring people are 'on the same page from day one' helps build a strong approach to the evaluation and makes sure evaluation is a core part of the program design – and this is critical to success.

What is a feel-good kind of evaluation experience? It felt most good for us when there was an alignment between the funders' mindset and the stakeholders, as well as practitioners and the people who are benefitting from the program.

With alignment, the evaluation process can result in a greater commitment and stronger involvement from stakeholders and funders. There will be a stronger sense of ownership and more accountability for the way a project is run.

The mindset around evaluation is critical to the success or failure of an evaluation. Some stakeholders and funders are getting involved and saying, “We want this to be a learning experience for all of us because it’s a new area”. The evaluation process has encouraged them to reflect.

I think if every stakeholder is being honest enough about what they want out of the evaluation, then there is integrity in the evaluation.

You need to understand the relationships that exist, and the environment that you’re working in, to ensure that evaluation’s going to work. You also need to have continual reflection so that none of the documents become ‘cemented’ – they’re always reviewed.

Many PVAW practitioners recommend using a partnership analysis tool to help develop a clear understanding of the purposes of the collaboration and to help ensure that outcomes and measures valued by the clients of the program are also valued by the stakeholders and funders. (VicHealth has developed a good partnerships analysis tool. See ‘Useful resources’ at the end of this paper.)

This adds value to the partnership and, ultimately, contributes to the success of the evaluation.

I’m working over three councils and working with emergency management committees, safety committees, and a bevy of other partnerships. We used a partnership evaluation tool to shine a light on what people are doing in the partnership and ask how we can make it better.

We had a reference group that would come back and meet regularly. We’d then get the practitioners to work through the interim findings. We also included our regional colleagues so we could really embed that practice. There was a whole range of learnings that were quite useful for other cohorts within the target groups.

What are the ingredients for a successful evaluation?

These are some of the suggestions from PVAW practitioners:

- Clarity on theoretical frameworks and evidence base using the VicHealth Framework regarding the determinants of violence against women and its prevention.
- Clear purpose and good program logic (see ‘Useful resources’ for tools to build logic models).
- Knowledge of your audience.
- Time invested to build good relationships and alignment.
- Ongoing communication to foster a shared commitment.
- Alignment: agreed values, outcomes and measures.
- Stakeholder involvement and participant engagement.
- Agreed commitment by stakeholders.
- Transparency, ethics, integrity.
- Courage and safety.
- Flexibility.
- Piloting.
- Reflexive praxis; feedback loops to inform and reshape practice.
- Adequate resourcing and timeframes.
- Follow-up – with a good dissemination strategy.
- Professional support and the right skills.
- Evaluation as a core part of the program design (built-in from the beginning).
- A culture of learning, which is respectful and accepts failure.
- An environment in which evaluation is enjoyed, valued and supported.

What are the challenges in PVAW evaluation? Key themes from practitioners

Challenge: finding an approach, method and tool that is 'fit for purpose'

There is a range of approaches for preventing violence against women initiatives, and it is important to select a tool that is fit-for-purpose and that effectively measures your project indicators of success.

This is one of the key challenges in PVAW evaluation.

Something we all talk about is how do we all start to evaluate in a similar way so that we can create one body of knowledge – so that people can see that we're all 'part of one pie'? That's a quandary.

It's important to do a whole bunch of research before you do your evaluation: setting up a sound program logic, seeing where the gaps are, deciding on what methodology you need, who needs to be involved and what are the outcomes you're trying to achieve. There's a whole range of work that's involved before you even get started on the 'doing'.

Choosing an inappropriate evaluation method (or having an inappropriate method chosen for you) is a problem many PVAW practitioners have faced:

We asked participants to fill out a double-sided A4 evaluation survey and we told them, "This will take 5 minutes to complete". We started to realise we weren't being sensitive to an audience whose literacy levels were low. So you need to check your methodology and the power dynamic between the collector of information and the participants.

We were running a PVAW project in a community setting. The evaluation relied on only process data collection: how many people came to the training, how many came to the event. It wasn't until we were repeating the project the following year that we realised that all of the critical learnings that could inform the next phase of that project were missed.

We were evaluating a project and the pre-survey we were using was inappropriate for the group – it was long and it contained lots of double negatives – but we needed to keep using it to match the post-survey. But we were transparent in our evaluation and declared there were confounding variables and limitations. The good thing was that we used mixed methods so we were able to capture some of the impacts and great unintentional outcomes in the focus groups.

Many different approaches and methods are valid because it depends on the project and evaluation you are doing, who it is for, what they need to know and why. Various processes and impact measures can be used to answer your evaluation questions.

We are not just looking at survey results but doing focus groups and having conversations and getting people's stories. That worked particularly well because we discovered that sometimes when our participants were completing surveys they were trying to provide the 'right' answers.

It's important to have inclusive methods. It's very difficult to target certain cohorts so consideration of the particular needs of each target group is essential.

Flexibility is important – that the methodology of the evaluation isn't so rigid that you can't accommodate things that come out of 'left field'.

We were supporting women in leadership and we used the 'most significant change' technique to really allow participants to reflect in an un-predetermined and inductive way around what was significant to them and how do they see the shifts. That's proving a really helpful way to get some insightful data.

"It's all about the 'who'," says VicHealth Research Practice Leader Dr Wei Leng Kwok. "We can ask 'why evaluate?', and that's important. But the question that needs to come before that is, 'Who is this evaluation for?'"

"Identifying who are the evaluation's primary intended users – their needs and their values – helps you determine the right approach, and helps ensure the evaluation's usefulness."

After all, says Dr Kwok, the best kind of evaluation for preventing violence against women initiatives is an evaluation that gets used.

"In the case of preventing violence against women initiatives, and indeed for any other social innovation program, the choice of one's evaluation approach can make all the difference between having useful information for practice and ending all work before the full effects of the effort (and its potential to influence change) are ever really known."

– Kwok WL 2013, *Evaluating preventing violence against women initiatives: A participatory and learning-oriented approach for primary prevention in Victoria*, VicHealth.

Challenge: what are the indicators?

In PVAW, clarity of understanding of outcomes such as 'gender equity' is hard to achieve.

It is difficult to arrive at a set of agreed definitions, indicators and measures in PVAW, which makes it difficult to have a shared understanding of 'what success looks like', and this is one of its key challenges.

We're all talking about developing more gender equitable environments, but having some clarity around what those indicators are would be good, so that we all know.

I think it's good to have those conversations around what the evaluation indicators could look like – whether we agree that the level of success for one organisation is similar to another.

Every implementation context is going to be different because our innovations in PVAW don't operate in laboratory-like conditions, says Dr Kwok.

The VicHealth *Framework to guide the primary prevention of violence against women* describes high-order kinds of changes but, when it comes to evaluation, creativity in developing your indicators is needed:

I'm thinking the useful tool is actually a process of creativity, and relaxation, around, "Yeah that's the right indicator for us because it's the appropriate one for our program. Rather than, "Where's the toolkit of every single indicator?" I don't know that could ever be achieved. Maybe the skill is in the creativity around indicator development.

Challenge: getting the balance right

Many practitioners find that it is a challenge to get the balance right between the 'doing' and the evaluating.

We can find ourselves in dual, or often multiple, roles: program designer, implementer and evaluator – a combination that is difficult to manage. There are competing demands, and multiple perspectives and multiple interests.

Not everyone is going to be skilled in all aspects of evaluation, so who is best placed to do it? It is not necessarily the project worker, say PVAW practitioners, and external evaluation isn't necessarily always the answer either.

Basically, if I loved writing the evaluation report as much as I loved delivering the program with the kids, I'd have a really awesome report right about now. But I don't do evaluation as well as I conduct focus groups. I love talking with the kids and hearing what they like and what they didn't like. I can spend an hour telling you about what I learned from the focus groups. Have I written it in a report? No, simply because I don't love it.

I don't love it, but I respect that evaluation is important and valuable.

It is clear that building evaluation capacity is needed, as well as fostering a culture for participatory and learning-oriented evaluation of initiatives for preventing violence against women. We need a culture that strongly encourages the sharing of skills and knowledge.

Fostering a culture of evaluation

Because this is an emerging field, we need better consistency in access to networks of practice, say PVAW practitioners.

To create our community of practice, we need more support – networking, mentoring, knowledge-sharing – and time to reflect.

We need an opportunity for professional support, coaching, mentoring and feedback in evaluation. More input. We need to be able to check-in with other people and troubleshoot and get ideas.

We need to ensure a culture of sharing, listening, and learning – that we encourage a culture of self-reflection.

The fact that so many people are saying, “We need more time and resources” makes it pretty clear that there isn’t a recognition of what’s involved in the evaluation process.

We need to ensure there’s a strong connection between evaluation and planning and implementation. We need to make sure there’s sufficient time invested in evaluations. An action learning approach is very important in evaluation because it allows for iteration, interaction, and reflection.

The good news is that the mosaic of cultural change is slowly growing.

We have the ground-breaking and indispensable piece of work that is the VicHealth PVAW framework, which not only gives us a theoretical understanding, but important information for practice direction.

This framework contains a coordinated, whole-of-community approach with a comprehensive range of mutually reinforcing strategies to promote non-violence, gender equity and respectful relationships. With this, gradual incremental change in PVAW is entirely possible.

We also have a growing sector of committed and skilled PVAW practitioners who are forming networks, sharing ideas and supporting each other. Together we are building the mosaic of cultural change that will lead, over time, to the prevention of violence against women before it occurs.

What do we need for our community of practice?

Some suggestions from PVAW practitioners:

- e-newsletters
- blogs and websites focusing on evaluation
- an evaluation guide including key questions
- more professional support, mentoring, and coaching
- more professional development e.g. workshops.

“Preventing violence against women before it occurs is a growing field of practice; therefore, one of the most important purposes of evaluation is to contribute to the growth of primary prevention as practice. Evaluation can do this by capturing the achievements and successes of current efforts (as well as the challenges and learnings) and sharing them for practice improvement. Improvement, in short, drives evaluation purpose.”

– Kwok WL 2013, *Evaluating preventing violence against women initiatives: A participatory and learning-oriented approach for primary prevention in Victoria*, VicHealth.

Useful resources

- Innovation Network Inc. 2005, *Logic Model Workbook* [available for download at: http://betterevaluation.org/resources/guides/outcome_chains/logic_model_workbook]
- Kwok, WL 2013, *Evaluating preventing violence against women initiatives: A participatory and learning-oriented approach for primary prevention in Victoria*, VicHealth [available from the VicHealth website: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/PVAW-evaluation-trends]
- VicHealth 2007, *Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria* [available from the VicHealth website: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Publications/Freedom-from-violence]
- VicHealth 2011, *The partnerships analysis tool: A resource for establishing, developing and maintaining partnerships for health promotion* [available from the VicHealth website: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/partnerships]
- VicHealth 2012, *The respect, responsibility and equality program: A summary report on five projects that build new knowledge to prevent violence against women* [available from the VicHealth website: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Publications/Freedom-from-violence/Respect-Responsibility-and-Equality-program-report]
- WK Kellogg Foundation (2004) *Logic Model Development Guide* [available for download at: <http://www.wkkf.org/resource-directory/resource/2006/02/wk-kellogg-foundation-logic-model-development-guide>]