

Briefing notes on the links between gender equality and preventing violence against women

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1. The promotion of gender equality as a strategy to prevent violence against women has been espoused by Australian violence prevention organisations for many years. This has been premised on the view that gender inequality is a major driver of violence against women.
2. Until recently, there has been no acknowledgement by violence prevention advocates in Australia that there are high levels of violence against women in the Nordic countries. These are countries which are presented as being gender-equal when compared to other countries around the globe.
3. Recent academic and popular commentaries have referred to the existence of gender equality and high levels of violence against women in the Nordic countries as the Nordic paradox. These notes address the issues raised for violence prevention in Australia.
4. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a wide recognition among feminist academics, activists and policy practitioners that patriarchy was the major cause of violence against women. There was significant push-back, primarily from men, to the concept of patriarchy and so the language of gender inequality was used instead. However, the language of gender inequality has not been able to capture the complexity and nuance of causal dynamics that the language of patriarchy enacted at multiple levels was able to advance.
5. There are many different understandings of what gender inequality (and consequently gender equality) means. The most common understandings, utilising the Gender Equality Index, involve equal rights, opportunities, responsibilities and access to resources and equal treatment of men and women in laws and policies. It is usually measured by socio-economic indicators such as income levels between men and women, levels of labour force participation, gender ratios of executives and managers, levels of educational attainment, and levels of political participation, including representation in parliaments. The question is whether these measures are adequate in assessing gender equality and consequently in determining how equal Nordic countries are.
6. The conventional measures of gender (in)equality are limited on many levels. Informed by (neo)liberal feminism, these measures only involve treating men and women equally within a patriarchal framework of gender relations. That is, they only aim to grant women's access

to some of the privileges available to men rather than aim to transform the structural roles of women and men. The equal treatment of men and women within patriarchal structures does not address the systemic inequalities in the structure of gender relations.

7. These measures of gender (in)equality do not address the perpetuation of the gendered division of labour in the private sphere. The focus of gender equality policies in the Nordic countries is primarily on the distribution of material goods and economic power measured by the social indicators noted earlier. Less attention was given to the cultural domination of men and masculinity over women and femininity and less attention was given to the gendered distribution of labour within the family and women's primary responsibility for domestic work and child care. So these equality measures do not address the daily interaction between men and women. Consequently, the Nordic countries are not as gender equal as they are believed to be.
8. These gender equality measures do not address intersectional issues related to class, race and ethnicity. Thus, they often fail to address gender-segregated labour markets where in male-dominated jobs men have higher status and pay. Many of these jobs are intersected with class, race and ethnicity. Gender segregation is still a major problem in Nordic countries.
9. Because of the lack of emphasis on cultural domination and the deeply internalised misogyny, sexism and sense of male entitlement among many men, these men are likely to resist greater gender equality in the public realm and many will use violence against women as one expression of their perceived loss of power. This is referred to as the 'backlash thesis'. Some regard this as only an initial unintended consequence of gender equality policies and that over time it is predicted that it will reverse. However, this does not seem to hold in relation to the Nordic countries where gender equality policies have been in place for some time.
10. Higher rates of reporting do not necessarily mean higher rates of violence against women. In more gender equal societies, women will feel more supported to report violence because there is less stigma and greater likelihood that some form of action will be taken to address it. Whereas in less gender equal societies, high levels of violence against women may not be recognised and reported.
11. Furthermore, in more gender unequal societies, where hierarchical gender relations are deeply embedded and not contested, patriarchal men may not need to resort to physical

violence to make demands upon women and to preserve male privilege. Hence, rates of physical violence against women are not the sole indicator of coercive control and men's domination of women.

12. Given that gendered analyses of men's violence against women are contested, anti-feminist and non-feminist commentators will use the so-called Nordic paradox to undermine feminist analyses more widely and argue that individualised and gender neutral approaches to prevention that focus on socio-economic vulnerability, mental ill-health, trauma, use of alcohol, stress and previous exposure to violence etc. should be given more attention over and above gendered power.
13. The contribution of factors other than gendered power towards men's violence against women should not be seen as undermining a gendered analysis. Rather it should be noted that these other factors are not gender neutral and that a feminist lens is necessary to understand how they play out in interactions between men and women.
14. The concept of the Nordic paradox itself should be contested as a framework for understanding violence against women in the Nordic countries. The concept of paradox implies that it is contradictory and contrary to one's expectations and that it is not explainable. Commentators often say things like. 'There's no clear answer.'. and 'It's hard to explain'. Whereas, if you understand the limits of neoliberal gender equality in these countries, the persistence of men's cultural domination, the gendered division of domestic labour and the entrenched gendered and class-based segregation of paid work, it is clear that significant dimensions of patriarchal power relations remain in place.
15. It is also important to emphasise that men's violence against women is itself a cause and a manifestation of inequality between men and women. So it is not possible to achieve gender equality if men's violence against women remains. Consequently, societies with high levels of violence against women cannot be considered gender equal.
16. Finally, because gender is a system of power within a hierarchical gender binary rather than just a form of sexual difference and socialised masculine and feminine roles, genuine equality between men and women (and gender diverse others) may mean that gender itself as a category of power may need to be dissolved.