

# **An Interview with Alan Berkowitz on Men's Role in Ending Violence Against Women**

**Centre for Leadership for Women  
([www.leadershipforwomen.com.au](http://www.leadershipforwomen.com.au))**

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DRH. Welcome to the CLW interview series. Thank you for agreeing to this interview.

AB I am honored that you asked me to be interviewed by the Centre, and I am happy to contribute whatever I can to your important work. One of the best ways that men can demonstrate leadership is by supporting the leadership of women, so thank you for giving me a chance to do this.

DRH. Can we start by hearing a bit about how you got involved in this work and why you choose to work in the area of preventing violence against women?

AB Social justice work has always been one of my passions. I grew up in a community where I was able to witness injustice and the unconscious racism of my neighbors and this made me want to do something to make a difference. I was also inspired by the Civil Rights movement and the political changes taking place in the United States in the 1960's. In the 1980's in my first job working in higher education I noticed that as a result of the feminist and women's movements there was a lot of attention being paid to the emotional needs and political consciousness of women, but almost no attention to the needs of men. Young men were confused, feeling on the defensive, and without an understanding of themselves as men and how they needed to change. As a result a colleague and I founded a program at Hobart College called "Men and Masculinity" that offered workshops and trainings for men about gender issues. One of the offshoots of this program was my work with men to prevent violence against women. This has been a critical element of my professional identity ever since.

DRH. I understand that one of your favourite sayings is: "You can't be part of the solution until you understand how you are part of the problem."

AB. Yes, it is. I have always felt that we have a responsibility to be active in creating the type of world we want to live in. This saying is actually a variation of one that was popular in the United States in the 1960's: "you're either part of the solution or part of the problem." I love the revised version of this quote for two reasons. First, it makes it clear that we have to change ourselves in order to create change in the world and that there will always be something in us that is "part of the problem." For example, as a man committed to ending sexism and violence against women I have had to learn about my unconscious sexism and male privilege, a process that is ongoing. Second, the revised version of the quote substitutes "both/and" thinking for "either/or" thinking. Either/or

thinking is responsible for many of our current problems and polarized discussions. The solutions that we need for many of the world's problems are "both/and" solutions. Unfortunately the leadership of my own country is currently one of the worst offenders in fostering "either/or" thinking.

DRH. In your consulting work, in which ways do you find that people are part of the problem?

AB. Well, this can take many forms. As I said, as men we need to begin to see our own sexism, with the help of women who are willing to be our allies, and use our privilege against itself. This is true for other oppressions as well – for instance, racism, heterosexism, classism, etc. Actually, most of what I will say here about men's role in ending violence against women will be true for other issues as well – whites ending racism, Christians ending anti-Semitism, etc. Often people are naive in how they approach a problem and think that they know the answer without having done their homework and without being accountable to the groups they are trying to help.

In my work on social norms theory we have found that many leaders hold misperceptions that contribute to the problem. For example, young people may think that their peers drink alcohol and have more sex than they really do, which causes pressure to engage in these behaviours. Yet the leaders who are trying to solve these problems are often guilty of believing and spreading the same misinformation about young people that contributes to the problem to begin with.

DRH. To what do you attribute a shift in the field of sexual assault prevention to address the role of men in ending violence against women? When did this shift occur?

AB. This shift has been taking place gradually over a period of years and is now gaining momentum and critical mass. Ending violence against women has always been seen as the province of women: first because all the original leaders on these issues were women; second, because women were skeptical about men's involvement, and third; because men did not step up to the plate to be part of the work. But seeing violence prevention as only the responsibility of women is an example of thinking that perpetuates the problem. Many women advocates and leaders have come to the understanding that it is important to have male partners in the work who can speak with and understand men. At the same time, men have become more aware of violence against women because of the many courageous survivors who have chosen to not be silent. So there is a growing awareness that men have a role to play in this issue, but that it must be alongside of and as accountable to women.

DRH. In many of your writings you have argued that men underestimate the extent to which other men are uncomfortable with sexist behaviour towards women? What problem does this pose for men and why do you advocate strategies to reduce this discomfort amongst men?

AB. In my own personal experience there have been many times when I was uncomfortable with oppressive behaviour and was silent because I thought that it did not bother others. One of the beautiful things that can happen in an all-male workshop with

honest dialogue is that men will come “out of the closet” and express their discomfort with some men’s behaviour. This experience led me to design survey questions that ask men how uncomfortable they are with certain situations, and how uncomfortable they think that their male peers are with the same situations. We almost always find that men are uncomfortable but think that their peers are not. Many others have replicated this research and it has been extended to other issues such as racism and homophobia.

DRH. What is the Social Norms Theory and why do you believe that social norms interventions focusing on peer influences, have a greater impact on individual behaviour than biological, personality, familial, religious, cultural and other influences?

AB. The example I just gave of men thinking that other men are not uncomfortable is an example of social norms theory. Social norms theory says that we often misperceive what others think and do. For example, people tend to overestimate unhealthy behaviours and underestimate healthy behaviours in groups that they belong to. These misperceptions then have an effect on what people do. In one study that I conducted with colleagues we found that men underestimated other men’s willingness to intervene to prevent sexual assault and that the single biggest predictor of men’s willingness to intervene was whether they thought other men would intervene. This finding reveals the reason why men’s programming is effective – because the biggest influence on men is other men. This is due to sexism and men’s not taking women seriously. The idea is to use this reality against itself in order to change it.

One of the reasons why correcting misperceptions is effective is because they are easier to change than the other influences you mention – personality, family, etc.

DRH. How do you use the Social Norms Approach to assist men develop into women’s social justice allies in ending violence? What has been the level of success of this approach?

AB. In the United States the social norms approach has been very effective in addressing alcohol use, cigarette use, driving while intoxicated, and driving without seatbelts. It has been used in Canada and the Great Britain. For those who are interested there is a summary of the social norms literature on my website, [www.alanberkowitz.com](http://www.alanberkowitz.com). This approach is also being used to address violence against women and there are indications that it can be effective. Most of this research is still in the formative stage but I feel that it is promising.

The idea behind the social norms approach is that misperceptions influence how we act. For example, if I would like to act differently as a man my willingness to do so may be influenced by how I think other men will react. Information that other men actually feel the way that I do will give me permission to try new behaviours. The social norms approach offers a methodology for providing information about true norms – in this case, what men actually feel- in the form of group discussions or social marketing media.

By the way, there is an interesting way of looking at male socialization from a social norms perspective. It turns out that most men are uncomfortable with many of the ways that we have been taught to be men, but we think that we are alone in our discomfort.

For example, a man might think that it is ok for a man to express sadness, but he will refrain from doing so if he incorrectly thinks that other men don't agree. So telling men the truth about what men feel gives us permission to act differently than we have been taught to act as men.

DRH. What types of programmes do you offer that focus on men's role in preventing violence against women and what is their structure? Do you run programmes for men who perpetrate domestic violence?

AB. Most of my work is as a consultant helping others develop effective programs on health and social justice issues. This can take the form of designing effective rape prevention workshops for men, or helping in the design and implementation of media campaigns that provide men with accurate information about what other men do. Because most of my work is in the area of prevention I don't usually work with perpetrators.

DRH. Do men voluntarily join your programs when promoted or are they recommended to join by a third party working with them?

AB. One of the dilemmas in working with men is that most of us don't begin by seeing ourselves doing this work. So we need to be invited in. This can take place by being nominated by a man we respect, by learning about violence against women from women we care about, or by attending a required workshop that opens our eyes to the problem. Many men want to do the right thing and will be receptive to helping if they are recruited as allies and approached with respect rather than guilt and/or blame.

DRH. In terms of the programme focus, which focus have you found most beneficial for participants: building empathy towards victims, the development of personal skills, learning to intervene in other men's behaviour, re-socialization of male culture and behaviour?

AB. Well, you just gave a great list of the different approaches to working with men! They are all effective in different ways, but some ask men to change more than others. For example, it is important that men have empathy for victims and understand the trauma of victimization, but this approach can leave men in the role of wanting to help women without changing ourselves. Similarly, we all need to have the personal skills to ensure that sexual intimacy with a man or woman is consenting, so this is essential, but having these skills only prevents someone from being a perpetrator, it doesn't help them to change others. So teaching men to intervene against the problematic behaviour of other men is critical to social change and it is essential because men care so much about what other men think. Finally, since part of the problem is with how men are socialized to be men, any programme examining gender socialization is valuable.

These approaches can be ranked according to how deeply they take men into the process of understanding ourselves "as part of the problem" and how they help us make the necessary changes.

DRH. How have you worked with the media to change the larger environment?

AB. The social norms approach was originally developed using media as a way of announcing the true norm. In many countries including Australia there are creative uses of media to educate men about their role in preventing violence against women: for example, the “Violence Against Women –It’s Against All the Rules” and the “Violence Against Women – Australia Says No” campaigns.. When this media includes statistics about what men actually feel and/or do then it is considered “social norms marketing” media. These statistics let men know that other men like them care about these issues and will support them in taking action.

DRH. In the all-male rape prevention programs that you have conducted, do you find that such programs are more effective when conducted in separate gender groups than in co-educational formats? Why?

AB. Most of the research addressing this subject has been conducted in the United States with college students. The findings are clear – both men and women benefit more in separate gender groups. This is because men and women start out with different levels of awareness of the issue, have different learning goals, and are more comfortable discussing the issue with their same-gender peers. This has also been my experience conducting many all-male workshops. There is also value in co-educational workshops and these can help foster dialogue and present each gender with the other’s perspective. But my personal experience and the accumulated research suggest that it is better when possible to start this work in separate gender groups. This is parallel to the experience of the women’s movement, which began with all-female consciousness raising groups.

DRH. How do you get University students to understand and observe the Guidelines you advocate for consent in intimate relationships and in particular that they are free to choose not only at the initial point for sexual intimacy but also at ensuing points of interaction?

AB. I have found that the best way to get young people to understand how to ensure consent is to present them with ambiguous scenario’s in which it is not clear if consent is present. We then discuss these scenario’s and the men present have vigorous discussions presenting their points of view about the presence or absence of consent. When men see that there are a variety of opinions among other men it gets them thinking and re-examining their own assumptions. For those who are interested, there is an article on my website that outlines these consent guidelines.

DRH. With researchers who study the male gender role finding that masculinity is often defined in opposition to femininity -which is devalued or seen as less desirable- are you satisfied with the approaches of the American education system to socialize boys to value the female sex and their own feminine qualities?

AB. This is one of those “both/and” discussions. I believe that as part of our human inheritance we have both “female” and “male” qualities within each of us. Our full emotional and spiritual development as human beings requires that we develop both of these and find a balance between them that works, which will be different for each person. Because men have been taught to de-value and neglect our feminine side, it is important that we learn to accept it and express it. As we value the feminine inside of

ourselves we will also learn to respect the feminine outside of us, and vice-versa. Even as I say this I can feel a certain discomfort within myself in talking about my feminine side. This is because men's socialization to devalue the feminine is so deep that it feels awkward to me as a man to talk about my femininity. This is another good example of a situation where either/or thinking (male or female) needs to be replaced with both/and thinking (male and female).

DRH. What are some of the frustrations and highlights of working in this field?

AB. The highlight is that I am a better human being as a result of this work. We often tell men that they need to care about violence against women because it hurts the women we care about. This is true but what we often forget to say is that it hurts us as well. When a woman walks across the street because she is afraid of me she is making a good decision but I feel bad being seen as dangerous. Violence against women therefore hurts me directly and not only indirectly. All of us want to be effective and make a difference. One of my great blessings is that I have been given the opportunity to make a difference by helping men take responsibility for ending violence against women. Another highlight is the tremendous progress we have made in figuring out how to involve and engage men. We have very far to go but we can still appreciate where we have come from. The frustration, of course, is that there is so much to do and the problem is immense. It is a great spiritual challenge to maintain optimism and faith in the face of so much injustice. My spiritual mentors have taught me that it is possible to remain positive, effective, and joyful in the face of overwhelming challenges. It feels right to end this interview by acknowledging their great influence in my life.

Alan Berkowitz is an independent consultant who helps colleges, universities, public health agencies and communities design programs that address health and social justice issues. His expert opinion is frequently sought after by the U.S. government and professional organizations, and he is well-known for scholarship and innovative programs addressing issues of substance abuse, sexual assault, gender, social norms, and diversity. Alan has developed model rape prevention programs for men and programs on men's issues, is a co-founder of the Social Norms Approach, and is the editor and founder of The Report on Social Norms. He received a Ph.D. in Psychology from Cornell University in 1981 and has received five national awards for his professional contributions and activities. More information about Alan and his work can be found at [www.alanberkowitz.com](http://www.alanberkowitz.com)

Diann Rodgers-Healey, who conducted this interview, is the founder of the Australian Centre for Leadership for Women. Diann has conducted extensive interviews with well-known leaders – mostly women- that are posted on the Centre's website, and she has written extensively and produced programs on women as leaders. Diann also works as a strategic planning consultant for schools and organizations to help them develop vision, mission and core principles, and provides leadership, guidance and coaching to individuals. More information about Diann can be found at [www.leadershipforwomen.com.au](http://www.leadershipforwomen.com.au).