Respondent Remarks, Peace in Our Cities Panel Discussion on Men, Masculinities and Violence Prevention, March 12, 2026 by Dean Peacock[1]

Executive Summary

This paper was originally prepared as respondent remarks for a Peace in Our Cities panel discussion on men, masculinities, and violence prevention held on 12 March 2026, in response to presentations by Alba Alfageme Casanov (Government of Catalonia) and Sara Serin-Christ (City of Oakland). Rachel Locke (Peace in Our Cities) provided introductory remarks. The paper was subsequently expanded to incorporate supporting research and comparative evidence.

My remarks highlight the importance of engaging men in violence prevention while also emphasising the need to situate gender norms within a broader set of structural, political, and commercial drivers of violence. Drawing on research from South Africa and other international contexts, the paper argues that effective violence prevention requires a systems approach that combines efforts to transform harmful gender norms with policies addressing the material and contextual conditions that increase the likelihood of violence.

Several key arguments are advanced.

First, engaging men within institutions is essential. Norms about masculinity shape the cultures of key institutions—including police services, security sectors, workplaces, and political leadership—where expectations of dominance, risk-taking, and emotional suppression can normalize aggression and exclusion. Initiatives that engage male leaders as allies, such as International Gender Champions and Champions for Change, demonstrate how institutional leadership can play an important role in shifting workplace culture and advancing gender equality.

Second, gender norms do influence violence, but they are not the only driver. Research consistently shows that endorsement of gender inequitable ideas about manhood is associated with harmful behaviors including violence, harassment, risky drinking, and gun ownership. However, interventions that focus exclusively on changing harmful gender norms are difficult to scale and often overlook other factors that interact with gender norms to shape violence.

Third, structural determinants play a major role in men's use of violence. Evidence from studies in South Africa and elsewhere shows that factors such as childhood exposure to violence, food insecurity, alcohol use, depression, and unsafe environments can be as important—or more

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important—than attitudes about gender roles alone. These conditions interact with gender norms to increase the risk of violence.

Fourth, policy frameworks frequently overlook key drivers and facilitators of violence. Many global and national strategies emphasize changing harmful gender norms while giving insufficient attention to other major contributors to violence, including poverty, alcohol availability, firearm access, trauma, , access to open spaces, and the lack of key support services.

Fifth, commercial interests can exploit narratives about masculinity to deflect regulation. Industries producing harmful commodities—including alcohol, gambling, tobacco, and firearms—have historically framed violence and other harms as the result of aggressive male culture or irresponsible individuals, thereby shifting attention away from regulatory measures that would reduce harm.

Sixth, debates about accountability and impunity often assume that stronger criminal legal sanctions are the primary solution. However, research with survivors of violence shows that many prioritize prevention, healing, safety, and economic security rather than harsher punishment alone. Comparative experience from countries including India, Brazil, and South Africa suggests that expanding criminal penalties without addressing structural drivers and institutional failures rarely produces meaningful reductions in violence.

Taken together, these findings suggest that violence prevention requires a multisectoral systems approach. Cities can play a central role by strengthening collaboration across sectors—including health, education, urban planning, policing, housing, and social services—and by implementing policies that address the broader determinants of violence.

Effective prevention therefore requires a dual strategy: continuing to challenge harmful norms about manhood while simultaneously addressing structural drivers such as trauma exposure, poverty and food insecurity, alcohol availability, firearm access, institutional failures, and economic inequality. Only by acting across this wider system can cities achieve sustained population-level reductions in violence.

Respondent comments:

Thanks so much for this opportunity to respond to the excellent presentations made by Sara and Alba. As you indicated, Rachel, it is indeed a privilege to be able to respond to and reflect on two such rich presentations.

Following Sara's lead, I too am going to show a picture of Cape Town. It's an area right near my house where members of Cape Town's large Muslim community are sitting together and breaking the day's Ramadan fast, sharing Iftar as the sun sets over the Atlantic Ocean in this city I love so much. It's a powerful example of what multi-culturalism and freedom of religion looks like. It stands in stark contrast to the violence being inflicted on mostly Muslim communities in Gaza, Iran, and Lebanon currently, and to the racist rhetoric of politicians like Republican Representative Andy Ogles of Tennessee who stated that "Muslims don't belong in American society" and argued that "pluralism is a lie".

Cape Town is a complicated city, though. Many of the families celebrating Iftar will return to communities where violence is endemic. Sara mentioned that Oakland recorded just under 500 homicides last year. In Cape Town, we are currently experiencing about 3,000-3,500 homicides a year

(Matzopoulos et al., 2022; South African Police Service, 2024). This is a number that's increased dramatically for a variety of reasons—mostly to do with the influx of weapons, many diverted from the police armoury and sold to gang members here in Cape Town. Others were stolen from licensed gun owners, blurring the line between legal and illicit weapons (Gould & Lamb, 2017; Shaw & Kriegler, 2018). While gun violence against women is indeed a major problem—guns are now the main weapon used to commit femicide (Abrahams et al., 2022)—it is nonetheless overwhelmingly concentrated among men: roughly 85–90% of murder victims are male, with the highest risk borne by young men in a small number of high-violence neighbourhoods on the Cape Flats (Matzopoulos et al., 2022). This pattern is deeply shaped by the city's history of spatial exclusion—rooted in Group Areas Act, forced removals from areas such as District Six, and the enduring geography of apartheid-era land dispossession—which concentrated poverty, limited opportunity, and entrenched marginalisation in townships where violence today falls disproportionately on young Black and "coloured" men.

I want to make four main points today.

Firstly, as Alba has indicated, it's vitally important that men in key city institutions step forward to work with women as allies. How it's done is important.

Secondly, gender norms do indeed play an important role in shaping men's use or endorsement of violence. And interventions aimed at changing harmful gender norms can be effective. Multiple RCTs show us that. However, as Sara pointed out in her presentation on Oakland's school-based trainers, such interventions require a skilled workforce, they're costly, they're often difficult to replicate, and they've proven very difficult to implement at scale (Stern et al 2023).

Thirdly, a growing body of research indicates that other factors interact with gender norms in important ways and are sometimes as important in contributing to men's violence as gender norms, sometimes even more so.

Fourth, it's often easier for local or national governments to address some of these other political, social and commercial factors of violence than to double down on tough on crime approaches.

So, let me get started with the first point.

First, Alba's presentation brings critical attention to the role of men in key institutions. As she points out, harmful notions of manhood are not only expressed in personal relationships; they are often embedded in organizational cultures — including, as she indicated, in police, security, and emergency services where hegemonic masculinities are aspired to. These institutions shape how violence is understood, whose safety is prioritized, and how public space is governed and experienced.

A growing body of research also highlights what scholars call **"masculinity contest cultures"** in workplaces (Berdahl, et al, 2018). In these environments, people are rewarded for dominance, competitiveness, risk-taking, and emotional suppression, while collaboration and care are undervalued. These dynamics can normalize aggression, silence dissent, and create institutional cultures that tolerate harassment or exclusion.

Alba's comments captured the ways in which hegemonic masculinities affect workplace culture and public spaces, and she described the different impacts this has on people of different genders. Sexual harassment and disregard for women's safety in the workplace and public spaces remain massive

problems, even in the wake of MeToo. As Alba indicates, research shows that higher proportions of women in positions of leadership within the workplace are associated with decreased sexual harassment. However, ongoing sexual harassment limits women's opportunities to advance. It's an issue that requires urgent attention and models like the International Gender Champions and Champions for Change are important potential models.

The International Gender Champions initiative now includes hundreds of CEOs—many men--across UN agencies, governments, and the private sector. Each "gender champion" commits to at least three concrete actions — advancing gender-equitable hiring and promotion practices, strengthening policies to prevent harassment and discrimination, and using their public leadership to champion gender equality. Importantly, those commitments are publicly tracked and monitored.

Similarly, initiatives like the Australian Champions for Change started by Elizabeth Broderick, the former UN Special Representative on Discrimination against Women and Girls, bring senior male leaders from the corporate sector together to challenge gender inequality within their own companies and industries.

These kinds of efforts show that engaging men as institutional allies — particularly those in leadership positions — can help advance gender equity and shift norms at scale.

So engaging men within institutions is essential. But how we do it matters.

The University of Calgary's SHIFT Project to engage men in ending domestic violence explores the tensions between "calling in" versus "calling out", in other words the difference between more confrontational naming and shaming strategies compared to those that attempt to understand people's current position and context and then engage in respectful dialogue to increase their receptivity to new ways of understanding and responding to a given issue (Pascoe & Wells, 2022).

Lana Wells and Laura Pascoe at SHIFT cite gender equality and civil rights activist Loretta Ross who "explains that calling out, through shaming and blaming, invites people to a fight, not a conversation, which limits opportunities for growth and connection." Building on this, they emphasise the "necessity of recognizing that where one wants people to be may differ from where people actually are" (2022).

Engaging men in parenting and caregiving is also an important entry point that often defuses defensiveness. These can include expanded parental leave, as well as leave for other forms of caregiving and state funded child-care. The Global MenCare Campaign's 50/50 pledge is one such approach. It recommends: Equal, Paid, Non-Transferable Parental Leave and Family-Friendly Workplaces with flexible hours, remote work options, and, where possible, on-site childcare or breastfeeding facilities. Here, policy levers can be augmented by communications campaigns and gender equality education at schools.

Then, the second main point I want to make is about gender norms and what they mean for violence prevention. I'm in full agreement with Alba that gender norms and ideas about manhood are critically important to analyse in the context of violence prevention, whether in urban or rural settings. The International Men and Gender Equality Study, or IMAGES, shows that stronger endorsement of inequitable and violence-supportive ideas of manhood is associated with a cluster of harmful practices, including bullying, sexual harassment, the use of violence, excessive drinking,

ownership or intention to own a gun, and poorer health outcomes (Barker et al., 2011; Levtov et al., 2015). Many other studies do too.

A recent report from UNDP SEESAC examining demand factors driving gun ownership in the Western Balkans reached a similar conclusion. It identified cultural ideas about manhood as one of the most significant drivers of firearm demand, and highlighted digital media as a major influence shaping those norms (UNDP & SEESAC, 2025).

So, there is lots of evidence that gender norms matter.

However, there are two important caveats that should inform how we approach this work.

First, we sometimes overestimate the independent explanatory power of gender norms relative to other factors shaping men's choices and behaviours, including violence.

Second, and relatedly, our violence prevention initiatives mostly pay insufficient attention to the broader forces that shape gender norms themselves, and we do too little to address those structural drivers.

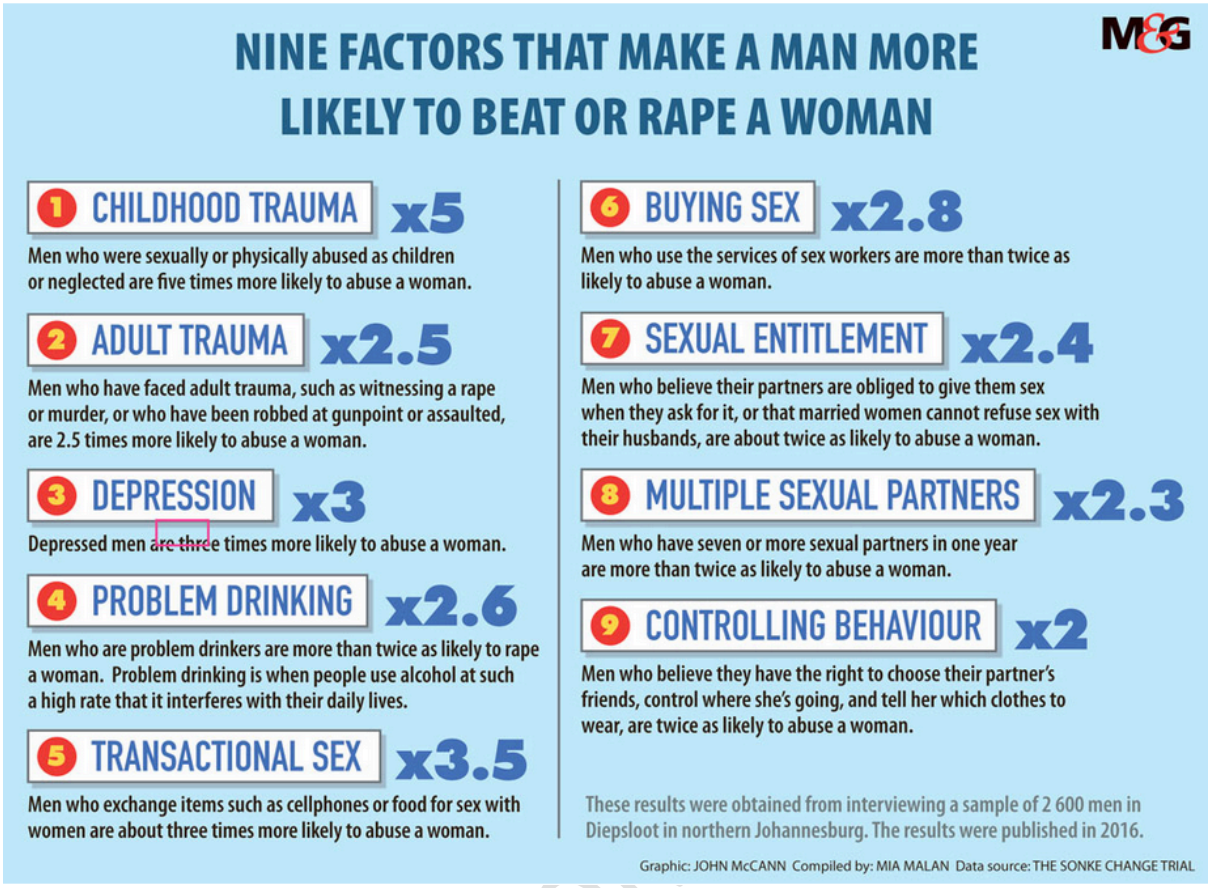
Let me briefly illustrate what I mean.

Several years ago, when I was at Sonke Gender Justice, we partnered with the University of Witwatersrand to conduct a large baseline study in Diepsloot, an informal settlement outside Johannesburg, to better understand the drivers of men's violence. Funded by the UK Government's What Works to End Violence Against Women initiative, we examined gender norms, but we also included measures of childhood exposure to violence, alcohol use, mental health, food insecurity, employment, and housing conditions. We also looked at aspects of the built environment, including access to parks and open spaces, sanitation, the availability of mental health services, and liquor outlet density (Christofides et al, 2018).

An important finding from the study is that several variables commonly assumed to drive men's violence—including gender inequitable attitudes, lower education, migrant status, and unemployment—lose statistical significance once structural and relational factors are included in the model. While these factors appear significant when examined individually, their association with IPV is largely explained by other conditions such as food insecurity, depression, alcohol use, and relationship dynamics. This suggests that some of the factors often highlighted in violence prevention—particularly gender attitudes alone—may operate through broader structural stresses and psychosocial conditions rather than acting as independent drivers of violence (Hatcher et al, 2019).

- Men experiencing hunger and food insecurity were also about twice as likely to use violence (Hatcher et al, 2022).
- Men who drank excessively were twice as likely to engage in violence against women.
- Men with probable depression were three times more likely to report using violence.
- And men who had experienced violence in childhood were fully five times more likely to have engaged in recent violence against women.

Our Diepsloot findings generated significant media interest and were usefully summarised by the Mail and Guardian, one of South Africa's most reputable news outlets (Malan, 2016 & 2017).



Or as captured in a paper led by Abigail Hatcher titled Pathways from Food Insecurity to Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration Among Peri-Urban Men in South Africa (Hatcher, 2019):

Table 2. Adjusted Associations Between Predictors and Men's Use of Recent Intimate Partner Violence

		Recent physical/sexual IPV		
Variable	**OR (95% CI)**	**Model 1 AOR (95% CI)**	**Model 2 AOR (95% CI)**	**Model 3 AOR (95% CI)**
Sociodemographics				
Age, years	**0.96 (0.93, 0.96)*** **	**0.95 (0.94, 0.97)*** **	**0.95 (0.92, 0.95)*** **	**0.95 (0.92, 0.97)*** **
High school education	**0.81 (0.62, 0.99)***	**0.81 (0.59, 0.99)***	0.88 (0.63, 1.10)	**0.88 (0.59, 1.11)***
Migrant	**0.69 (0.59, 0.87)****	**0.73 (0.66, 1.00)***	**0.75 (0.62, 0.97)***	0.65 (0.59, 1.10)
Poverty				
Unemployed	0.83 (0.74, 1.03)	0.88 (0.72, 1.09)	0.89 (0.79, 1.19)	0.88 (0.80, 1.21)
Food insecure	**2.15 (1.73, 2.66)*** **	**2.18 (1.75, 2.54)*** **	**1.89 (1.53, 2.32)*** **	**1.66 (1.31, 2.11)*** **
Relationship characteristics				
Live together	1.05 (0.88, 1.25)	—	**1.29 (1.24, 1.88)***	**1.44 (1.13, 1.93)****
Past-year quarrels	**1.82 (1.50, 2.13)*** **	—	**1.73 (1.43, 2.18)*** **	**1.36 (1.31, 2.06)***
Controlling	**2.11 (1.87, 2.75)*** **	—	**1.82 (1.39, 2.25)*** **	**1.79 (1.36, 2.21)*** **
Gender inequitable	**1.62 (1.50, 2.23)*** **	—	1.19 (1.14, 1.78)	1.16 (0.88, 1.51)
Mental health				
Probable depression	**2.56 (2.02, 3.25)*** **	—	—	**2.08 (1.59, 2.70)*** **
Problem drinking	**2.29 (1.79, 2.73)*** **	—	—	**1.75 (1.38, 2.24)*** **

Note: Boldface indicates statistical significance (*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$). All models adjust for clustering by neighborhood.
IPV, intimate partner violence.

Despite this, our intervention focused almost exclusively on changing gender norms. Meanwhile, in the broader community there were almost no mental health providers, little to no enforcement of alcohol regulations, and very few recreational facilities or safe public spaces.

These findings are consistent with recent research conducted in Southeast Asia which similarly challenges our assumption that men use violence because they think it demonstrates desirable and socially affirmed hegemonic ideals. Robert Nagel's research showed that men in armed groups did not endorse the norm that the use of violence was associated with ideals of manhood. "Violence" he found "does not appear as a core quality of men's understanding of or investment in masculinity." They concluded that in all three of the study sites, "men consider being capable of violence the least important quality for being a man." (Nagel et al, 2023). Henri Myrttinen's research with ex combatants in Timor Leste similarly concluded "Almost literally to a man, they denied their participation in violence, tried to reframe the acts as being legitimated by something else (e.g. self-defence), cast themselves as being non-violent, and/or as having been manipulated into committing violence. Whether or not these assertions were truthful or disingenuous is irrelevant to the point that they clearly did not celebrate violence as being part of their masculine identity, often highlighting their own sense of victimhood instead".

A second example comes from a large and very expensive randomized controlled trial that evaluated an intervention designed to increase men's use of HIV services. We believed men were not seeking health services because of gender norms such as for men, getting sick is a sign of weakness, or a man shouldn't go to the doctor unless his situation is serious, or health clinics are for women and children. As the image below demonstrates (Project Soar, 2018), survey work to test endorsement of these norms revealed that few people actually believed in them (Pulerwitz et al, 2019). In other words, we had built an intervention around a set of assumed gender norms that turned out not to be widely held. And we paid insufficient attention to the factors that were most relevant—like health service delivery.

Men's toughness and avoidance of help-seeking	Women %	Men %
For men, getting sick is a sign of weakness.	27	26
A man shouldn't go to the doctor unless his situation is serious.	13	18
Health clinics are for women and children.	16	16

One of the most important recent syntheses of evidence on the factors behind men's violence against women comes from the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls programme—one of the largest multi-country research initiatives in this field, led by some of the most respected GBV researchers globally. Their analysis shows that gender norms are often not strong predictors of men's violence against women once other conditions are taken into account.

And this is important, so let me emphasise it: one of the key empirical findings from the What Works studies is that men's gender attitudes were inconsistently associated with men's perpetration IPV. In some multivariable models, they dropped out entirely as significant predictors. They point out that this is consistent with findings from an earlier large UN Multi-Country Study on Men and Violence across Asia and the Pacific where men's stated beliefs about gender were only clearly associated with violence in two of the six countries studied (Jewkes et al, 2013).

Their analysis of the What Works data points instead to three overlapping drivers: gender inequality, poverty and the normalization of violence. Their findings suggest that what we often describe as "drivers"—things like alcohol use, poor mental health, or childhood trauma—are better understood as part of the pathway through which these structural conditions lead to violence. In other words, they help explain how violence happens, rather than being the root causes themselves. As an example, chronic food insecurity — a concrete, measurable form of poverty — consistently shows up across studies in both rich and poor countries as a direct trigger of violence, in part because hunger increases stress, fuels arguments over scarce resources, and physiologically impairs people's ability to manage their emotions. The findings are clear: measuring only gender attitudes, while overlooking structural stressors and individual-level pathways, will consistently underestimate what it actually takes to reduce violence (Gibbs et al., 2020).

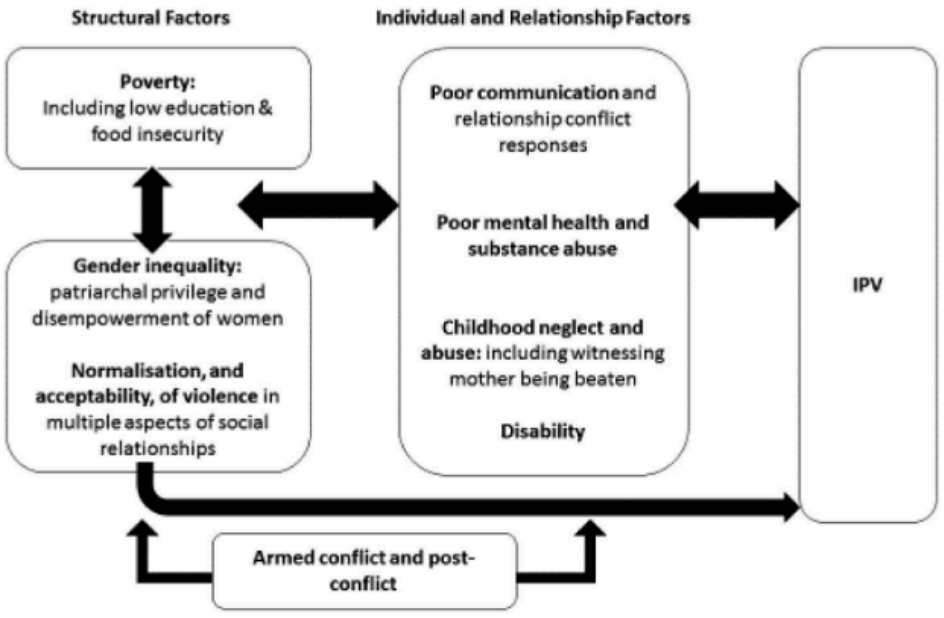


Figure 1. Drivers of IPV.

Recent debates in Australia about what constitute the key factors behind men's violence and what Australia's National Action Plan on GBV should do to address them illustrate the tensions in the field. A prominent recent intervention by Jess Hill and Michael Salter argued that Australia's prevention efforts are overly focused on gender inequality and norms change, and that this emphasis has not delivered the reductions in violence that might have been expected. They call for greater attention to factors such as trauma, socioeconomic conditions, perpetrator accountability, and the role of alcohol, as well as more targeted rather than primarily universal approaches. Others, however, have pushed back on this critique. What is striking, however, is that even in responses defending current frameworks, there has been limited engagement with emerging multi-country evidence--such as the

What Works and UN multi-country studies-- that complicate how we understand the relative weight of different drivers and find that gender attitudes themselves are often inconsistent predictors of violence once other conditions are taken into account.

This lack of attention to other, often more salient, drivers of men's violence is also reflected in the way major global institutions frame the problem of men's violence.

For example, the World Health Organization's RESPECT and INSPIRE frameworks for ending violence against women and against children focus heavily on shifting gender norms. They both mention alcohol but mostly omit gun violence (Peacock et al, 2025). Similarly, PAHO reports on adolescent health in the Americas and on masculinities and men's health in the Caribbean barely mention firearms, despite the fact that gun violence is the leading cause of death for young men in many countries across the Americas and the Caribbean and the primary means used to commit femicide. The PAHO Strategic Plan 2020–2025 contains only a single reference to firearms, and that reference appears in a footnote.

What global health institutions measure and recommend shapes national approaches—as we've seen here in South Africa where our National Strategic Plan on Gender Based Violence and Femicide fails to mention the leading mechanism for femicide and a tool widely used to assert coercive control: firearms.

Before I sum up and list concrete multisectoral strategies that have shown promise in reducing levels of violence, I did want to comment on one of the images in Alba's presentation: the now iconic photograph "Lunch Atop a Skyscraper," which was taken in 1932 during construction of the Rockefeller Center. It captures a group of ironworkers casually eating lunch while sitting on a steel beam high above Manhattan. Although the image appears spontaneous, it was staged as part of a publicity shoot promoting the new development, with workers posing for a series of dramatic photographs designed for newspapers. Yet the risks depicted were very real. In the early decades of skyscraper construction, safety harnesses, guardrails, and modern occupational protections were largely absent, and construction injuries and deaths were common.

The men in the photograph were typical of the workers who built New York's skyline—many were immigrant or working-class labourers, including Irish and Indigenous Mohawk ironworkers, who took on extremely dangerous jobs in order to earn relatively stable wages and support their families. Their calm posture and camaraderie in the image reflect the occupational culture of high-steel work, where toughness, composure in the face of danger, and solidarity among crews were valued traits.

At the same time, the photograph can obscure the systemic nature of the risks these men were exposed to by industry disregard for their safety—just as was the case for mineworkers in South

Africa who were routinely killed in mine shaft collapses or died slowly and painfully from silicosis because of industry disregard but were celebrated in photography and art for their stoicism.

Images like *Lunch Atop a Skyscraper* helped construct a cultural narrative of heroic masculinity in dangerous work while drawing little attention to the lack of safety protections or to employers' responsibility for workplace hazards.

The photograph also needs to be understood in the economic context of the Great Depression. With unemployment extraordinarily high in the early 1930s, construction jobs on projects like Rockefeller Center were prized opportunities, even when they involved extreme danger. For many workers, the choice was not between safe and dangerous work, but between dangerous work and no work at all.

Taken together, the image is powerful precisely because it sits at the intersection of several realities: the norms of masculine toughness that developed in high-risk labour cultures, the very real dangers that construction workers faced, the staged nature of the photograph as promotional imagery, and the economic pressures that pushed many working-class men into hazardous occupations in order to sustain their families during one of the harshest economic crises of the twentieth century. It serves as a powerful example of the multiple forces—gender, race, class, migration status, power differentials between workers and employers, etc.—that constrain choice, shape risk and generate harm for some and wealth for others.

Without belabouring the point, the photo captures a reality of forced risk that remains true today: men account for the 85–90% of occupational fatalities and a large majority of occupational injury, while women account for a smaller share of fatalities but a substantial share of certain occupational illnesses (International Labour Organization, 2023).

The pattern reflects gendered labour markets, occupational segregation, successful efforts to weaken unions, corporate efforts to limit regulations, and differences in exposure to hazardous work, and these in turn establish and exploit gender norms of masculinity and femininity. Just like advocates working to advance occupational safety, those of us involved in violence prevention must address these complex factors.

Two cautions about hijacking: of a masculinities framework by corporate interests and an accountability framework by carceral approaches.

First Caution: Commercial interests and the hijacking of a masculinities framework.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of norms about masculinities, we should also pay careful attention to the ways in which industry has and can hijack these ideas to deflect attention from the social harms caused by their products, including violence.

Across several sectors producing harmful commodities, industries have strategically mobilised narratives about masculinity and male behaviour to shift attention away from regulatory interventions that threaten profits. In the alcohol sector, for example, the industry-funded report by Anne Fox argued that violence in night-time economies reflects "violent individuals" and cultures of aggressive masculinity rather than alcohol itself, recommending interventions focused on changing male behaviour and social norms rather than restricting alcohol availability or marketing (Fox, 2015). Critics have shown that this framing downplays a large body of epidemiological evidence linking alcohol price, outlet density, and trading hours to violence, and instead promotes educational and

social marketing approaches consistent with long-standing industry strategies emphasising individual responsibility (Jackson & Kypri, 2016).

Similar dynamics appear in other industries. Research on the commercial determinants of gambling harm shows that gambling companies frequently frame excessive gambling as the result of impulsive young men or "problem gamblers," while deflecting attention from product design features such as continuous betting, inducements, and targeted sports marketing that increase addiction risk (Livingstone & Adams, 2011; Cassidy, 2020). In the firearms sector, advertising and advocacy often invoke the figure of the responsible male protector, while violence is attributed to deviant men rather than the availability or lethality of firearms themselves (Carlson, 2015; Yamane, 2017). Tobacco industry messaging historically used similar tactics, framing smoking as an expression of masculine freedom and later emphasising individual choice to deflect attention from the addictive properties of nicotine and the industry's marketing practices (Brandt, 2007).

Taken together, these examples illustrate a broader pattern identified in research on the commercial determinants of health: by attributing harms to aggressive masculinity, risky male cultures, or irresponsible individuals, industries can acknowledge the existence of social problems while diverting political attention away from regulatory measures—such as pricing policies, marketing restrictions, or product regulation—that would reduce consumption and threaten commercial interests.

Second Caution: Hijacking of feminist activism for accountability and an end to impunity for GBV by the carceral state.

Our panel today has not focused explicitly on questions of accountability and impunity. I'd like to say a few words on this critically important issue drawing on key research and examples from around the world, including Oakland. I will also reflect on concerns I have held for a while now about some of the work I developed while building the Men Overcoming Violence Youth Program in San Francisco in the 1990s.

Wherever I've worked on GBV, key demands articulated by GBV focused organisations have been an end to impunity, survivor safety, and accountability for perpetrators. Accountability is such an important concept that it has been stretched to mean almost all things to all people. I want to suggest today that we need to be more reflective about what we mean by accountability and to whom. Because very often, when people raise accountability in relation to gender-based violence, there's an unstated assumption sitting underneath the discussion — namely, that what is wanted and needed is more arrests, more prosecutions, and more incarceration. That is often where the conversation goes almost automatically. But when you look at the research on what survivors themselves actually say they want, that assumption starts to look much less secure.

Research with survivors of gender-based violence suggests that what survivors want from justice systems is often more complex than punishment alone. Many prioritise safety, acknowledgement of harm, and assurance that the violence will stop, while still valuing accountability; survivors of intimate partner violence, for example, may sometimes favour approaches that end the abuse without necessarily imprisoning a partner with whom they share children or economic ties, while survivors of sexual assault by strangers are more likely to prefer criminal prosecution (Artz, Smythe, & Leggett, 2012; Daly, 2016). Studies of restorative justice programmes in the UK and Europe similarly show that when survivors have opportunities to ask questions, be heard, and receive

acknowledgement from offenders, many report high levels of satisfaction and reduced anger compared with conventional court processes alone (Sherman et al., 2015; Strang et al., 2013).

Large national surveys conducted in the US by the Alliance for Safety and Justice, for example, consistently find that survivors of violent crime — especially those from low-income communities and communities of colour, who experience some of the highest rates of violence —prioritise prevention, trauma recovery services, mental health support, and economic assistance over harsher punishment (Alliance for Safety and Justice, 2016, 2022, 2024). Importantly for our discussion, the report finds that "victims of the most serious crimes such as rape or murder of a family member widely support reducing incarceration to invest in prevention and rehabilitation and strongly believe that prison does more harm than good" (Alliance for Safety and Justice, 2016, p21).

As Sara will know well, research by the Oakland based Essie Justice Group also demonstrates that incarceration itself produces significant social and economic harms for women and families in communities already affected by violence. Surveys of more than 2,000 women with incarcerated loved ones found that 86% reported significant or extreme impacts on their mental health and 63% reported major effects on their physical health as a result of a loved one's incarceration (Clayton et al., 2018). Women frequently absorb the economic consequences as well: nearly one-third report losing the household's primary income following incarceration, while almost 70% report becoming the sole wage earner in their family (Clayton et al., 2018). Research in South Africa similarly shows that pre-trial detention shifts financial and caregiving burdens onto women, who must compensate for lost income while also covering legal costs, transport for prison visits, and support for detained family members (Redpath, 2019).

Like the *Crime Survivors Speak* report, research on restorative justice in the UK and Europe shows that many victims of crime say what they most want is acknowledgement of harm, answers about why the offence occurred, and reassurance that it will not happen again, rather than simply harsher punishment (Sherman et al., 2015; Strang et al., 2013). In fact, victims who participate in restorative processes often report higher satisfaction and reduced anger compared with those who go through conventional court proceedings.

Although systematic reviews and meta-analyses have indicated that restorative justice approaches have a favourable effect on general criminal behavior (Kimbrell et al., 2023; Sherman et al., 2015), its application to men's use of domestic and sexual violence against women is a rare and still contentious practice. As a result, the debates about its appropriateness have not been informed by strong empirical research, although a recent review finds "potentially favorable effects" (Kettrey & Reynolds, 2024).

So, one important point I want to make today is that the impunity discussion often begins from a punishment framework that does not necessarily line up with survivors' own priorities.

Lenore Anderson, the founder of the Alliance for Safety and Justice, makes this point very clearly. She argues that victims are "rarely anyone's priority" in contemporary debates about crime and punishment (Anderson, 2021). On one side, more punitive advocates focus on strengthening the reach of the criminal legal system — more arrests, stricter prosecution, tougher sentencing. On the other side, many reform advocates focus on reducing incarceration, but often without really centring the needs of those who have been harmed. And so survivors can disappear in both directions. Anderson also points out that the growth of criminal legal responses has long reproduced

inequalities in whose victimisation is taken seriously, with race and class shaping which crimes attract public and political attention, which cases are properly investigated, whose compensation claims are approved, and who is treated with dignity by police, prosecutors, and medical personnel (Anderson, 2021).

A substantial body of feminist scholarship has also documented how movements addressing domestic and sexual violence gradually became increasingly intertwined with criminal legal strategies. Works such as Leigh Goodmark's *Decriminalizing Domestic Violence* (2018), Aya Gruber's *The Feminist War on Crime* (2020), Beth Richie's *Arrested Justice* (2012), and Emma Thuma's *All Our Trials* (2019) describe how feminist organizing rooted in civil rights and community-based activism was progressively drawn into closer collaboration with policing, prosecution, and incarceration. Mimi Kim (2018) argues that efforts to "feminize the state" often led movements into the orbit of the carceral system itself, inadvertently reinforcing policies that deepened mass incarceration and reproduced the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality that the movement originally sought to challenge.

When we look beyond the US, we see very similar patterns. In India, for instance, the 2012 Delhi gang rape produced enormous public outrage and very rapid legal reform, including harsher penalties and expanded criminal provisions. But scholars have shown that this emphasis on criminal law reform often operated as a kind of quick or symbolic response, while the deeper structural drivers of violence such as economic inequality, institutional weakness, gendered power relations, and wider social norms remained largely unaddressed (Sharma & Bazilli, 2014). More broadly, comparative research looking across multiple countries shows that governments regularly respond to public pressure around gender violence by passing new criminal laws or increasing penalties, even though there is limited evidence that criminalisation on its own actually reduces violence (Goel & Goodmark, 2015).

South Africa offers a very sharp example of this. Former Constitutional Court Judge Edwin Cameron has argued that calls for harsher prison terms and tougher sentencing often function as a distraction from the far more difficult work of fixing institutional failures — weak police response, poor investigation, broken forensic systems, and inadequate services for survivors (Cameron, 2021).

Brazil offers another example of the same broader problem. There, too, strong laws on paper have not translated into safety in practice. As César Muñoz notes, the absence of sustained investment in shelters, survivor services, and social protection means that women can report abuse and still end up with nowhere safe to go.

So, I want to be clear: this isn't about dismissing concerns about impunity or accountability. They must be priority concerns. But it is to say that we should be cautious about allowing ending impunity and strengthening accountability to function as a shorthand for "more punishment." Once we do that, we risk missing at least three things. First, we risk ignoring what survivors themselves say they most need. Second, we risk overlooking the structural and institutional forces that increase women's exposure to violence and limit their ability to find safety. And third, we risk obscuring the harms that carceral responses themselves can produce for women, families, and communities.

If we take research on survivor's stated needs and preferences seriously, then accountability has to mean more than punishment. It has to include prevention, protection, institutional responsiveness, healing, material support, and genuine social conditions for safety. Criminal legal responses may have

a place within that, but they are not the whole of it, and they are very often not the thing survivors most urgently need (Peacock, 2022).

Experiencing the pull of the criminal legal system away from prevention and towards carceral approaches in San Francisco:

In September 1994, US President Bill Clinton signed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) into law as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. That same year, working as a volunteer at Men Overcoming Violence (MOVE) in San Francisco, one of the first batterer intervention programmes in the United States, I established one of the country's earliest youth focused domestic violence prevention focused programmes. Unlike VAWA, which I had not yet heard of and knew nothing about, my goal was not to focus on using criminal legal sanctions to address men's violence against women. Instead, I aimed to start a community-based network of men and women who would conduct school and community focused domestic violence prevention education to address men's violence against women.

In close partnership with Jamie Lee Evans, then at San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR), MOVE and SFWAR established a high school peer education program focused on teen dating violence prevention which we called Students Talking About Non-Violent Dating, or STAND, and began to implement it at Mission High School. At the same time, drawing on MOVE's adult batterer intervention model which worked with the courts to provide group education sessions to men who had been convicted of domestic violence, I began to develop and run intervention groups for young men who had been arrested for using violence against their girlfriends or mothers.

While we were not then able to attract any funding to expand STAND beyond one school, in the wake of the passage of VAWA and the funds that accompanied it, MOVE was approached by the Department of Justice in 1996 and awarded a sizable grant to collaborate with the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department (SFJPD) to expand our juvenile batterer intervention program. After two years of volunteering, there were finally funds for salary and new youth program positions. As part of the deal, we were asked to serve as a conduit for funds to the SFJPD so that they could establish a dedicated juvenile probation officer to monitor the compliance of the 14–17-year-olds sent to us by the Juvenile Courts for having perpetrated violence, typically against either their girlfriends or their mothers. When participants failed to show up for meetings, we called the probation officer who more often than not locked our clients up for the weekend or longer at the San Francisco Youth Guidance Center. The costs of incarceration were borne by the parents, which meant mostly the mothers. My notes from a session with one mother, assaulted by her son, record a conversation about this:

> *"I'm asking you not to file a report. Please, I can't afford it. I still owe them over a thousand dollars from last time." "They charge me $21.50 a day which of course they only told me about after he'd been in there for nearly 2 months. $21.50 as though it's a Best Western hotel".*

Now, thirty years later, I worry that the juvenile batterer intervention program we established did its participants more harm than good. Certainly, the research literature on youth incarceration and its long-term effects suggests that our close partnership with the criminal legal system was

counter-productive, likely decreasing educational and employment outcomes and increasing future involvement in the adult criminal legal system for the dozens of young men we attempted to educate and deter from using violence against women again (Mendel, 2011). While we were attentive to the risks of close collaboration with the criminal legal system, writing at the time that about its systemic racial bias and "inherent risks to the physical and mental integrity of children, and its potential for negative influence rather than rehabilitation" (Peacock and Rothman, 2001), that was probably of little comfort to the mostly young men of color we worked with.

So where does this leave us?

After more than three decades of implementing and evaluating programmes aimed at reducing men's violence, I increasingly come to the following conclusion: gender norms matter, but they are one piece of a larger set of factors that interact with each other to shape men's violence.

If we hope to meaningfully advance violence prevention, cities must follow the evidence and address all of these factors. Some ways to do this would include:

1. Cities should ensure **stronger multisectoral collaboration** across city government departments and initiatives. Violence prevention requires coordinated action across health, education, economic development, housing, parks and recreation, the arts, transport, and social services. The examples shared by Sara today offer us a vision for what that might look like.

2. Cities should **invest in mental health support for children exposed to violence**. Exposure to violence in childhood is one of the strongest predictors of later perpetration and victimisation. World Health Assembly Resolution 74.1 on ending VAC through health systems was endorsed by 197 countries and commits each of them to designate a focal point on ending violence against children in national governments. Cities should do the same. Teacher and social work unions in some cities have called for the enforcement of minimum ratios of mental health practitioners to students in schools and communities, and these standards should be implemented broadly.

3. Cities should expand **community-based mental health services,** including through workplace referral systems and through trained paraprofessionals at the community level. Research by the Alliance for Safety and Justice offer useful guidance on what those services might look like: "For every one-hundred thousand residents, minimally, a safe community would need one trauma recovery center, twenty domestic violence shelter beds, and one nonprofit that provides legal services to address the needs of violent crime victims". They go on to say "to have a robust violence prevention infrastructure, that same community of one hundred thousand people would need at least twenty-five violence prevention street outreach workers and a youth prevention program with capacity to serve about one hundred young people who need safe places to go and extra support. To ensure capacity to appropriately respond to mental health crises, that same community would need, minimally, a team of twenty-four mobile response workers. And to respond appropriately to the re-entry needs of people exiting the justice system, that same community would need seven re-entry navigators and at least sixty re-entry housing placements" (Anderson, 2022 p.240). Groups like the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance have also generated guidelines for minimum standards and workforce personnel (UNICEF, 2019)

4. Cities must **enforce strong regulation of alcohol availability and marketing**. This includes enforcement of opening and closing hours, limits on outlet density, increased taxation, minimum unit pricing, and restrictions on alcohol marketing. The evidence is clear that this reduces all forms of violence, decreases health care costs, and diverts spending to more productive and job generating parts of the economy (Dualibi et al, 2007; Barron et al, 2022; Morris et al, 2025).

5. Cities and especially police must **strengthen and enforce firearm regulation and diversion controls**. This includes removing firearms from individuals subject to protection orders for domestic violence, ensuring that police and private security companies do not serve as conduits for diversion of legal guns into criminal markets, and strengthening oversight of legal gun ownership which easily and often becomes the source for illegal guns.

6. Cities should **invest in safe public spaces, parks, and recreational facilities**. They provide alternatives to violence and are strongly associated with improved wellbeing and reduced crime.

7. **Cities must strengthen economic security through job creation, living wages, labour protections, strong trade unions, and social protection programmes**.

8. Cities should draw on **emerging approaches to narrative change**. Rigorous narrative frame analysis can help us understand which messages increase men's support for gender equality and violence prevention. Common Cause Australia, FrameWorks in the US, and recent research by the American Institute of Boys and Men and the Young Men's Research Project offer great examples of these.

So, to conclude:

Gender norms — and particularly norms about manhood — are critically important. But if we focus on them in isolation, we risk missing many of the structural and commercial drivers that constrain choices, increase risk, sustain violence, and obscure the systemic and structural factors that also need to be addressed.

Effective violence prevention therefore requires a dual approach: continuing to challenge harmful norms about manhood, while simultaneously addressing the structural conditions — trauma, poverty, alcohol availability, firearms access, weak institutions, and inequality — that make violence more likely.

If we want population-level reductions in violence, we must act across that whole system.

Thanks again for the opportunity to share my thoughts in response to Sara and Alba's rich presentations.

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