

Ending Violence Against Women – a Call to Men

John Williams, Australian Ambassador to the Lao PDR

“It is men taking the message of gender equality to other men that will change the picture of gender equality.”

Today, 25 November, the world marks White Ribbon Day - the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

This is a day that heralds 16 days of global activism to eradicate violence against women and their children - one of the world's most odious and prevalent human rights abuses.

No country, no community is immune from this problem. Its impact on the lives and development of our communities is disturbing.

Globally, more than one in three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way. This is most often perpetrated by someone she knows, including her husband or another male family member.

In Australia, one woman is killed every week by a current or former partner – 75 each year. One in three women over the age of 15 has experienced physical or sexual violence at some stage in their lives.

Almost 1 billion women, 1.2 million of them in Australia, today are either currently living in an intimate relationship characterised by violence, or have recently done so.

This means there are now more women living in an intimate relationship characterised by violence than malnourished people in the world.

An estimated one in five women in Laos experience physical violence within the home, with one in three experiencing emotional violence.

Compounding this, many women, both in rural and urban areas, have a limited understanding of their rights to be protected from violence.

Societal attitudes can perpetuate violence – where acts of domestic violence are considered by some to be acceptable.

Research in Australia shows inequality between the sexes and an adherence to rigid gender roles - a belief men should dominate relationships – were among the major causes of violence against women.

Similarly and disturbingly, a 2012 Lao Social Indicator Survey found 58 percent of women believed it was justified for a husband to beat his wife if she neglected the children, argued with him, refused to have sex with him, or burnt food.

Changing these attitudes and behaviours, among men and women, that perpetuate, justify, excuse and fail to counter such violence, will be a vital part of any solution.

Australia recently launched its *Second Action Plan: Moving Ahead 2013-16* which unites the Australian community to reduce the levels of violence against women and their children.

The *Plan* aims to promote cultural change, so women will feel encouraged to report their experiences, and more Australians will actively reject violence.

Recognising violence against women is an issue that effects women and girls around the world, Australia is also committed to supporting and partnering other countries to end violence against women.

Earlier this year, Australia launched a four-year AUD20 million program to address both the causes and consequences of violence in Timor-Leste by working to prevent violence and provide support services.

We have also contributed more than AU\$30 million to end violence against women and girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan since 2013. This funding is providing support services for women and their children, and innovative approaches to engage men, women, religious and community leaders to challenge attitudes and behaviours that tolerate violence against women.

Australia's programs highlight the economic development dimensions of the problem.

Violence affects women first and foremost, as well as their children, families and communities. But it is also a burden on national economies, and a threat to sustainable national development.

The direct economic costs of violence against women and girls are enormous, in terms of lost earnings, reduced productivity and undermining the active role women and girls can take in helping develop their community.

A 2009 report found violence against women and their children cost the Australian economy an estimated AU\$13.6 billion. Without appropriate action, this could rise to AU\$15.6 billion by 2021-22.

Those countries that develop most quickly are those that most effectively address issues of inequality.

This is why Australia tabled the idea at the 14 November Roundtable Implementation Meeting that gender equality be included as a central platform in Laos' 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan.

Promoting gender equality, to ensure 50 per cent of the work force are able to reach their full potential, lies at the heart of Laos' ability to achieve its 2015 MDG goals, and its ambitious target of graduating from LDC status by 2020.

This brings me to my appeal to Lao men.

I welcome the leadership from the Lao Government in acknowledging this issue as a serious problem.

Australia's Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, is also leading by example as a White Ribbon Ambassador, making clear Australia has zero tolerance for violence against women.

This strong leadership, at the highest level of government, is vital in helping to change attitudes. Education will play a vital role too.

But it is at community level, among networks of families and friends, where we all, as men, husbands, brothers, fathers, uncles, nephews and cousins, have a vital role in intervening to protect women - and in saying clearly that violence against women is never justified.

Each individual, community and government has a responsibility to speak out against violence against women. In our workplaces, in our schools and universities, in our communities and in our homes, we must all say "enough".

White Ribbon Day is important to help amplify the voice of women, to tell their personal stories, so men the world over better understand the human dimensions of this problem. So men understand what it is like for women to live in fear of violence in their own homes, and the loss of dignity they suffer as a victim of violence at the hands of a husband or partner.

But women cannot pursue this agenda alone. This is not a problem women have brought on themselves. The cause and solutions lie also with men.

As Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, puts it so well, it is men taking the message of gender equality to other men that will change the picture of gender equality in Australia, in the Lao PDR and across the globe.

As the father of two young daughters, I have a personal stake and commitment to speak up about domestic violence, and to urge all men to do the same.