

Bystander Action

Shifting the culture that drives violence against women through small, courageous actions in daily life.



preventing
violence
against
women
program

A MELBOURNE ANGLICAN INITIATIVE



As Christians, and together as the Church, we are compelled by Christ's love to shift the culture.

Introduction

A deep shift is needed to address the culture and social enablers driving men's violence against women and prevent it from occurring. As Christians, and together as the Church, we are compelled by Christ's love to shift this culture. To do this, we need to play our part in challenging the attitudes, behaviours and structures that underpin violence against women, and we need to model a different way. However, culture change can seem big and overwhelming.

What if we told you that by taking small, courageous actions in our daily life, we can create a significant cultural shift?

That is where the active bystander approach comes in. It is proving to be a powerful tool enabling individuals and communities to begin right where they are.

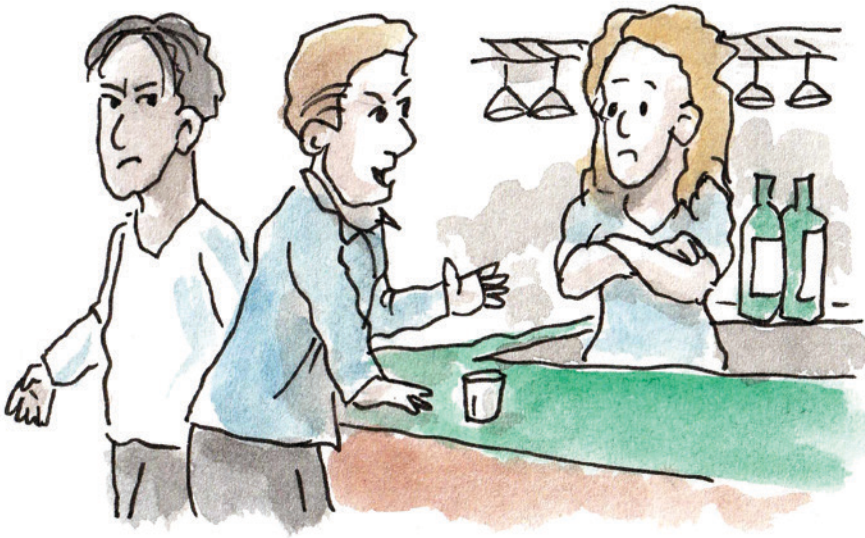
Keep reading and we will explore this topic together.



Points to explore

This resource is designed as a learning tool. Throughout, there are points to 'explore' with questions for you. You can use them for personal reflection or facilitating a group discussion.

They aim to help you build your understanding and think about your own experiences, and how you can become more confident to take bystander action.



What if we told you that by taking small, courageous actions in our daily life, we can create a significant cultural shift?

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An active bystander is someone who steps in after witnessing or hearing about an incident or situation they do not think is right. The action they take is called 'bystander action'.

What is bystander action?

A bystander is a person who witnesses or hears about an incident or situation but is not directly involved in it.

An active bystander is someone who steps in after witnessing or hearing about an incident or situation they do not think is right. The action they take when they step in is known as 'bystander action'.

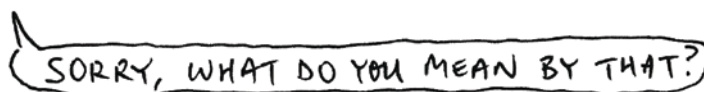
When it comes to preventing violence against women, bystander action is focused on addressing the culture and social enablers that drive violence against women. It is about taking action in response to everyday sexism, gender stereotypes, disrespect towards women, and anything that excuses or trivialises violence against women.

Here are some examples of bystander action:¹

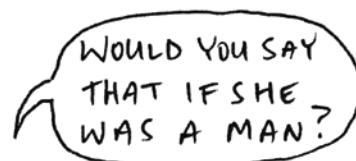
- Speaking up when someone uses sexist language, tells a sexist joke or shows you a sexist image.
- Speaking up when someone makes a comment or joke that puts women or men down.
- Speaking to someone about their recent disrespectful behaviour.



ANYONE ELSE THINK THIS IS NOT OK?



SORRY, WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?



WOULD YOU SAY THAT IF SHE WAS A MAN?



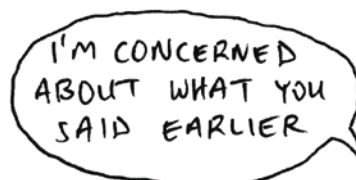
- Challenging comments or practices that reinforce gender stereotypes or fixed and harmful ideas about masculinity and femininity.
- Speaking up when you notice organisational cultures and practices that exclude or make it difficult for some people to participate equally.
- Speaking to leaders when you notice language or content in policies and procedures that need to be changed or updated.
- Looking for opportunities to include people, and actively making room for people to join in wherever appropriate.
- Supporting a colleague who is making a complaint about sex discrimination or sexual harassment.

It is about taking action in response to everyday sexism, gender stereotypes, disrespect towards women, and anything that excuses or trivialises violence against women.



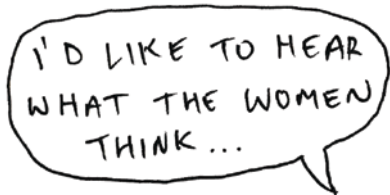
Explore

- What examples of bystander action have you taken or seen others take?
- What was being challenged? (e.g. a sexist comment, gender stereotyping or exclusion of some kind.)
- How did the scenario unfold?





It is about taking action in response to everyday sexism, gender stereotypes, disrespect towards women, and anything that excuses or trivialises violence against women.



Why take bystander action?

Research shows that bystander action is a highly effective way to create positive culture change.² The benefits of taking bystander action are as follows:

- **It discourages harmful attitudes and behaviours by establishing social consequences for them.** When we ignore an incident or situation, the offender and other bystanders can perceive this as endorsement. However, when we challenge sexist or disrespectful comments or behaviour, we start to disrupt the current culture by sending a loud, clear signal that this is not acceptable and that we will not stand for it.
- **It supports those targeted or affected by the comment, behaviour or situation.** It shows the person that they are seen and that they are not alone.
- **It can nip things in the bud.** Bystander action can surface concerns and create discussion about them before they become a bigger issue.
- **It has a multiplying effect.** When people see us take bystander action, it gives them courage to do the same.



Explore

- What motivates you to take bystander action?
- Which of these benefits resonate(s) most with you?

Bystander action is a highly effective way to create positive culture change. When we do this collectively, our call for change gains strength and momentum. Our bystander action functions as a catalyst for cultivating a safe, fair and respectful environment where everyone can thrive.

In the Gospels, we see how Jesus, time and again, challenges the culture around him in both words and actions. We are called to follow His example.



Explore

- What are some examples of Jesus challenging the sexist culture of his time?

Preventing violence against women is everyone's business. By being intentional and making the most of such opportunities in our daily interactions, we can create and reinforce the culture we long to see – one where everyone can flourish and know life in its fullness.

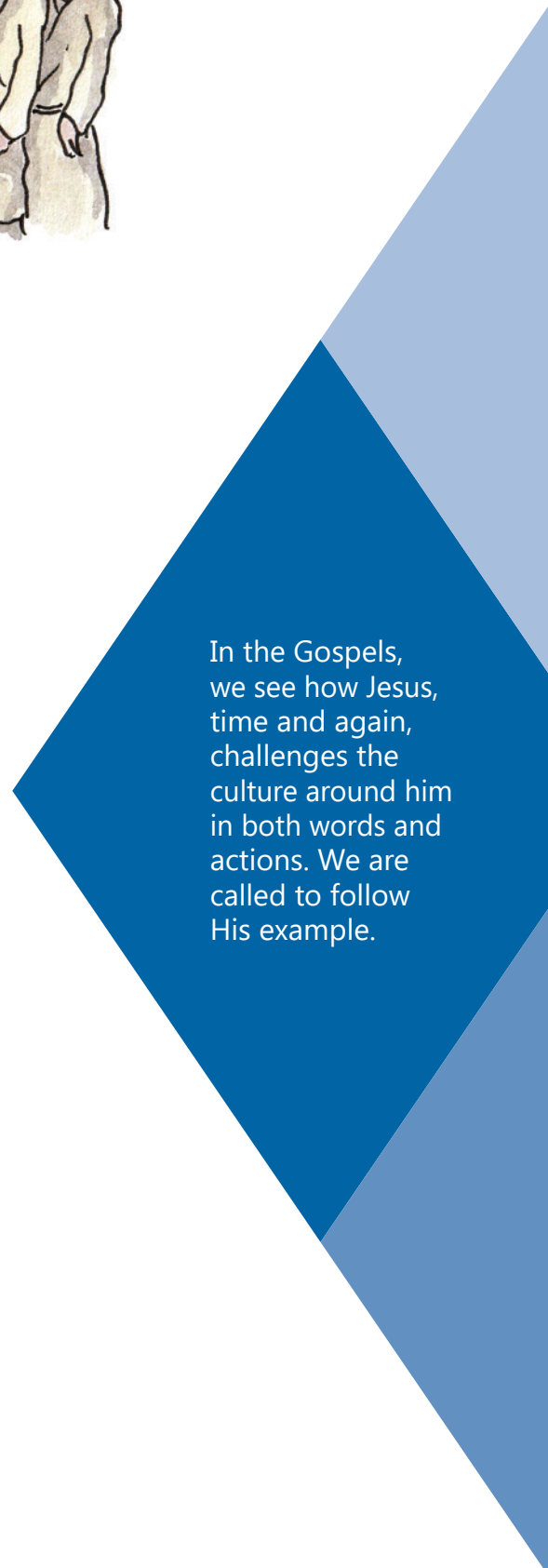
'It's in the many small things that go together that we see big changes happening.'

'It's at the grassroots level that the real work of the Church happens. It's that phone call that people make. It's that stopping for a conversation. It's that seeing beyond the stereotypes of what we might think another person's position is and engaging them in a conversation about us being ambassadors for Christ in our daily life that probably matters most of all...

It's put down to the approach of breaking things down to the small elements, and seeking in all the small elements, that we have immediate opportunity of influencing...

And if we put all of that together across the whole span of activity, it makes us all more effective people to minister in Christ's name in our generation.'

Archbishop Philip Freier³



In the Gospels, we see how Jesus, time and again, challenges the culture around him in both words and actions. We are called to follow His example.



How can we take bystander action?

To get started, it is important to know that there are many ways of taking bystander action. It includes speaking up, signalling disapproval through body language or facial expression, or reporting an incident. Engaging others to speak out and take action is also a form of bystander action.

Bystander action can be indirect or direct, and can be taken at the time or afterwards.

You can take bystander action anywhere, including in social settings, at work, at your sports club or at church. We can all find a way of taking action that works for us. The important thing is that we do something.

Preparing to act

Here are a few tips for preparing to take bystander action:⁴

Educate yourself and talk to others about:

- What kinds of comments, behaviours and practices are sexist or disrespectful.
- What negative impact they have.
- What types of action you can take and how to choose the most suitable action for the situation.

There are many ways of taking bystander action.



Reflect on your own commitment to shifting the culture and creating an environment where everyone can flourish.

You might want to ask yourself:

- What kinds of comments, behaviours and practices make me uncomfortable?
- When do I feel uncomfortable but do not speak up or take action?
- What would help me to be able to speak up or take action?

Think about what to say if you face backlash for taking a stand. For example, consider how you would respond if someone said something like:

- ‘Come on. It was just a joke.’
- ‘What makes you think you can tell me how to behave?’
- ‘But it’s true...’

Become familiar with your church or organisation’s policies, procedures and expected standards of behaviour, so you know what is expected and how to report an incident or make a complaint if necessary.

Gather a group of people to reflect on and discuss how you can become more confident to take bystander action. You could use this resource as a guide for that discussion.

We can all find a way of taking action that works for us. The important thing is that we do something.



Explore

- Which of these tips are particularly helpful for you right now and why?
- What are some of your reflections in response to the questions above?
- Reflect and pray through this, asking God to bring to mind what you need to know.





In any given situation, you can use one type of action or a few types of action.

Deciding what action to take

The action you take depends on a range of factors, including:

- The situation.
- Who else is present and your relationship with those involved and present.
- How safe and confident you feel to act.

To decide what action to take, you need to assess the situation and think through:

- Your position and power in relation to others present.
- How your action might impact upon others.
- Who else might stand by you.
- If it is likely to make a difference to the person's behaviour or the culture where it takes place (i.e. your church, workplace or a social group).
- Your own safety, skills and ability to be calm and respectful.

In any given situation, you can use one type of action or a few types of action.



I FELT UNCOMFORTABLE
IN THE MEETING TODAY...



Explore

- Think of a time when someone's comment or behaviour made you feel uncomfortable because it was not right. Use the prompts above to think through the situation and what you need to take into account when deciding what bystander action to take in such a context.

Indirect action

Indirect action allows bystanders to do something about a situation without having to become directly involved at the time. This can be particularly useful when the bystander is junior to the person whose comment or behaviour needs addressing or to other bystanders present. It can also be a good approach when the bystander is aware that they might not be the most effective messenger.

Here are some examples of indirect action:

- **Asking someone else who is better placed to take action**, e.g. someone else in a group situation, a church leader, a friend, a parent or a youth leader.

'Jo, what do you think about that?'

'Reverend Smith, please can I talk to you about something that happened in our small group? I wondered if it is something you could raise with the leaders?'

'Hannah, I didn't feel comfortable about the sexist joke the visiting speaker made during the service but I am nervous about bringing it up with the vicar. As my youth leader, I wondered if you could talk to her about this?'

- **Speaking afterwards to the person affected to show your support.**

'I noticed what happened in the meeting today. That wasn't OK. How are you doing?'

'Thanks for making time for this call. I wanted to talk to you about last week's meeting.'

- **Speaking afterwards to the other people who were bystanders to discuss a strategy for joint action.**

'I felt uncomfortable about what happened in the meeting today. I wonder what we can do about it together?'

'I wanted to talk to you about what happened yesterday at church. What can we do to raise this matter?'

- **Speaking to your church leader or leadership team about problematic culture or practices that you have noticed.**

'I've noticed that...'

'Why do we only have women organising catering for church events?'

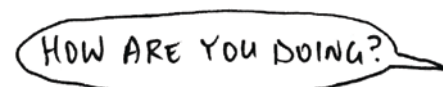
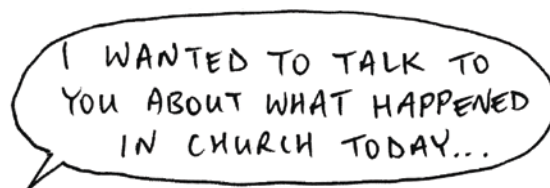
'Why don't we have many men involved in our church children's ministry?'

'I think some of the language in our songs can be alienating for women in the congregation. We have to do mental gymnastics during worship to engage.'

'Why are the baby changing facilities only in the female toilets?'

- **Reporting an incident or making a complaint informally or formally** (speaking to the vicar or following a grievance or complaint process).

- **Supporting someone else who is reporting an incident or making a complaint.**





THAT JOKE
ISN'T FUNNY

WE SHOULDN'T
REFER TO
WOMEN THATWAY

ISN'T THAT
SEXIST?

Direct action includes speaking up and/or using your facial expression or body language to express disagreement.

Direct action

Direct action includes speaking up in order to communicate that something is unacceptable and/or using your facial expression or body language to express disagreement about the incident or situation, or to support the person affected. Online, we can do this by posting a comment, reacting to a comment, or sending a direct message. Direct action needs to be carried out respectfully and appropriately.

Here are some examples of direct action:⁵

In the moment...

- **Asking a question.**

'Sorry, what do you mean by that?'

'Sorry, I don't get it. Can you explain the joke?'

'Isn't that sexist?'

'Isn't that a bit stereotypical?'

'Would you say that if she was a man?'

'Am I the only one who feels uncomfortable about this?'

'Anyone else think this is not OK?'

- **Stating your opinion.**

'I don't agree with that.'

'I think what you are saying may be sexist/discriminatory.'

'I think some women might be offended by that.'

'That was a bit full on.'

- **Saying how the comment or joke makes you feel and why.**

'Hey, that makes me feel a bit uncomfortable. It is demeaning to women/men.'

'I feel frustrated that we still hear women referred to in that way, even in church.'

'I'm pretty upset by this. That happened to my friend.'

- **Reminding a group of the standard of expected behaviour.**

'This isn't how we agreed to...'

'I'd like to remind the group of our agreement on how we will work together.'

'I don't think that fits in with how we have agreed to talk to each other.'

- **Ensuring everyone gets a say, especially about matters that affect them.**

'I don't think we should decide until we ask them what they think would be best...'

'I'd like to hear what Monica thinks.'

'Perhaps we could ask the playgroup parents what the challenges are and what their recommendations are.'

- **Amplifying women's voices if they are spoken over or if someone else takes credit for their idea.**

'Hang on! Ann was making a point.'

'Sam, had you finished?'

'Yes, that was the point Emma was sharing earlier.'

Direct action needs to be carried out respectfully and appropriately.

Afterwards...

- **Speaking afterwards to the person who behaved inappropriately. Here are some potential opening lines:**

'Hey, that joke you made really bothered me.'

'I don't think what you said was appropriate because...'

'I'd like to follow up what you said before...'

'I am concerned about the joke you told earlier. We have agreed that those types of jokes are not on.'

'Can we please have a quick conversation about the remark you made earlier?'

'That might not have been a big deal to you but...'



Explore

- Go through the examples of actions for both indirect and direct bystander action to ensure you have understood each one.
- In what situations would these different types of indirect and direct action be helpful?
- What other examples of direct and indirect action can you share that are not covered here?

I DON'T AGREE WITH THAT.

WHY ARE NO MEN DOING THE CLEANING?



Churches can help create positive culture change by supporting and fostering bystander action in their community.

How can a church foster and support bystander action?

Churches can help create positive culture change by supporting and fostering bystander action in their community.

Church leaders (lay and ordained) can create a supportive environment for bystander actions and encourage people to be active bystanders by communicating that:

- We all have a responsibility to act, and we can all do something.
- Our small actions can make a big difference.
- This is a place where we welcome bystander action. We seek to be a place where people feel safe to share their concerns and suggestions for how we can build a flourishing community together.

The markers of a church that supports bystander action

- Authentic support for bystander action from leaders.
- Leaders take responsibility for and are intentional about:
 - Educating themselves about what constitutes sexist and discriminatory comments or behaviours, and what the impact of this can be.
 - Ensuring there is a clear and shared understanding of what behaviour is acceptable.
 - Reflecting on their own beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.
 - Modelling fair and respectful behaviour, and taking bystander action.
 - Creating and maintaining an environment in which people are encouraged and supported to take bystander action.
- Staff, volunteers and parishioners have a shared understanding of what bystander action is, and how to use it.
- There are options for staff, volunteers and parishioners to provide feedback to church leadership, including on sensitive matters relating to the church's culture and practices. They are encouraged to use these channels.





- Staff, volunteers and parishioners know what options there are for addressing inappropriate behaviour and what to expect about how it will be handled. This includes how to use formal channels to report unacceptable behaviour and make a complaint if they need to.



Explore

We all have spheres of influence and can make a difference in the groups and communities we are part of.

- What vision has God given you for bystander action in your spheres of influence?
- What do you need to do to prepare yourself for this?
- Who are the key people you will need to work with, and how might you need to build their leadership and skills in bystander action?
- What do you need to reflect on, learn about and/or do together to help achieve your vision?

If God is leading you to create a supportive environment for bystander action in your church, we recommend you begin by gathering a group and engaging in the learning process together. Why not use this resource as a tool for discussion?



Our small actions
can make a big
difference.



Conclusion

Preventing violence against women is about culture change. To achieve the transformation we long to see, we must each play our part. We can create a culture shift if we each take bystander actions in our everyday interactions in order to challenge the attitudes, behaviours and structures that underpin violence against women, and if we model a different way.

We encourage you to use this resource to have conversations in your church and the groups you are part of about how to do and foster bystander action to build a safe, fair and respectful culture where everyone can thrive.

With Jesus' teaching and example as our inspiration and guide, let's make the small things count because, as Archbishop Freier shared: 'It's in the many small things that go together that we see big changes happening.'



Explore

- What has been helpful for you in this reflection about bystander action?

FOOTNOTES

¹ These examples are drawn from the following resource: VicHealth 2014. 'Stepping in: A bystander action toolkit to support equality and respect at work. A resource for State Sporting Associations.' Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia.

² Taket, Ann and Crisp, Beth R. 2017. 'Bystanders for primary prevention: a rapid review.' VicHealth, Melbourne, Australia.

³ Archbishop Philip Freier 2020. 'The small things matter.' [<https://bit.ly/3e2u1uw>].

⁴ VicHealth 2014. 'Stepping in: A bystander action toolkit to support equality and respect at work. A resource for State Sporting Associations.' Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia, p. 47.

⁵ Some of the examples are from the following resources: VicHealth 2014. 'Stepping in: A bystander action toolkit to support equality and respect at work. A resource for State Sporting Associations.' Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia, p. 53; Gender Equity Victoria (GEN VIC). 'Responding to harassment on social media. Online active bystander project.' [<https://bit.ly/3mqJB6u>]