

Support for overcoming resistance and backlash

Resource to accompany the [Queensland Equal & Together Alliance's \(QuETA\) 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence 2023](#) campaign.

QuETA and Women's Health and Equality Qld (WHEQ) acknowledge *Safe + Equal*, in particular their resource: [Overcoming Resistance and Backlash](#) upon which this resource is based.

“Resistance describes the various forms of push back against policies, programs and perspectives that aim to create progressive social change. Anyone working to prevent family and gender-based violence through social change will experience resistance” (Safe + Equal 2023)

Resistance and backlash can take multiple forms and, just as the drivers of violence overlap and intersect, resistance to any social change or activism will also overlap and intersect. Backlash and resistance to gender equality is experienced together with backlash and resistance to change addressing racism, homophobia, transphobia, and other movements for change.

Other resources of interest:

Guidance on backlash and resistance experienced by particular communities

- Rainbow Health Australia's [Pride in Prevention Messaging Guide](#) provides detailed guidance on responding to resistance in the primary prevention of family violence experienced by LGBTIQ+ communities
- Women with Disabilities Victoria have also prepared a specific resource for practitioners, [Resistance and backlash to gender and disability inclusive practice](#).
- [Passing the Message Stick](#) is an evidence-based program for overcoming resistance by developing transformative messaging to build support for self-determination and justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

Resistance to change is evident across and within our interpersonal relationships, organisations and institutions and at a broader systemic level - where deeply embedded gendered norms, structures and attitudes are reinforced. We see resistance in a range of contexts:

External or structural resistance	Internal or interpersonal resistance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance within organisations and broader sectors we seek to engage • Resistance in training and workplace programs • Resistance in public and online forums • Resistance in policy and government investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance within our own organisations and sectors • Resistance in ourselves or within our relationships

While more active forms of resistance are easier to identify, more passive forms can be harder to notice and respond to in a productive way. Familiarising yourself with the different forms of resistance is important for determining how we then respond.



For more detail, see VicHealth’s [\(En\)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives](#).

The thing with resistance is... if it feels like resistance then it likely is resistance and this is something we can address. We need to be prepared, and anticipate resistance and backlash. There are four key elements to being ready to respond:

- Plan for resistance and backlash:** Think about what arguments may arise and develop a plan for where it may occur, and how you will respond to it.
 - For example, consider how you will manage any conversations in your workplace with a colleague who believes that gender equality has been achieved and we no longer need events like 16 Days of Activism.
- Build capacity internally:** Know the evidence, relevant statistics and key policy frameworks and support your colleagues to build their knowledge, too.
 - For example, provide this and other useful resources to any staff who are participating in community engagement activities through 16 Days of Activism to support them to know how to respond.
- Build strategic alliances:** Like QuETA! Get in contact with one of your QuETA peers for support or to de-brief on an experience you have had.
 - QuETA’s Teams Channel is the ideal space to link up with your peers. Access the Team [here](#).

Ongoing learning and support: Critical reflection and collective learning about effective practice is essential to progressing the work of QuETA.

- You are invited to provide any feedback to support the evaluation of QuETA's 16 Days of Activism 2023 campaign; this supports our alliance to learn and be better prepared next time.

In our work, what we are looking for are ways to shift people and move through resistance. First and foremost, this means listening and remaining curious about the blockage that person or organisation is experiencing or expressing. This could be a result of:

- Lack of information or education on the issue
- Unfounded myths and fears
- Initial reservations about new ideas
- Parroting or repeating ideas heard from other sources
- 'Blind spots' that are a result of social privilege
- Misjudgment of the context and contemporary imperative for change

It is important to understand if attitudes of resistance are isolated or widespread across an organisation or community, and how deep these beliefs run.

Strategies to help unpack resistance

- Establishing 'non-negotiables' as a boundary upfront - i.e. the line where resistance becomes backlash
- Asking questions back to clarify the concerns or push someone to 'defend' their position
- Naming the dynamic in the room that is creating difficulty in allowing an open and honest conversation
- Switching between learning strategies to invite connection with the content - i.e. through storytelling, role-playing or reflection
- Taking discussions 'offline' if it is unclear in the room where the issue lies, or responding to one individual is taking up too much time and energy
- Re-stating the policy, organisational position, or legal requirement that establishes the obligation to support inclusion and equality
- Following up afterwards with organisational leadership to provide feedback and work out the next steps

You might find that silence or polite resistance is harder to deal with in the moment.

Actions you can take include:

- Pushing forward regardless, assuming and establishing a consensus but continuing to check for, and flush out, resistance

- Naming silence and inaction and encouraging people and organisations to think through when seemingly positive change isn't 'real'
- Talking about allyship, and the ongoing damage done by denial and exclusion, as opposed to solidarity

A critical tool for responding to backlash and resistance is strategic messaging – because it's all about shifting the conversation to our advantage. The focus here is using evidence-based social change messaging to convince those who are open to being convinced.

Consider the below strategies:

Know your audience: The majority of people in Australia are persuadable on the issue of gender equality (the 'moveable middle'). We need to ensure that we are aware of what the 'entrenched opposition' is saying, but we cannot spend our time and energy talking to them. Instead our messages need to engage the already committed, but focus predominantly on persuading those who are not yet fully committed.

For more, see VicHealth's [Framing Gender Equality: Message Guide](#).

Re-frame the issue: *"Framing is how we make the case for gender equality, anticipating and countering resistant reactions, challenging common defences of gender inequality, and 'touching the hearts' of those we seek to persuade. As we repeat and continually strengthen the frame, culture and practice can be shifted"* (VicHealth, 2018).

Examples of framing strategies include using metaphors, associations, contrasts, stories, and so on.

For more, see VicHealth's [\(En\)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives](#).

Appeal to values: Consider the values of the particular group of people you are targeting and ensure that your messaging is strategic in appealing and connecting to these values in ways that can cut through division, and create openings for change. Values-based messaging has three key components:

- Put forward a positive vision that appeals to values
- Clearly outline the barrier to change
- Put forward solutions and positive actions

For more detail, see [The Common Cause Handbook](#) from Common Cause.

Still not sure what to do?

If you encounter resistance or backlash to your violence prevention work, try one of the suggestions on the following page.

Suggested messaging for gender equality

Adapted from: *Framing Gender Equality Message Guide* (VicHealth 2021).

- “Businesses have a responsibility to ensure their workplaces are safe places for women to work – free of sexual harassment.”
- “It is wrong for tech companies to pay women less than men for the same work.”
- “Women are more likely to be judged than men for not doing housework and end up doing the majority of it.”
- “Men are overrepresented in leadership roles and are less likely to be overlooked for promotions than women.”
- “Gender pay audits can help businesses identify and address discriminatory pay, so women are equally compensated for their hard work.”
- “Boys raised free from masculine stereotypes are more likely to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships later in life.”
- “Flexible work arrangements help nurture and retain effective leaders.”
- “Respectful relationships education helps students question outdated gender stereotypes.”

Final tips:

- Try to refrain from repeating myths or stereotypes, or overusing statistics as this can actually reinforce the status quo by making inequality seem ‘normal’ or inevitable.
- Be specific and clear about who is responsible for the problem and the change required. For example, be clear about the beliefs and attitudes that reinforce inequality and condone violence, as well as those who hold and perpetuate these.
- Positive messages and appeals are more likely to encourage and create change.
- **Look after yourself and others.** Responding to resistance and backlash can be a fatiguing part of social change work. Check in with your QuETA peers or turn to the below list of supports to help take care of your wellbeing.

Resources to explore: Guidance on backlash and resistance:

- [Overcoming resistance and backlash](#) - Safe + Equal (2023)
- [Understanding, monitoring and responding to resistance and backlash](#) - Our Watch & Respect Victoria (2022)
- [\(En\)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives](#) - VicHealth (2018)
- [Framing Gender Equality: Messaging Guide](#) - Common Cause & VicHealth (2021)
- [Framing Masculinity: Messaging Guide](#) - Common Cause & VicHealth (2020)

Support is available

1800 Respect

- Phone: 1800 737 732
- Website: 1800respect.org.au

13 Yarn

- Phone: 13 92 76
- Website: 13yarn.org.au

DV Connect

- Womensline: 1800 811 811
- Mensline: 1800 600 636
- Website and webchat: dvconnect.org

Q Life

- Phone: 1800 184 527
- Website and webchat: qlife.org.au

Contact us:

Women's Health and Equality Queensland, on behalf of the Queensland Equal & Together Alliance

Email: engage@womenshealth.org.au

Website: wheq.org.au/programs/equal-together

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