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The Day the White Ribbon Campaign Changed the Game:
A New Direction in Working to Engage Men and Boys

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To Jack Layton, co-founder of the White Ribbon Campaign, a political leader and inspiration to many Canadians, and my friend. 1950-2011

Several years ago, I was looking through the window of an art gallery. I don't recall where, but the city was cosmopolitan enough and wealthy enough that the gallery was selling pictures by Kandinsky, the great abstract painter. Until that night, his sometimes chaotic canvasses had never been favourites of mine but, this night, I saw them differently. I thought how amazing this man had been: it's not only that he had done something so totally unlike what anyone had done before; it was that he obviously *saw* the world in a whole new way. He was a true visual revolutionary. Until that moment, though, how ordinary his way of seeing had appeared to me and I realized that perhaps this was because, once

accomplished, the world soon took for granted the new artistic universe he helped reshape.

Change is like that—whether in art, science or politics. Once there is an accepted wisdom and once that new 'reality' has set, it soon becomes hard to remember, hard even to imagine, that we had once thought differently.

I'd like to talk about what I think were the six breakthroughs of the White Ribbon Campaign, that is, how we helped introduce changes that are now barely questioned. The six are: 1) deciding we could devise an education campaign that would be a mass campaign that would make this a mainstream issue for men; 2) focusing on men's silence and on

those who don't use violence; 3) uniting across the social and political spectrum under a "big tent"; 4) more than just education: believing that men could and would take action; 5) asserting the importance of men's leadership; and 6) structuring ourselves as a decentralized, community-organizing campaign based on a belief that people know best how to reach those in their own communities, schools, and workplaces.

And even if none of us comes remotely close to claiming either the genius or the intellectual bravery of Kandinsky, I do believe these were game-changing breakthroughs.

PART I THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT, MEN, AND WORK TO END MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN BEFORE 1991

To assess the conceptual and organizational shift represented by White Ribbon, let's start by looking at the landscape before 1991.

For those unfamiliar with the White Ribbon Campaign, it is an education and awareness-raising campaign focused on engaging men and boys to think about their own attitudes and behaviour and to speak out to other men to challenge all forms of men's violence against women. Begun in Canada in 1991, it has now spread to more than sixty countries.

The Landscape in 1991

In the year we started the White Ribbon Campaign, work to end men's violence against women (VAW) looked pretty much like this:

1. Activist women—those working in shelters, crisis centers and helplines; those fighting for legal change; those teaching self-defense to women, those working as educators and organizers fighting for social change, those focused on scholarship and research—stood pretty much alone. Their isolation wasn't so much the result of the fact they represented only half the population. It was chiefly the result of the continued monopoly, by men, of the institutions of social, economic, religious, cultural power. Critical and insightful women's voices were marginalized, ignored and often belittled in the halls of governments, from pulpits, on the airwaves, in universities, in boardrooms, supervisors' offices and union halls.

2. In spite of this isolation and scarce resources, the movement to end violence against women was scoring victories around the world. Against all odds, countries such as Canada, the United States, and Britain enjoyed vibrant networks of women's shelters and crisis centres. Laws in many countries were beginning to change. In a few countries, there was a society-wide discussion on sexual harassment. Forms of abusive behaviour that had gone unchallenged and unquestioned for too long were, finally, being questioned. The

courage of individual women and the strength of the women's movement were having an impact.

3. Even in an era when women were making tremendous gains, the vast majority of men turned a blind eye to a range of issues around violence against women. Although some of these were men who used violence in their relationships with women, the majority never did and never would.¹ But the near total silence of men who didn't use violence was the result either of ignorance of the extent of the problem (that is, assuming it was far less prevalent than it was), or a belief this violence was unfortunate but was just the way it was, or distorted ideas of who was to blame ("she

¹ I'm making the loose distinction here between behaviours which constitute violence and those that are inequitable and, up to a point, domineering and controlling. True, at a certain point "domineering and controlling" behaviour is a form of interpersonal violence – and there is certainly no line where "merely" inequitable and domineering behaviour ends and emotional violence begins. And, certainly, any interpersonal behaviour that is based on and reinforces patterns of hierarchy and control both belittles and diminishes the other person and destroys healthy relationships. So this distinction isn't to make light of "normal" patterns in a relationship where a man's voice, ideas, opinions, and decisions might have more power than a woman's, but simply to say we should not label every form of hierarchy and inequality as violence. If we do, it minimizes the impact and horror of ongoing emotional or physical abuse. Thus when I say that the majority of men, in most although not all societies, do not use violence in their relationships, I am definitely not saying that most men have been involved in equitable, respectful, and egalitarian gender relations. Nor am I excusing or minimizing the impact on women of these inequitable relationships.

probably asked for it"), or, in some cases, a sense that men were entitled to use violence in their relationships. In other words, the category of "silent men" was very broad.

4. There was also a minority of men who were more consciously sympathetic to women's concerns (and who did not use violence in their own relationships) but who took a passive attitude. At best, they would express verbal support for these "women's causes" and for women's equality; they might donate some money to one cause or other or be supportive or women friends, family members, or spouses. When it came to violence against women, they knew little about the issue. They rarely (if ever) spoke out, they rarely took initiatives: these were women's issues and not issues for them.

5. There was a smaller group of men who were more outspoken in supporting women's efforts that, in all of North America, perhaps numbered only several thousand. They saw the issue of violence against women as a women's issue, but also thought men should support women's efforts. They might speak out in their union or on campus. In a company or union, they'd support women trying to get sexual harassment on the agenda. They might help at fundraisers or volunteer to provide childcare at a Take Back the Night march. In some

communities a few men might help with a cleanup or construction of a women's centre.²

6. Included in this last group was an even smaller subset: a few men here and there in minuscule pro-feminist organizations who were outraged at the violence but who spent most of their time speaking to each other. Sometimes, I almost felt that we perversely enjoyed our isolation from other men as a sign of our difference from the masculine norm (rather than an indication we were having no impact!) In the worst cases, you could see the collective guilt dripping from the brows of some activists: for example, one pro-feminist men's group in the U.S. put out a despicable button that said, "Men Rape" – a rather grand generalization to say the least. Aside from occasional small efforts (putting up some posters, writing the odd letter to the editor) we didn't do much to reach out beyond our tiny circles. We meant well but we had no impact.

Women's Organizations and Men's Involvement

At the time, women's organizations had an ambivalent response to the thought of men's involvement in work to end violence against women.

² In the mid-1980s, for example, Toronto Blue Jay's baseball player Jessie Barfield quietly volunteered to help paint Interval House, Canada's first women's shelter.

There was, to start, a large dose of scepticism: eight thousand years or so of patriarchy hadn't exactly taught women that men could be trusted to be allies in the process of change! No significant group of men had proven to women that they were serious and committed to working to end violence against women. (Although men had been part of the history of struggles for women's equality, these voices had, of course, been a small minority and had been all but silent on issues of men's violence. Furthermore, by the time of the rise of the new wave of feminism in the late 1960s, these early voices of men were all but forgotten. [Kimmel and Mosmiller: 1992] Simply put, most women activists had no reason to imagine that men would take up their causes.

There was also deep concern and suspicion (both conscious and unconscious) that, if men got involved, they would attempt to take over anti-violence movements. This would happen not necessarily by intention, but because of men's monopoly of public discourse—that is, men's voices would carry more weight. It was also feared this would happen because many men hadn't learned to be good listeners and would not necessarily work cooperatively with women.

In some cases, there was outright hostility towards the idea of working with men. In some cases this was because some of the women active on the issues had, themselves, suffered abuse at the hands of men and had no desire to place themselves in a position of sharing space with men. In many

cases, women involved in these movements saw the very worst of men every day (as counsellors at a women's shelter or rape crisis centre) and simply had little trust of men.

In most cases, women appreciated having autonomous spaces where, for just about the first time in several thousand years, they could fully experience autonomy, fully voice their concerns and ideas, and fully have control of their environment. Furthermore, when it came to shelters and crisis centres, there was often a strong belief that these should be spaces that were as exclusively female as possible.

And in some cases, this hostility was a belief that *men's* violence was *male* violence: that is, the violence was ultimately the result of biology. (Susan Brownmiller virtually started her pathbreaking book, *Against Our Will: Men, Woman and Rape*, with the assertion: "By anatomical fiat – the inescapable construction of their genital organs – the human male was a natural predator and the human female served as his natural prey." [Brownmiller 1976] To be biologically "inescapable" means to be inevitable—just like breathing or eating is inescapable and, hence, inevitable. If, indeed, this were true about interpersonal violence, it means that such violence is a property of being male and this, in turn, would mean that ultimately no male could be trusted as an ally. Or even if the odd man could somehow be trusted to overcome a biological imperative, it would be foolish to think that the majority of

men could or would live lives free of violence, even if they should.)

All this translated into either a dismissal of the possibility of engaging men even if it would be good, scepticism about the wisdom of doing so, or, in some cases, actual hostility to this possibility. (There were, certainly, women who thought otherwise, but here I'm referring to the general state of things.)

Lest this sounds like blaming women for men not being involved, let me be explicit: There may have been reasons why many activist women didn't welcome, encourage, or look towards men's involvement. Some reasons might be more valid than others, some might have been short-sighted, one might have even been grossly sexist and objectionable (that violence is an anatomical fiat), but this was the historic period we were in. Social movements (including the second wave of women's movement) have their own trajectories, their own biases and prejudices (as in, things that are pre-judged). That the women's movement was not particularly a venue where men were not always welcomed should come as no surprise.

That much said, men's exclusion from these struggles against men's violence against women was, ultimately, a self-exclusion by men.

Let me also be explicit about another thing. Although I will argue men's involvement is critical for ending men's violence, it is not because I believe that men must come to the

rescue. Nor would I ever question the right (and the importance) of an autonomous women's movement—and, even if I did, who cares! Certainly not women activists. I would never automatically assume that women's spaces or women's organizations should be open to men (although they may choose to be and although I would certainly argue that the overall movement to end men's violence against women should be both open and welcoming to men and boys.) I would not say that women are incomplete without men, but I would certainly argue that although efforts to end men's violence might score many important successes, they will, ultimately, be incomplete and partial without the engagement of men and boys.³

The Discourse on Men

At the time, there was still an almost unquestioned equation between gender issues and women. That is, the discourse on gender was a discourse about women—who are, of course, only half of the gender equation. Although I'm simplifying here, men as gendered beings was a concept that was marginal within women's studies and women's activism, and almost totally absent outside.

³ I've written elsewhere why it is critical to engage men and boys and have addressed some of the concerns about doing so. See, for example, Kaufman: 2003.

The serious engagement on issues of men and masculinities was still very limited. It was actually possible, at that time, to know all the men and women in the world—at least within one's languages—who were doing research or writing on men and masculinities.

Meanwhile, the notion of a diverse range of masculinities was only then beginning to emerge (although the reality of diverse masculinities has always been with us.)⁴ The result was a tendency to treat "men" as a homogeneous lot—an assumption that fed into essentialist or biologicistic interpretations of violence. There was little widespread acceptance of what in the 1980s I called men's contradictory experiences of power—that is, of the relationship between how we have, on the one hand, socially constructed men's power and given unequal power and privilege to men and, on the other hand, men's own experiences of masculinity and that exercise of power that is often rife with individual disquietude, alienation, dissatisfaction, and emotional distance from others. That is, the very ways we've constructed men's power, although leading to privilege and rewards relative to women, also leads to a whole pathology which is the underpinning of such things as men's higher rates of suicide and accidental death, and is one of the reasons for men's violence against women and other men. Furthermore, the experiences of power

⁴ R.W. Connell's 1995 book, *Masculinities*, was the first full articulation of this concept.

are far from uniform and depend not only on our individual purchase of hegemonic forms of masculinity but on the complex gender hierarchies once we include race, sexual orientation, economic class, religion, and so forth. [Kaufman 1987, Kaufman 1999]

What Type of Men's Organizing Existed Before 1991?

Where there existed attempts to organize to promote gender equal and/or to work to challenge and transform our dominant conceptions of masculinity, it was in a number of small-scale forms.

- Throughout the 1980s, there was in Canada, the US and beyond, a sizeable number of men's support groups. These promoted discussion analogous to the women's consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s. Some had a peer counselling focus, some discussed particular topics or issues, and some simply were a place where men, for the first time, could create safe places for open, confidential, and intimate discussions with other men.
- As well, there were networks, some with a social-action focus. For example, in Ontario, Canada, there was a loose grouping called the Men's Network for Change and annual men's

conferences, started first in Kingston and then held elsewhere. In the US, there was the National Organization of Men Against Sexism, whose annual conferences peaked in attendance in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There were local or regional networks in many communities.

- There were occasional, short-term campaigns organized by men supported feminist efforts. In most cases these were small, local affairs.

I want to mention one short term campaign in particular because it was, in a sense, a precursor to White Ribbon. Not in terms of focus nor even how large a tent it spread, but, in part, in terms of approach. In the summer of 1989, Gord Cleveland and I initiated *Men for Women's Choice* and brought together a small group of men in Canada who wanted a clear, men's pro-choice voice. We took a novel step: After writing a statement of purpose, we contacted some very diverse, high-profile men in the social, cultural, religious, business, union, and political mainstream, asking them to sign this statement. It was front page news.

For me it was a watershed. It told me we could get out of the small ghetto of self-identified, pro-feminist men and

bring together men who represented the majority of men in Canada.⁵

A Specific Canadian Situation

One factor that made possible the development of White Ribbon was the tremendous impact in Canada of the women's movement. I don't think there was a country at the time in which feminism had had such a widespread and mainstream impact: not necessarily by name, but certainly in terms of issues. To cite only two examples: a) a large majority of Canadians were pro-choice, and b) trade unions were becoming increasingly active in pressing for equal pay and workplace equality.

The greatest single factor, though, that formed the backdrop to the White Ribbon Campaign was the murder of 14

⁵ For any who might doubt the role of music and culture in social change, here's a little story: Gord and I decided to start *Men for Women's Choice* (MFWC) in 1989 while standing in a parking lot after a Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie concert – the former the great musician and cultural activist in the labour, civil rights and anti-war movements and the latter a well-known socially-committed musician in the early 1970s. A case was in the news of a man trying to prevent his girlfriend from having an abortion. We were inspired by the concert and were talking wistfully about our more activist days in the student and anti-war movements when, pretty much out of the blue, we came up with the idea of encouraging men to speak out as men in favour of women's right to choose. Without that, there would have been no MFWC and likely no White Ribbon Campaign.

women at the Ecole Polytechnic in Montreal on December 6, 1991. This event galvanized the country and, literally overnight, started a nationwide discussion about men's violence against women. For months the media gave unprecedented attention to these issues. Two years later, Parliament proclaimed that December 6 would forever be the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.

And although many more men were now aware of the dimensions of the problem, when it came to a public response, when it came to men knowing they must speak out, the question was still there: Where are the men?

II. THE NEW FRAMEWORK OF WHITE RIBBON

In the late summer of 1991, two women posed that very question—where are the men?— to three men in Toronto, Canada. Finding an answer quickly preoccupied us—Jack Layton, Ron Sluser, and me. By the middle of the fall, we thought we had found an answer. At the end of November, along with a few others in Toronto and small groups of men in Ottawa, London, Montreal and Kingston, we launched the White Ribbon Campaign. (Appendix B is a short account of the formation and early days of the WRC).

The campaign, both in its inception and particularly as it evolved in its first year, involved five breakthroughs about how we might best conceive of engaging men and boys not

only to work to end men's violence against women, but also to think about and change their own attitudes and behaviours on this and a range of gender equality issues.

I believe this framework has implications for political and social organizing on a much wider range of issues. Let's look at these five points in more detail:

1) A Mass Campaign To Make This a Mainstream Issue For Men

When Jack and Ron approached me, they were thinking of reproducing the modest, short-lived, but in its own small way successful Men for Women's Choice (see above.) But I felt that rather than do something so a small number of good men could speak out, we needed a vehicle for men in our thousands, our tens of thousands, and our millions to speak out.

My reasoning was shaped by my own concern about the marginalization of the pro-feminist men's 'movement'—the word movement clearly being an exaggeration since, in general, you can't fit a social movement into a phone booth (that being a time when we still had phone booths.) I was also influenced, in part, by a clever book by Michael Lerner called *Surplus Powerlessness*. [Lerner 1986] In it, Lerner suggested that the New Left of the 1960s and early 1970s unconsciously did all it could to marginalize itself. In this, we mirrored the

experience of the working class and the marginalized who Lerner had been focusing on as a social worker: True, he said, many groups certainly have real experiences of powerlessness in this society. But their sense of being powerless was far-greater than their actual powerlessness—hence, surplus powerlessness, a feeling you have less power to change things than you actually do. This, indeed, is part of class, racial or any other form of oppression.

Extrapolating this to New Left, we could say all this: yes, we were generally privileged as well as enthusiastic, creative, hard-working, and dedicated. However, even though our goal was to change the world, we also reveled in being different from everyone else; we reveled in our minoritarian status. Meanwhile, what did the conservatives do from the early 1970s? In the United States, for example, at a time when the public was overwhelmingly liberal, at a time when the public was branding as immoral the war in Vietnam in particular and US political leadership and economic and political direction in general, the conservatives came along and announced they were the "moral majority." In one fell swoop, not only did they seize the moral high ground (and to this day, forty years later, saying someone votes on the basis "values" is the same as saying they're on the right of the Republican Party) but they also proclaimed (erroneously at first) that they were the majority. And, once proclaimed, they set out to *become* the majority—the very thing that the New Left seemed

afraid of ever becoming because, for us, the majority was associated with those we didn't like and didn't want to be like. (I simplify here, of course.)

I was quite taken with this analysis. I felt that if we felt that men should embrace gender equality, if we felt that no man should use physical, sexual, or emotional violence in his relationships and that men should speak out against this violence, then shouldn't these be values we should espouse for *all* men? Didn't we need to go well beyond the small number who were self-consciously (and, I sometimes felt, self-righteously) defining ourselves as pro-feminist?

In other words, I felt these should be mainstream issues for men. They should not be marginal or for the few who could prove their full pro-feminist pedigree.

In coming up with the idea of a campaign that men in our overwhelming numbers could and would actively take part in, a campaign that individual men would take to their own communities, I felt we should not be scared of creating a mass, mainstream campaign even though it would mean we couldn't always be pure and that we would have to welcome as allies a range of men with whom we might not see eye-to-eye on many issues.

2.) Focusing on Men's Silence and on Those Who Don't Use Violence

This is what we knew: A majority of men in Canada, as in most (although not all) countries in the world, did not use violence in their relationships. They had never committed sexual assault nor hit a girlfriend or partner.

But this begged at least two critical points.

One, that a significant minority had committed such acts at least once, and a smaller minority did so with some regularity.

Two, that the majority of men who did use violence had remained silent. We reasoned that this silence was key for enabling some men to use violence in their relationship. After all, men define masculinity for other men. Boys who grow up witnessing their father using violence are more likely to use violence themselves than boys who do not. If men in positions of political power stay silent and don't pass laws, if men in positions of religious power don't challenge the immorality of men's violence, if men in positions of power in the justice system don't implement laws against the violence, and if men who have a natural authority in the locker room, schoolyard, workplace, neighbourhood, or bar, stay silent then we are all allowing the violence to continue.

We knew it would be difficult to reach that minority who used violence. But we also felt we could reach that silent majority of men who have remained quiet. We reasoned that

there were vast number of men who were opposed to men's violence but either didn't realize how extensive it was, or believed the myth that it wasn't their business, or thought it was only a woman's issue, or didn't realize how many women they knew were affected by the violence.

On the other hand we also felt that the combined impact of the Montreal Massacre in 1991 and decades of work by women's organizations had created a strong, but unmet, sense among a significant number of men that, indeed, Canada had a real problem concerning men's violence against women. And yet, even among those more aware and concerned, there was no vehicle for them to express their outrage and concern.

I felt that these men—not only the already-concerned but the far larger numbers of men who didn't use violence but didn't realize how extensive it was or didn't see it as something they should be speaking out about—were the key to change. These men could become a *transmission belt* taking our message to other men: to those in positions of power, but also to the boys and men in their families, their schools, their workplaces, their teams, their places of worship, and their communities. They could reach other men with a message that it was all of our responsibility to work to end violence against women. More specifically, they could reach those men who do or might use violence in their relationships.

And so we decided to make this the focus of our efforts, as seen in the title of our founding statement of November 26, 1991: "Breaking Men's Silence to End Men's Violence."

This not only was, but remains, an important departure point for White Ribbon. When I see other anti-VAW education campaigns around the world, some still focus on messages directly to those who use violence. A typical TV or magazine ad depicts an act of violence against a woman and then has a message to those who commit this violence telling them that it is wrong. Some such ads are brilliantly done and, I believe, there is a place for such approaches. But the exclusive use of this type of approach is not a recipe for success. Many of those men who use violence will simply turn off the message; many men who might use forms of emotional violence and control might not see what they do as similar to those depictions of physical force. But, most of all, this approach leaves out the majority of men who can actually have a huge impact on those men who do use violence.

3) Uniting Across the Social and Political Spectrum Under a "Big Tent."

From the start (based on the model we had used for Men for Women's Choice), we wanted to engage men from across the social and political spectrum. For our signatories for our founding statement, we took care that if we asked, for example, a prominent corporate leader we would also

approach a prominent union leader, if a politician from one party, then a politician from others, from left to right: the WRC would be strictly non-partisan.⁶

(I should note that it wasn't for another decade that we and others started using the expression "big tent"—signifying the creation of a large space that could embrace virtually one and all. But I'll use it here because it is a useful phrase to summarize our approach. It's also one of the concepts that, now, is widely accepted among those working to end men's violence and promote gender equality. No one, for example, would image that current efforts to promote men playing an equal role in fatherhood and domestic work should only speak to men who are socially progressive. But, as far as I can remember, this framework was unknown in 1991.⁷

⁶ One of my favourite stories about this approach was the launch of the WRC in Sweden in the mid-1990s, organized by journalist Lars Naumburg. On stage in an historic auditorium, stood a former social democratic prime minister arm-in-arm with the head of a right-wing political association, a corporate bigwig standing next to the head of the labour federation and, my favourite, the head of the Swedish Turkish association standing arm-in-arm with the head of the Swedish Kurdish association.

⁷ In fact, at the time, parts of the women's movement had taken quite a sectarian turn: splitting, dividing, even vilifying and ostracizing some fellow feminists for their views on a range of issues as if proving that isolation doesn't breed purity so much as it breeds division, contempt, and greater marginalization.

This big tent approach was in part the logical result of developing a mainstream educational campaign: after all, the mainstream is diverse politically and socially.

It was also very much the result of the practical challenges of figuring out how to create a campaign that would find its way into every nook and cranny of society. We would, for example, seek the support of political, business, and social leaders even though those of us who led White Ribbon might disagree with them on a range of very important social, economic and political issues.

Little did we think, however, about the logical extension of this approach, although this came quickly enough. One day, I believe in October or November of 1992 in the run up to our second public campaign, I was in our donated office space cutting white ribbons by the thousands with a volunteer I hadn't met before. Knowing I was one of the leaders of the campaign he said, "White Ribbon should take a stand on abortion." I asked what he meant. He said, it was clearly an issue of violence and we should speak out. He explained he was active in the right to life movement. I smiled and said, "That's interesting, because I've been a supporter of the pro-choice movement." For him, it was a clear issue of morality. For me, a woman's right to choose was part of my own moral framework and an important part of feminism and women's human rights. The traditional response (by most of us working for progressive causes) would be to hear such a

thing and say, “No, this is a dividing line. We can not work together.” But I knew that as soon as White Ribbon said this, millions of Catholics in Canada, Catholic churches, and the whole system of church-based public schools in Ontario, along with smaller numbers of Protestants and others, would instantly fall out of the White Ribbon orbit. We would be a “mainstream” campaign only for those who were pro-choice which, although a large majority of women and men in Canada, was still far from everyone we wanted to reach. So I said this to him: “You and I disagree on an important social and moral issue. But can we agree that no man has the right to beat up his girlfriend or wife?” He said yes. I said, “Can we agree that no woman should ever experience sexual assault or live in fear that could happen to her?” He agreed. I said the same about sexual harassment, stalking, murder, verbal and emotional abuse and more. And then I said, “Then why don’t we agree we can work together on all those things and agree to disagree on the important issue of abortion? You and I will each continue to speak out as we please on that, but when it comes to the huge number of other things, we agree to work together.” Once again, he said yes.

4) More Than Just Education: Believing That Men Could and Would take Action

At first, we didn’t even refer to White Ribbon as an education campaign which, of course, it was and still is. We saw it as engaging men to take action.

Our founding statement (see Appendix A) was explicitly a call to personal and social action. In it we:

- urged men to hang white ribbons from cars, houses at workplaces, wear white arm bands and ribbons: it was described not simply as an expression of concern but as a “call on all men to lay down their arms in the war against our sisters;”
- asked unions, student councils, corporations, governments to make this a priority issue;
- urged all levels of government to radically increase their funding to rape crisis centres, shelters for battered women, and for services for men who batter;
- called for large-scale education programs for police, judges, in workplaces and schools;
- saying that as supporters of White Ribbon we were committing ourselves to think about sexism in our own words and deeds and to challenge sexism around us;

- encouraging men to circulate the statement, contribute financially to women’s organizations, or support the White Ribbon Campaign.

This commitment to ending the silence and taking action was codified leading up to our second campaign with a new formulation. We said, “Wearing a white ribbon is a public pledge never to commit, condone, or remain silent about violence against women.”

Thus action was seen both as a challenge to oneself—not only to end our silence but to examine our own beliefs and behaviour—as well as affirming we needed to take many forms of social action.

From the start, we saw the ribbon not only as a symbol or fashion statement, but as a catalyst for discussion and soul-searching, as a public commitment, and as a call to more effective action.⁸

What made this part of the WRC framework different from what had come before? If point one above was that men’s violence against women should and could be a mainstream

⁸ Our founding statement included the phrase: “The white ribbon symbolizes a call for all men to lay down their arms in the war against women.” Within a year or so we dropped this phrase. Although nicely rhetorical, it implied (erroneously) that all men used violence and all men were part of this war. Furthermore, by using a language of group blame and collective guilt, we were violating the very approach that we were trying to pioneer.

issue for men, here was our notion that it should be more than an issue for men to be aware of. We believed we could successfully engage men across the social mainstream to *take action* to end men’s violence against women and to challenge sexism, in part by examining our own actions and beliefs.

5) Asserting the Importance of Men’s Leadership

We believed it was critical for men to take leadership alongside women in working to end men’s violence against women.

First, let me say what this did *not* mean: It didn’t mean men taking leadership away from women nor declaring some sort of supremacy as leaders or social actors. In fact, the WRC explicitly recognized women’s leadership. In a short document we wrote in our second or third year, “What Every Man Can do to End Violence Against Women,” the very first point was “Listen to Women, Learn from Women.” We said explicitly that women had been and are the experts on violence against women and have been and are the leaders of this work.

As such, we strove not to take space or resources away from women’s efforts or women’s organizations. In fact, our fundraising during what we came to call White Ribbon Week was, for many years, focused exclusively on raising money for women’s programmes and we still urge local White Ribbon efforts to raise money for women’s groups. We had a policy in Canada throughout the 1990s not to accept government

funding for fear it would take away from scarce funds going to women's groups. Although it wasn't necessarily logical (as pointed out by some women), it certainly was well-intentioned.⁹

As well, we decided in Canada that on December 6 itself, men should step back and listen to the voices of women. (In practice, given the decentralized nature of the campaign, this didn't always happen—many local December 6 commemorations, particularly in schools, workplaces, the Federal and provincial parliaments, used the white ribbon as a symbol of that day.)

And we saw it as important to consult women's organizations and the women activists in our circles.

⁹We maintained this policy in Canada until around 2000 when, Lesley Ackrill, a woman on our board of directors and a long time staff member of a woman's shelter, convinced us this was a self-defeating and absurd policy. In consultation with women's organizations, we developed a more nuanced policy around government funding. In some countries, White Ribbon receives significant government funding or is even run by the government. Given this policy and also given that our effort was almost entirely volunteer, and that salaries for our one or two staff members in the 1990s were well below the norm for the field, it was disturbing to see the spread of stories and rumours (repeated in one student paper that occasionally resurfaces) that were full of misinformation about lavish salaries and the supposed government funding we received—particularly given that one year Jack Layton and I respectively used our house and car as collateral for a loan so we could do basic outreach.

So what did we mean by men's leadership?

It was very simple: We said that while men's violence against women was, indeed a women's issues, the word at the beginning of that phrase—*men's*— shows very clearly that this also needs to be an issue for men. As a men's issue, it was critical that men join women not only as a well-meaning and enthusiastic auxiliary, but as leaders.

This was important for many reasons: As noted above, because of sexism and the way gender is constructed, men hear men's voices more than they do women's. Because of sexism, men's voices are given more credence. For us, this didn't mean to throw up our hands and say that it's sexist for men to become leaders; rather we said it gave us a particular responsibility to be leaders (as well as particular challenges to do so in a way that did not take away women's voices or leadership.)

Men's leadership was also key because, by definition in a male-dominated society, men have disproportionate power and control in our political, religious, economic, media, educational, cultural, judicial and policing institutions. Thus, to have as great an impact as we need to have to end the violence, we needed men to be leaders on these issues within the institutions where we already have power. (Of course, part of exercising that leadership is to recognize, explicitly, women's leadership and also to say, explicitly, that men's

monopoly of power in these institutions should be a thing of the past.)

6) A Decentralized, Community-Organizing Approach

There was a final, unique, feature of White Ribbon. In 1992, as we first started developing the idea of an ongoing campaign and within another year first encouraged its spread to other countries, we adopted a decentralized approach to organizing.

This was both practical and philosophical. We drew on our own organizing experience, in particular on Jack's background in community organizing. Part of my own research in those years was a project on organizations of grassroots democracy in Central America and the Caribbean and I was very much focused on the importance of grassroots, community-based organizing as a way to extend democracy and to transform society.

This was also a practical concern: We had no desire or intention to develop a large organization. We had no money and we wanted whatever fundraising we did to either go into education and outreach or to go, as contributions, to women's organizations. We did not want money deflected away from women's efforts and, indeed as noted above, made a decision from the start not to try to try to obtain any governmental funding.

We also had seen, even in our first year, how quite a number of men across the country who had absolutely no contact with us were immediately taking ownership of the campaign. Indeed, we estimated that 100,000 men had taken part in some way or other.

We also felt strongly that men and women knew best how to reach those in their own communities, schools, religious institutions, clubs, and workplaces. It was critical that men and boys find their own voices, using their own language (both literal and figurative) to reach those around them.

With these considerations, the thought of developing the WRC as a normal organization that more or less tightly controlled its intellectual property, its symbols, and its ideas simply did not make sense. It would have thwarted the spread of the campaign and where it did develop, it simply would not be as effective.

We also did not attempt to direct how campaigns should start or develop or how they should be run. In some countries, a non-governmental organization has started the campaign; in others it is the government or a government agency; in others it is a United Nation's agency. In some it is simply an individual man or woman or a small group of individuals who gets it off the ground. A relatively few countries have an autonomous, ongoing organization focused exclusively on White Ribbon, while others have NGOs or a consortium of NGOs who have White Ribbon as one of their

annual efforts. In many countries and communities, it's simply something that happens each year. In some regions (especially in Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific islands, it's synonymous with November 25, proclaimed by the UN as the International Day for the Eradication of Violence Against Women—and there they refer to November 25 as White Ribbon Day.)

Different countries and communities even have their own time for doing White Ribbon. Although most use the November 25 to December 6 or December 10 (International Human Rights Days and the end of the 16 Days of Activism period), some have focused their campaigns around Fathers' Day, or specific events or months, such as Take Back the Night marches or Family Violence Prevention Month. In some countries, it's a once-a-year campaign, in others there are ongoing education and awareness-raising efforts and activities.

Although at times we toyed with the idea of encouraging branches or some type of membership, these plans never got off the ground, at least not in Canada. On the positive side, this decentralization was key to the spread of White Ribbon around the world—including to countries (such as Australia and New Zealand) where the campaigns have a much higher public presence than in Canada. It's meant that the white ribbon symbol has been culturally adapted (Brazil has added its national colors to the logo; First Nation's

communities on Ontario have incorporated their cultural frameworks and symbols into both the WRC logo and materials; and, most importantly, different communities and different countries have developed widely different activities.)

On the negative side, a decentralized approach thwarts coordinated action; it limits fundraising; it limits communication and networking.

III. CONCLUSION

Although the White Ribbon Campaign spread during the 1990s to various communities across Canada and countries around the world—sometimes coming and then going, sometimes ongoing—at first our approach remained pretty marginal. Some women and women's organizations were very supportive and encouraging—and some risked their own reputations by supporting White Ribbon and work with men. Others remained sceptical or in some cases, distrusted our very premise and were concerned that any work with men would take away scarce resources from women's efforts.¹⁰

¹⁰ I've addressed this important concern at length in my article "The AIM Framework: Addressing and Involving Men and Boys to Promote Gender Equality and End Gender Discrimination and Violence," a paper originally prepared for UNICEF. In it, while saying it is a legitimate concern and indeed a possibility, I look at the fallacies of the argument that work with men and boys will take resources away from women and girls. I suggest, among other things, that if designed well, work with men and boys can be

Meanwhile, the thought of engaging men and boys to promote gender equality and ends men’s violence was not taken seriously in the United Nations, or in virtually any government or foundation.

That, of course, has changed. I don’t think there was a particular moment when it shifted, but by the mid-2000s and certainly by the end of that decade it was becoming commonplace to hear male and female activists, educators, policy-makers, and political leaders talk about the importance of engaging men. There are now more organizations than can be counted doing this work—some focused on men’s violence, some on issues around fatherhood, men’s health, reproduction and sexuality, and workplace safety.¹¹

I’m guessing that a young activist who joins one of these efforts might not imagine that there was a time not long ago when it would have seemed unimaginable that anyone would think of trying to organization a campaign to make these mainstream issues for men and boys.

Or even if we tried to make these issues mainstream, that it would have been unimaginable that men, across the social and political spectra, would say yes.

designed to help meet the needs of women and girls. In other words, engaging men and boys versus meeting the needs of women and girls is not a zero sum game. [Kaufman: 2003]

¹¹ Many NGOs along with government and UN partners working to engage men are grouped in the network MenEngage. See www.menengage.org.

Appendix A: WRC Founding Statement

(This statement has been slightly revised over the years. Here, as far as I can tell, is the original I wrote in November 1991. A current version is available at www.michaelkaufman.com.)

THE WHITE RIBBON CAMPAIGN

Breaking Men's Silence to End Men's Violence

Statement of Principles

November 1991

If it were between countries, we'd call it a war. If it were a disease, we'd call it an epidemic. If it were an oil spill, we'd call it a disaster. But it is happening to women, and it's just an everyday affair. It is violence against women. It is rape at home and on dates. It is the beating or the blow that one out of four Canadian women receives in her lifetime. It is sexual harassment at work and sexual abuse of the young. It is murder.

There's no secret enemy pulling the trigger. No unseen virus that leads to death. It is just men. Men from all social backgrounds and of all colours and ages. Men in business suits and men in blue collars. Men who plant the fields and men who sell furniture. Not weirdoes. Just regular guys.

All those regular guys, though, have helped create a climate of fear and mistrust among women. Our sisters and our mothers, our daughters and our loves can no longer feel

safe in their homes. At night they can't walk to the corner for milk without wondering who's walking behind them. It's hard for them to turn on the TV without seeing men running amok in displays of brutality against women and other men. Even the millions of women in relationships with that majority of men who are gentle and caring feel they cannot totally trust men. All women are imprisoned in a culture of violence.

Men's violence against women isn't aberrant behaviour. Men have created cultures where men use violence against other men, where we wreak violence on the natural habitat, where we see violence as the best means to solve differences between nations, where every boy is forced to learn to fight or to be branded a sissy, and where men have forms of power and privilege that women do not enjoy.

Men have been defined as part of the problem. But the White Ribbon Campaign believes that men can also be part of the solution. Confronting men's violence requires nothing less than a commitment to full equality for women and a redefinition of what it means to be men, to discover a meaning to manhood that doesn't require blood to be spilled.

With all of our love, respect and support for the women in our lives:

- We urge men across Canada to hang a white ribbon from their house, their car, or at their workplace and to wear a white ribbon or armband from Sunday, December 1 through Friday, December 6, the second

anniversary of the Montreal massacre. The white ribbon symbolizes a call for all men to lay down their arms in the war against our sisters.

- We ask unions, professional associations, student councils, corporations and government bodies religious institutions, the media, non-governmental and governmental organizations to make this an issue of priority.

- We urge all levels of government to radically increase their funding to rape crisis centres, shelters for battered women, and for services to treat men who batter.

- We call for large-scale educational programs for police officers and judges, in work places and schools on the issue of men's violence.

- We commit ourselves to think about sexism in our own words and deeds and to challenge sexism around us. We urge all Canadian men to do the same.

- We urge men to circulate this statement to other men, to send donations to women's groups or to the White Ribbon Campaign to help continue this work. We ask the media to show their concern by reprinting and broadcasting this statement in full.

It has been the longest war, the greatest epidemic, the biggest disaster. With strength and love, we commit ourselves to work alongside women to bring this violence to an end.

APPENDIX B: THE FORMATION OF THE WHITE RIBBON CAMPAIGN

Since it has never been recorded, let me briefly recount the history of the White Ribbon Campaign.

In early September of 1991 two colleagues and (then only) acquaintances, Jack Layton and Ron Sluser, approached me with the thought of replicating my experience with Men for Women's Choice (MFWC—see above), only this time focusing on men's violence against women.

In 1991 there had been two, highly publicized sexual assaults and murders in Toronto where we lived: one of an elderly woman, the other of a girl. Jack's and Ron's partners, Olivia Chow and Jan Peltier, respectively, challenged them to do something. They invited me to meet with them at the end of August or early September and, among other things, they suggested I write a statement and that (as with MFWC) we approach a diverse group of prominent men to sign it. (And also that, like MFWC, we use this as the basis for a large newspaper ad.)

In the aftermath of the first couple of meetings at a restaurant and Jack's house, I felt we needed more than a way for a small number of well-meaning men to express their ideas. In the course of two weeks, we met a few times. I made a vague proposal about combining a founding statement with some sort of activity (perhaps once a week for several weeks)

leading up to the December 6 second anniversary of the Montreal Massacre—perhaps involving men wearing or displaying various things in white, from white flowers to white arm bands to white ribbons.

At the time, ribbon symbols were virtually unknown. The only use I knew of was in the Iraq hostage crisis between late 1979 and early 1981, where some in the United States were tying a large yellow ribbon around a tree in front of their house. The red AIDS ribbon was created in the same year as White Ribbon and got its first public exposure when Jeremy Irons wore one when hosting the Tony Awards in June but it had yet to achieve its phenomenal and quite wonderful public presence.

I suggested the color white for several reasons: one was symbolic. It was a color associated in Western cultures with peace: the flag of peace, the peace dove. In some Eastern countries, it is a color associated with death and mourning. And it was also part of our first thought about reaching men: we wanted a color that men would feel comfortable wearing. And it was also very practical: most men wouldn't have a clue where to buy ribbon, but I figured anyone could tear up an old T-shirt or sheet.

Things stalled: Jack Layton was running for mayor which was occupying all his time and my father had heart surgery and I briefly left the city. Nothing much happened until an annual men's conference, that year held in Ottawa,

October 17-20. Within that, the Men's Network for Change—a group of us with a more activist bent—held a meeting at which I presented the idea for a campaign. Men from Ottawa, London, Kingston, Montreal and Toronto responded enthusiastically. We discussed names. I recall suggesting some long, descriptive, unworkable names but luckily one man, Michael Deloughery, said if the symbol was going to be a white ribbon, let's call it the White Ribbon Campaign.¹²

I wrote the statement of principles which we then revised. Ron and I tracked down phone numbers for prominent Canadian men in the arts, sports, politics, religion, business, and the labour movement and, from my home 'office' then tucked into a corner of my dining room, we faxed and phoned whomever we could find. Meanwhile, groups in other cities were making plans for WRC launch events and were garnering local support.

On November 27, with the founding statement and a diverse group of signatories, we held a press conference in the Ontario Legislature. So unusual was this (and so great was the impact of women's organizing and the untapped concern of

¹² I do hope others will continue this historical exercise and, among other things, pull together a list of the several dozen men who played a central role in the initial launch of the campaign in various cities, or the many dozen in the following year. I started to but, knowing I would forget, or not even be aware of, some of them, I have omitted this. But I would like to acknowledge the important founding role of one or two dozen other men.

men) that this made front pages across the country. Meanwhile, launch events and press conferences were held in several cities, particularly in Ottawa and London. Literally overnight, men here and there across the country fashioned white ribbons. We estimated that 100,000 Canadian men took part.

With the first campaign behind us, a now-larger group of us met in January 1992, rather symbolically, in the board room at the SkyDome in Toronto—that massive, and massively ugly, stadium. Over the course of the year we established a foundation that received government charitable status.

Jack (who unfortunately for Toronto but luckily for White Ribbon had not won the race for mayor) found us some free office space, hand-me-down computers and an old photocopier. At first we thought that Jack and I might become staff members but although we had job titles decided by our Board of Directors, we quickly realized that we would not have the money to pay us. Off and on for the next few years, Jack and I volunteered part-time coordinating the campaign; Ron was active on the executive and board but was still teaching full time. There were times during the 1990s where we did manage through our fundraising to hire one or even two part-time and then full-time staff members.)

The backbone of the campaign, in Toronto and across the country, was an ever-changing team of volunteers who led the campaign both nationally and locally.

At first, there were no women on the Board of Directors although that finally changed in the late 1990s when we wanted to find a way to have a more immediate women's voices—a tradition that continues to the present.

The campaign first spread, I believe, to Norway and Sweden in the early 1990. Subsequently, it spread around the world.