

Our Sector Still Doesn't Know How to Talk About Perpetrators, and It's Holding Us Back

Posted April 1, 2026

There is something we don't talk about enough in this field.

We talk about survivors ... and we should. We talk about safety, trauma, and healing ... and those conversations matter deeply. But there is a gap that continues to sit quietly in the background of our work: we still don't know how to talk about the people who cause harm.

Not in a way that is clear. Not in a way that is consistent. And often, not in a way that leads to meaningful change.

This isn't because we don't care. It's because the topic itself is complex, uncomfortable, and, at times, polarizing. For many, shifting the conversation toward those who cause harm can feel like it risks minimizing survivors. So instead, we stay where it feels safer: focused almost entirely on response.

But here is the truth we need to hold, carefully and clearly:

we cannot end violence if we only respond to its impact. We must also understand and address what, and who, is causing it.

Part of the challenge is reflected in the language we use. We often refer to "the situation," "the conflict," or "the incident." We speak in passive terms: *violence occurred, things escalated, there were concerns*. While this language may feel neutral, it does something subtle but significant; it removes clarity about responsibility.

Violence does not just happen. It is caused.

And when we avoid naming that, not with blame-based language, but with clear, behaviour-based understanding, we limit our ability to intervene effectively. This silence doesn't create safety. It creates blind spots.

We see the impact of this most clearly in how we respond to harm. Too often, behaviours are framed as anger issues, communication breakdowns, or relationship conflict. While those elements may be present, they are often not the core issue. Patterns of harm, particularly in the context of intimate partner violence, are frequently rooted in control, coercion, entitlement, and repeated behaviour over time.

When we mislabel the problem, we misdirect the solution.

This is where we see individuals who have used coercive or controlling behaviour being referred into anger management programs. And while anger management has value, it was never designed to address patterned harm rooted in control. When the intervention does not match the behaviour, we risk creating responses that do not increase accountability, do not change behaviour, and ultimately do not improve safety.

There is also a broader systems gap at play. Many of our services are designed to respond after harm has occurred. Fewer are designed to actively and effectively engage those who are causing harm in ways that are structured, accountable, and coordinated across sectors.

This leaves survivors navigating safety, planning, and recovery (often repeatedly) while the person causing harm moves through systems that may be fragmented, inconsistent, or not designed to meaningfully interrupt behaviour.

This is not a failure of effort. It is a gap in design.

Talking about perpetrators does not mean shifting focus away from survivors. It means strengthening the conditions that create safety. We can hold both truths at once: survivors deserve unwavering support, and those who cause harm must be understood, engaged, and held accountable in ways that reduce future risk.

If we are willing to move into this space, even carefully, there are meaningful steps forward. We can use pattern-based frameworks that look beyond single incidents and instead identify ongoing behaviours such as coercive control, intimidation, and isolation. We can strengthen accountability-based interventions that focus not just on behaviour change, but on responsibility and impact. We can invest in coordinated community responses that are aligned, consistent, and designed to prevent individuals from navigating disconnected systems with conflicting expectations.

Importantly, we can move away from defaulting to anger management as a solution when the behaviour is rooted in control rather than emotional regulation.

This is not an easy conversation. But it is a necessary one.

If we continue to avoid talking clearly about those who cause harm, we risk continuing a cycle where we respond (compassionately and tirelessly) to the impact of violence, without fully addressing its source.

Ending violence requires more than response. It requires understanding, accountability, and systems designed to interrupt harm ... not just react to it.