“Public Health just doesn’t get it!”: Addressing resistance to a public health approach to sexual violence prevention

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…and YOU!
Where it all began…

Public health is ___________.

So I studied it.
And then…

TALKING ABOUT PREVENTING
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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PREVENTION APPROACHES

Public health approach is comprehensive
way to improve prevention outcomes

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Successful sexual violence prevention work requires the use of multiple strategies and approaches. None of the most common approaches used today are:

1. Gender equity: Promotes healthy notions of gender roles.
3. Criminal justice: Focuses on offender accountability.

An Oregon-based initiative, known as the Oregon Sexual Assault Task Force (OSATF), is working to address these issues by integrating a public health approach to sexual violence prevention.

The public health model outlines four steps:

1. Define the problem
2. Identify risk and protective factors
3. Develop and test prevention strategies
4. Promote widespread adoption

Its core principles include the health of the public, data-informed approaches, cultural competency, and prevention.

I became involved with OSATF after four years of community health work, surrounded by public health researchers and practitioners who approached their work through a public health lens. For me, this work was about prevention

...
Still resistance?

- Yes
- No
Still resistance?

Yes

No
Defining Public Health
Perception
Public Health is a medical model, with a history of use for disease prevention, which doesn’t easily transfer to issues like violence prevention (which has more social than biological causes).
It doesn’t address the root causes of complex social problems, just the risk factors.
Ignores Social Justice

Public Health is about HEALTH. What does that have to do with social justice?
Public Health acts like it owns prevention – oppressed communities have been doing this work forever, just not using these inaccessible terms like ‘primary prevention.’
Directive/Behavior-obsessed/Shallow

Public Health just tells people what to do. It doesn’t care about eliminating injustices.
Public Health just tells people what to do. It doesn’t care about eliminating injustices.
Neutral

Public Health ignores gender. It ignores patriarchy. It doesn’t acknowledge the ‘gender-based’ nature of many problems.
Suggestions
Love Others

We use the Public Health approach as a compliment to a number of other approaches: human rights, criminal justice, gender equity. It all works together to provide a comprehensive analysis of and response to a community-wide problem.
Accept Limits

For me, Public Health provides the tools I need to put theory into action.
It wasn’t until we learned the Public Health model of violence prevention that we really understood the value of data informing our efforts and the importance of thinking beyond the individual.
Shift the Lens & Language

Public Health is just another way of wording all the things I learned in Community Psychology. It’s all about the health of a community…finding out why people are falling into this river and stopping that rather than pulling out bodies. It provides a model for strategic action.
Focus on Health Equity

It helped us to define violence and abuse as an issue of health equity. We hadn’t thought about the fact that it stems from health disparities before. Social determinants of health – those are totally based in oppression.
So…
It’s all about social justice.
I love public health.