

MEN'S ROLE IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

A New Approach to an Old Problem

Numerous reports have stated that one of every three women has, at some point in her life been the victim of sexual, physical or psychological violence perpetrated by men (1).

Thousands of programs have been developed to assist these women, from shelters and legal aid groups, to support groups and counselling services

Activists and theorists alike have realized that, while essential, these services are insufficient. To eradicate gender-based violence we must address the cause as well as the effect. The cause is men's violent behaviour.

It is easy to blame men without questioning why they are violent. In the United States, 90% of those charged with aggravated assault are men (4). But where does this propensity for violence come from?

Addressing Men's Violence

Growing attention to the problem of men and violence has focused on the environment in which men are socialized. The ideas, images and norms of behaviour to which men are exposed from birth play a crucial role in shaping their behaviour. Consider the fact that men who witness partner abuse during their childhood are more likely to abuse their partners (8).

Programs which address men's role in gender-based violence can be roughly sorted into three categories: Education campaigns (Including media advocacy); working with the perpetrators of GBV and addressing masculinities.

I. Education and Advocacy Campaigns

It is hardly surprising that men have a greater propensity towards violence when they are bombarded with it on a daily basis. Television, movies and advertising continue to glorify the role of the "macho" man through action movies and television, violent video games and toys, pornography and much more. Media education and advocacy campaigns have two central objectives; to elicit change in the existing media, and to use media to transmit alternative messages.

Changing existing media - This is accomplished mainly through lobbying governments, standards councils, television networks, manufacturers etc. to make their products less violent, or to develop and enforce quality control legislation. The Media Awareness Network in Canada (<http://www.media-awareness.ca/>), for example, monitors compliance with Canadian broadcasting standards on violence in programming, lobbies the government to develop tougher standards, and conducts public education campaigns about particularly violent programming.

Transmitting alternative messages - A number of non-governmental organizations have begun to use media to broadcast messages of non-violence and respect. For example, following Hurricane Mitch, the Nicaraguan NGO Puntos de Encuentro (<http://www.puntos.org.ni>) organized an anti-violence campaign around the message "Violence against women is one disaster men can prevent". Other men's groups in Nicaragua have been working with men in urban and rural communities to explore their own roles in their relationships. Similarly, the Washington DC-based Men Can Stop Rape (<http://mencanstoprape.org>) organized a "Strength Campaign" around the message "My strength is not for hurting", conveying that men could be strong without being violent.

II. Addressing Masculinities

Just as traditional notions of femininity have influenced both the way women behave, and the way they are expected to behave, men are victims of similar expectations (to be controlling, aggressive, physically strong, heterosexual, courageous and a financial provider).

From the earliest age, boys learn how to "be a man" from their, fathers, mothers, teachers, mentors, friends and other role models (including the ones they find on television and in movies). Boys play with guns, planes and other violent toys, they engage in "contact sports" that glorify violence and the ability to overcome the other team, they are expected to become ruthless and powerful business

Quick Facts

Gender-Based Violence is 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life'. (Economic and Social Council, UN, 1992).

- 33% (ages 16 and 49) have been victims of sexual abuse (2).
- At least 45% have been threatened, insulted or had their personal possessions destroyed. (2)
- In established market economies, gender-based violence is responsible for one out of every five healthy days of life lost to women of reproductive age (3)
- In a study of battered women in Costa Rica, 49% reported being beaten while pregnant, and 7.5% of these women suffered miscarriages as a result (3).
- A 1995 survey stated that violence against women in Canada cost the country \$1.5 billion (Cdn.) in lost labor productivity and increased use of medical and community support services (6).
- 10-50% of women in every country (where reliable data exists) have experienced physical abuse by an intimate partner (6).
- In 1998, interpersonal violence was the tenth leading cause of death for women (ages 15-44) (5).
- 95% of Mexican female workers report being sexually harassed (7)

executives, destroying their competitors, or they are encouraged to join the military and serve their countries by attacking "enemy" states or groups of people.

Programs which address masculinities attempt to explore what "makes a man". The central idea is to educate boys from the earliest age that violence (against anyone) is wrong, that the prevailing definition of masculinity in any society is not the only alternative, and that even though they are physically different, girls are entitled to the same rights and opportunities as men. These programs are still too young for researchers to say whether or not they are successful. Like education campaigns and BIPs, programs which look at masculinities should probably be viewed as one facet of a strategic approach which addresses GBV in all areas.

III. Working with Perpetrators

Programs that target perpetrators of violence against women have been a controversial, though occasionally successful initiative. Some studies show that when men follow Batterer Intervention Programs (BIPs) to their conclusion, they can influence their behaviour for a short time (see "[Controversies and Recent Studies of Batterer Intervention Program Effectiveness](#)"). These studies generally conclude that BIPs should be seen as one part of a multi-faceted approach to addressing GBV where the emphasis is on stopping violence before it begins.

A greater number of BIP evaluations have levied critiques at this approach: (see "[Limits and Risks of Programs for Wife Batters](#)"):

- BIPs absolve the perpetrator of responsibility for his actions by blaming them on mental illness or a traumatic past.
- No method exists to assure attendance, or penalize failure to attend
- BIPs may lead men to practice more subtle forms of psychological and economic violence, rather than overt physical violence.
- Programs are usually designed for middle class, employed and married men.
- BIPs prescribe specific therapies even though no "pathology of violence" (cause) has ever been identified.
- The fact that program participants do not batter again is taken as proof of the program's success, without exploration of other possible causal factors. In the majority of cases, the only measure of recidivism is re-arrest or conviction.
- BIPs may divert resources from victim services, which is not justified by their present rate of success.

Areas for Action

We must work with men, as both perpetrators and victims, in order to address those masculinities which glorify violence:

- Since the family is the first instrument of socialization for both girls and boys, it should be the first place that a boy is given the freedom to express his emotions, is taught to resolve conflict peacefully, and learns to see girls as equals in every respect. How a family treats its female members will have as much effect on the development of masculinity as how boys themselves are treated and taught.
- Education is another important conduit of gender socialization. The attitudes a boy is exposed to at school can either challenge or reinforce existing gender stereotypes.
- The media has an increasingly influential role to play in changing gender stereotypes. Just as movies, television and print media now perpetuate traditional or negative gender stereotypes, the media's centrality in our daily lives means that it can be a crucial channel for change.

Commitment and patience are two essential components of any attempt to change men's violent behaviour. It can not be done overnight and may require several generations of intense work. The end result however, a world where no one uses violence to control other people's behaviour, makes the means seem worthwhile.

References

1. A World of Difference: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Risks (Population Action International) 2000. http://www.populationaction.org/resources/publications/worldofdifference/rr2_introduction.htm
2. Gender-Based Violence is an Obstacle to Development <http://www.undp.org/rblac/gender/internationalday.htm>
3. Health: The Risks of Gender-Based Violence <http://www.undp.org/rblac/gender/genderbased.htm>
4. Connell, Robert. "Men and Violence" INSTRAW (2001) <http://www.mail-archive.com/emvnet@un-instraw.org/msg00001.html>
5. "Violence Against Women: WHO Fact Sheet No.239 (June 2000) <http://www.who.int/inf-fs/en/fact239.html>
6. Ending Violence Against Women *Population Reports*, JHUCCP (No. 11, 1999) <http://www.jhuccp.org/pr/111edsum.stm>
7. Gender-Based Violence: An Impediment to Sexual and Reproductive Health (IPPF) 1999 <http://www.ippf.org/resource/gbv/ma98/>
8. Domestic Violence and Children <http://www.famvi.com/othersts.htm>

Useful Links

- ❑ Ending Violence Against Women (Johns Hopkins Centre for Communications Programs) <http://www.endvaw.org>
- ❑ UNDP Men and Gender Equity Programme http://www.undp.org/gender/programmes/men/men_ge.html
- ❑ The White Ribbon Campaign (Canada) <http://www.whiteribbon.ca/>
- ❑ A Life Free of Violence: It's our Right (UNIFEM) <http://www.undp.org/rblac/gender/index.html>
- ❑ Men's Role in Ending Gender-Based Violence (INSTRAW Virtual Seminar Series) <http://www.un-instraw.org/mensroles/>
- ❑ Preliminary report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, (UNESCO) 1994 <http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/TestFrame/75ccfd797b0712d08025670b005c9a7d?Opendocument>

