

Bold Approaches to Engage Men to End Men’s Violence Against Women

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It’s the greatest and seemingly most intractable of human pandemics.¹ It is men’s violence against women in all its forms: harassment, stalking, battering, coercive control, sexual assault, and murder. Globally nearly one in three women will experience physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner or non-partner in their lifetime.² For several decades, we’ve argued that the missing link in ending men’s violence against women (MVAW) is the active engagement of men in prevention and response. Such action is the necessary complement to the leadership of women in pressing for legal reform and active policing, providing services to women experiencing violence, conducting research, and raising public awareness. Or to put it differently, the conversation about engaging men is not *instead of* supporting women survivors. Such engagement, along with increased support to women’s programs, needs to happen now.

First let’s talk about why we must engage men. The most obvious is that a frighteningly large number of men commit such acts. Less obvious, perhaps, is the silence of the majority of men who don’t use violence but through their silence—*our* silence—have allowed the violence to continue. We say this because we men still disproportionately wield power and influence as lawmakers, police and judges; as educators, religious authorities, doctors, and media figures; but also because boys look to men and men look to other men to define masculine norms. Even if these silent men are horrified by the magnitude of the problem (or are directly affected by it, as witnesses and at times as victims of other men’s physical or sexual violence) if we don’t speak out, advocate, and intervene, our silence becomes tacit acceptance.

Research carried out by Equipundo (the US-based NGO that one of us, Gary, co-founded) discovered, for example, that young men are fully cognizant of on-line and in-person sexual harassment of girls as well as homophobic bullying toward male peers but often don’t speak up because they are afraid of the consequences toward themselves from their peers.³ This is a problem we have heard from boys and men we have worked with around the world. Thus, a second reason to engage boys and men is to give them support to speak out or to seek support themselves.

And third? From many studies, including our own IMAGES studies conducted in nearly 50 countries, analysis from the majority of those surveys finds that the number one predictor of whether a man will use violence in his relationships is whether he witnessed his father or another man using violence against his mother as well as whether

¹ Michael is grateful to YSL Beauty for its support in the research and writing of this article.

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

³ <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/bullying-crisis-summary/>

he himself experienced violence from other boys and men, at home, school or in the community.⁴ When children (especially when very young) “witness” violence against a loved one, particularly if it is prolonged or severe, it can have the same psychological impact as if it was directly happening to them. Witnessing equals experiencing. We often fail to consider that violence in the lives of men and boys is a source of trauma that affects men and boys too. The intergenerational transmission of violent behavior is complex – after all, some men witness violence or experience it and do not go on to perpetrate it. This not only shows us the resiliency of children, but it can help us discover pathways to prevention. Rather than seeing boys as “infectious agents” who witness violence and then may go on to use it, our work must understand boys and men as deeply harmed by intimate partner violence, bullying, and other forms of men’s violence and to see their stake in preventing it.

For many years, we, along with a relatively small number of colleagues around the world, needed to convince others that it was important to involve boys and men to end MVAW. Increasingly, however, we no longer need to argue *why* we must do so. Rather, the conversation now is *how*? So let’s ask what actually works to change men’s attitudes and behaviour and to bring men and boys into the conversation as full allies and partners who see their stake in healthy versions of manhood and of full equality for all?

Over the years, we’ve heard comparisons to highly successful awareness-raising efforts to end smoking or drinking and driving. Unfortunately, the nature and causes of men’s violence against women (and, indeed, all forms of gender-based violence⁵) are exponentially more complex. Simple solutions don’t end complex, millennial-long problems deeply embedded not only in our minds but in the structures and institutions of our societies. An added challenge is that gender norms, relations, and expectations vary from culture to culture, as have women’s (and men’s) resistance and organizing against the patriarchal status quo. That said, there are common features to all our male-dominated cultures which we have explored in our research and writing over the years. Such commonalities give us the basis to make some generalizations and also to develop forms of international cooperation.⁶

⁴ The IMAGES surveys (International Men and Gender Equality Survey) are long, in-depth surveys, usually carried out in person. They’ve been carried out since the projects inception in 2008 and continue in new countries almost every year. See some of the results at: https://www.equimundo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IMAGES-Headlines_2022.pdf

⁵ Gender based violence (GBV) includes not only men’s violence against women and girls, but homophobic violence, transphobic violence, but also many instances of men’s/boy’s violence against other men/boys and some instances of women’s/girls’ violence against men/boys where relations of gender power, gender identity and self-definition, gendered expectations are at issue.

⁶ See for example, Michael Kaufman, *The Time Has Come: Why Men Must Join the Gender Equality Revolution*, Counterpoint Press, 2019.

While awareness campaigns aimed at men are far from sufficient, we recognize that they remain extremely important. Indeed, one of us, Michael, co-founded the first such large-scale campaign in 1991, the White Ribbon Campaign which spread from Canada to over ninety countries. Many national efforts in this de-centralized effort have come and gone, but others remain active.

Where campaigns are most important is engaging boys and men to question their peers and to see themselves as part of the solution. White Ribbon illustrates approaches which remain critical to virtually all efforts to directly engage men: It is critical to mobilize the voices of men, including role models, to speak out, thus making it safe for all boys and men to speak out. We use positive messages, not simply saying what *not* to do, but to emphasize the role men can play in ending this scourge, in supporting women in their communities and women's rights organizations, in supporting changes in laws and our ideas, and also by showing how boys and men will benefit from the end of gender-based violence and from healthier models of manhood. White Ribbon and similar efforts encourage careful messaging aimed at different age groups and diverse communities (ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, economic) and where possible we encourage members of those communities to lead the work aimed at their peers. We encourage all men to carefully examine our own attitudes and behaviours which usually include traditional ideas of manhood which are often harmful not only to women but to men ourselves.⁷

As well, campaigns and activities to engage boys and men do our best to ensure that we are not taking resources or attention away from work led by and supporting women but rather augmenting it. We do this by staying in close consultation with women activists and researchers, as well as survivors of violence. In some cases, campaigns directly build support and raise funds for women's programs. And we do it by putting the interests of survivors of violence first and foremost.⁸

Now, more than thirty years later, the type of approach pioneered by White Ribbon has been taken up and often improved by many organizations. These sometimes bring deeper research, more sophisticated educational resources, greater professionalism, a larger membership base, and deeper relationships with specific communities. One example is the "It's On Us" campaign in the United States, a partner of YSL BEAUTY's Abuse is Not Love's program, which focuses on university and college settings to engage young men to play a role in ending sexual assault. It has expanded beyond its initial focus on raising awareness to implementing a more comprehensive,

⁷ Michael's concept of "men's contradictory experiences of power" or "the paradox of men's power" explores the harmful impacts of patriarchy on boys and men, that is, the very ways we have constructed a world of men's power and privilege comes with costs to boys and men. See, for example, https://michaelkaufman.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/men_feminism.pdf as well as Kaufman, *The Time Has Come*.

⁸ <https://michaelkaufman.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/The-Day-the-White-Ribbon-Campaign-Changed-the-Game.pdf>

evidence-based model. They've integrated more accessible resources, set up peer-to-peer education initiatives, and facilitated group discussions. Like our colleagues at Coaching Boys to Men, their work includes specific outreach to male athletes.

Education campaigns can help raise awareness about the need for men to take action and can reduce men's use of violence when also accompanied by other interventions: individual discussions, group education, and referrals to services. As noted above, given that some men's use of GBV is related to trauma from violence experienced or witnessed, trauma-informed interventions also show promising impact.⁹

And that is why it is increasingly rare that men's awareness campaigns happen in isolation. Rather they normally roll out at the same time as a wide range of prevention and response measures: group education for young and adult men, hotlines for men experiencing stress, services to women who have experienced violence (including shelters for abused women, transitional housing, psychological and financial support), legal reform, police and judge training, research, intervention programs with men who use violence, and broad advocacy efforts.

We need these programmatic approaches to be scaled up, funded, and sustained. But we also need a paradigm shift in how we think about ending the violence once and for all. This means engaging government, workplace, and community-based initiatives that not only prevent violence but also promote care and equality. Much of our own work now focuses on the transformation of fatherhood so more men take equal responsibility for raising children and for domestic work. We campaign for extended parental leave for both biological and adopting fathers, knowing not only that this is essential for gender equality, but that this is absolutely key for men developing the caregiving and emotional skills required to live lives free of violence.¹⁰

Broader, deeper, and more impactful efforts also require recognizing boys' and men's vulnerabilities and health issues, both mental and physical, and promoting self-care among men. It requires age-appropriate support for men and boys to be respectful and caring individuals. It will require the end to the many social ills—including racism, homophobia, class oppression—that create humiliation and resentment among many groups of men and which can, in turn, lead to violence.

⁹ <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/breaking-the-cycle-of-intergenerational-violence-the-promise-of-psychosocial-interventions-to-address-childrens-exposure-to-violence/>

¹⁰ See <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/state-of-the-worlds-fathers-2023/> Also see Kaufman, *The Time*

Has Come, chapter 5

One example of how these issues can be combined comes from Rwanda and the work of the Rwandan Men's Resource Centre (Rwamrec) and Equimundo. The programme, Bandebereho ("role model") recruited fathers of young children and soon-to-be fathers to participate in a 17-week group education process. Sessions with their wives focused on couple negotiation, non-violent child rearing; men only sessions gave men their first opportunity to discuss their own lives and concerns.

Two years after this program ended, we conducted a randomized control study involving of 575 couples who'd been in the groups and 624 other couples who didn't get the intervention. Based on the answers from the women, we learned that men who'd taken part in the programme used 40 percent less partner violence compared to those who had not. And there was greater participation of women in household decision-making and an increase in men doing childcare and housework.¹¹

Based on the strength of those results, the Rwandan government is now scaling up the program nationwide. This is perhaps one of the first examples globally of a community-based program being taken to the national level. We need far more of those.

Often young men are the target (to use that unfortunate expression) of our efforts—for example, in the Abuse Is Not Love initiatives in the US and South Africa. Or to give another example, Equimundo's Program H/Manhood 2.0 curriculum has been used in more than 30 countries engaging young men in structured group discussions about healthier ideas of manhood, consent in the context of intimate partner relationships, and help-seeking. Results from several rigorous impact evaluation studies found important changes in attitudes and behaviors related to use of violence and bullying.¹²

Our key takeaway is this: Men's Violence Against Women (MVAW) is preventable. It is possible to end cycles of violence and improve not only women's but also men's lives in the process. Yes, we must continue to "call out" those men who use violence. But the promise of change is in "calling in" all men to lives of care, non-violence and respect.

caregiving

But in practice, what does "call in men" mean, other than a clever turn of phrase? Let's start with institutions. Organizations must start with humility and recognize that they likely don't have expertise engaging men and boys

¹¹ <https://www.equimundo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Gender-transformative-Bandebereho-couples-intervention-to-promote-male-engagement-in-reproductive-and-maternal-health-and-violence-prevention-in-Rwanda.pdf>

¹² <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/program-h-a-review-of-the-evidence-nearly-two-decades-of-engaging-young-men-and-boys-in-gender-equality/>

and that the lessons of other efforts (such as workplace safety, anti-smoking, or drinking-and-driving campaigns) don't usually work in this area. They must consciously develop the understanding, the expertise, the programming, and the skills to bring boys and men in as partners in the gender equality revolution and to end gender-based violence. This requires drawing on the now voluminous critical research on men and masculinities, and learning from the individuals and organizations that have carried out programs over the years.

Calling in men requires setting up allyship initiatives to bring together boys or men within their organization and its key partners. Creating these new networks allow organizations to train those men and to provide a safe space for them to explore their own experiences as boys and men, as well as to learn from the women around them, as well as from others facing discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, their race, religion, or ethnicity. (This what we now call an intersectional approach.)

Calling in men requires leadership from the top of organizations. Too often, we've seen well-meaning initiatives in companies, unions, governments, and educational institutions falter because there isn't active, vocal, and ongoing support from top leadership.

It requires organizations taking a "big tent" approach to reach out to stakeholders and others they don't usually work with (or perhaps not even totally agree with) to find ways to work together for gender equity and to end MVAW.

At the individual level, we men need to begin (or continue) this journey by listening with respect to the voices of women. We do so for the simple reason that that the history of male dominated societies has marginalized their voices. We men need to learn from the experiences of women. We must approach all this with humility, which often means setting aside the lessons we've learned as we grew to be men, and figure out what we don't know.

Helping us do so requires not only learning from women, but reaching out to our brothers with compassion but also challenge—and that includes challenging ourselves. We do so not out of collective guilt or collective blame, but out of a desire to be better, stronger, and more caring individuals who want to be part of the greatest revolution in human history, the gender equality revolution.