Engaging Youth to Promote Healthy Masculinities and End Gender-Based Violence

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While empowering women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals remains a cornerstone of gender-based violence (GBV) work, boys and male-identifying youth also play a key role in the prevention of GBV. Providing boys and male-identifying youth with opportunities to explore their identities, reflect on their own understandings of masculinity, and advocate for gender equality are some of the ways they can be allies in advocating for transforming social norms. Part of this work includes recognizing and resisting harmful stereotypical conceptions and constructions of masculinity and femininity (i.e. the gender binary) imposed by patriarchal masculinities that youth are often exposed to from a young age.

Patriarchal masculinities is a term that can be used to describe those ideas and practices that promote unequal gender norms in society by asserting men and boys' superiority and domination over female-identifying, gender-diverse, and other male-identified individuals. Such ideas and practices maintain gender inequalities and fuel the perpetration of all forms of GBV.

To counter the proliferation of patriarchal masculinities, advance gender equality and gender equity and end GBV, it is crucial that boys and male-identifying youth be inspired by and adopt healthy and equitable alternatives.
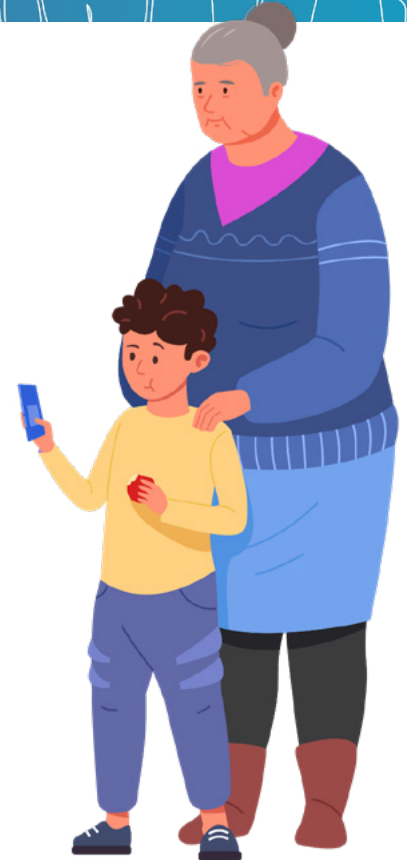
This Backgrounder explores patriarchal and healthy masculinities, the impacts of patriarchal masculinities on GBV, and the role of youth in promoting healthy masculinities. It also spotlights White Ribbon's intensive and gender-transformative curriculum on healthy masculinities and discusses its impacts on youth and the broader community. Lastly, it offers a call to action for boys and male-identifying youth to join efforts to prevent GBV.

This Backgrounder was co-created with the Learning Network and White Ribbon.

white ribbon

30 YEARS

Understanding patriarchal masculinities

Patriarchal masculinities are beliefs and attitudes that emphasize the superiority of masculinity over femininity and the authority and power of men over women to maintain gender inequalities.[1]

Ideas and practices of patriarchal masculinities are deeply entrenched in societies and lead to harmful impacts for women and girls, as well as men and boys. For instance, many of the messages and expectations traditionally associated with masculinity impose narrow gender roles on men and boys that ignore and deny their emotional, physical, and spiritual needs.[2] Thus, boys and male-identifying youth are subjected to, whether willing or not, a role of maintaining a patriarchal system of domination.

Patriarchal notions of masculinity are often associated with physical strength and protection, heterosexuality, obsessions with sex, emotional toughness (e.g. hiding emotions), and stoicness. Traits that fall outside of this idea of masculinity are associated with being "weak, emotional, gay, feminine."[3] These ideas can become so pervasive and idealized, allowing them to flourish and permeate into everyday life.

Patriarchal masculinities have been harmfully imposed upon some cultural and racial groups that did not have such beliefs. For instance, colonialism imposed patriarchal masculinities on Indigenous Peoples by disrupting the power dynamics in Indigenous communities where men, women, and 2-Spirit people all had valuable roles in their societies.[4]

Through colonization, women's roles and the roles of 2-Spirit people became viewed as inferior and the roles and power they held among their families and communities were actively undermined and transformed.

Relevant Resource:
Learn more about Indigenous masculinities in this Facebook Live presented by Sage Lacerte from the Moosehide Campaign!

Patriarchal masculinities and gender-based violence

Patriarchal masculinities reinforce ideas and practices that lead to violence against women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals. For instance, violence is used to maintain power and to treat women, girls and gender-diverse individuals as inferior and subordinate. This violence also targets men and boys who are perceived as less manly, masculine or 'feminine'.

Studies have shown that men and boys who adhere to rigid, patriarchal masculine gender norms tend to condone and commit higher levels of GBV, including intimate partner violence, dating violence, and sexual violence.[5] For instance, traits such as asserting dominance and power can lead to violent and aggressive behaviours that are apparent in cases of sexual violence. Asserting dominance and power can show up as bullying, not asking for consent, competitiveness, forceful actions, invading someone's personal space, and expansive body posture.

Patriarchal masculinities also have implications for boys and male-identifying survivors of sexual violence who may struggle with feelings of shame, stigma, and weakness for not being able to protect themselves from violence. The shame and stigma can deter boys and male-identifying survivors from disclosing, seeking help, and healing, leading them to navigate the trauma without adequate supports.

How masculinities are often presented to youth

Boys and male-identifying youth are often exposed to harmful messaging around masculinities (and femininities) within different environments that are absorbed, reproduced, and acted out in negative behaviours.

For example, school is often a place where boys and male-identifying youth feel unsafe as they must fit the expectations and ideas of "boyhood" and "manhood", or they risk not fitting in and becoming a target. Specifically, the middle school years (ages 10-13) appear to be a critical time when powerful and harmful masculinity norms become apparent.[6]

Consider the following harmful messages that are often heard in everyday contexts:

In daycare

"Dolls are for girls! Here, come kick a soccer ball with me!"
"Tell him to play with the girls – he uses a wheelchair and cannot keep up with us."

In school

"Man up, let's go beat him up!"
"Are you gay? Why are you doing a play?"

At home

"I don't do dishes or cook. That's your mom's job."
"I'm the boss – she's gotta do what I say or she pays."

At a party

"Come on man, drink up– you gotta be a team player!"
"I'm going after her whether she likes it or not."

In media

"A classic case of boys will be boys. Let them be."
"Black boys are prone to violence."

In a sports environment

"You're so weak, it's just a sprain. Suck it up and stop being a girl."
"You're Indigenous – a warrior! You have to be good at sports."

Related resource:
Learn more about sexual violence prevention in sport in this Backgrounder

Challenging these harmful messages in early education is an opportunity to foster positive attitudes and behaviors in youth during their formative years that will influence their lifelong perspectives on gender roles, relationships and violence. Boys and male-identifying youth not only build skills in equity and ally-ship, but also develop a healthier and more authentic sense of self.

Moving towards healthy masculinities among youth

Working with youth to address GBV must aim to challenge common concepts and constructions of gender binaries entrenched in social norms, seek to transform social attitudes around gender roles, and encourage healthier forms of masculinities.

Healthy masculinities encompass a diverse and positive range of behaviors, attitudes, and traits that best reflect values of selflessness, openness, kindness, supportiveness, authenticity, vulnerability while also promoting respect, equality and emotional wellbeing.

They redefine patriarchal notions of masculinity by embracing traits that foster healthy relationships, personal growth, and a more inclusive society while aiming to dismantle stereotypes that suppress vulnerability. Adopting traits and norms associated with healthy masculinities allow boys and male-identifying youth to connect more deeply with others and create more meaningful and equitable relationships by celebrating and encouraging broader gender expressions that move beyond the gender binary.

Healthy masculinities can look like:

Expressing emotions authentically

"I'm so proud of you – I know how hard you worked to achieve this and I am happy that you made it!"

Open communication

"Hey, can we talk? You said something yesterday that really hurt me and I wanted to understand what you meant by it."

Crying

"That movie was so good and gave me all the feels – I can't stop tearing!"

Being empathetic and compassionate

"I'm sorry this happened to you and I want to help you in a way that is comfortable to you."

Active listening

"Tell me more about what happened. Did you feel upset or angry?"

Being vulnerable

"I wasn't feeling okay last night and I think I need to get help."

Healthy masculinities can lead to positive mental health outcomes and improve the quality of life for boys and male-identifying youth in support of healthier families and communities.

"Boys cannot be what they cannot see. Young men need relatable, engaging models for manhood – mentors who expand the possibilities in their lives."[7]

Gender-transformative approaches: A spotlight on White Ribbon's *Promoting Healthy Masculinities from Coast to Coast* project

Opportunities for early intervention and promotion of healthy masculinities are critical for boys and male-identifying youth. Gender-transformative approaches seek to challenge inequalities by transforming harmful gender norms, roles and relations while working towards equality and equity.

In such approaches, everyone works together to create change, rather than putting the onus on women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals to advocate for equality.

Gender-transformative work includes amplifying messaging of alternative expressions of masculinity and developing better strategies alongside feminist, youth, 2SLGBTQIA+, and further marginalized groups in calling for action and change.

Promoting healthy masculinities from coast to coast

Through a gender-transformative curriculum and program entitled *Promoting Healthy Masculinities from Coast to Coast*, White Ribbon aims to address patriarchal masculinities and promote gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours amongst male-identifying youth (ages 13 to 17) in efforts to end GBV.

As part of the first phase in this project, White Ribbon created safe spaces together with male-identifying youth to engage in discussions around masculinity and what it means to be growing up as male-identifying in the world today. Through open conversations and education, youth were encouraged to challenge gender norms and stereotypes that often perpetuate harmful behaviors.

The project was divided into 3 main modules of learning:

Module 1 focuses on drawing attention to the negative impacts of gender stereotypes on men, boys and male-identifying folks in different aspects of their lives. Youth explore how to start building a healthy version of masculinity.

1. What are the issues?

Module 3 summarizes the curriculum and provides male youth with tangible actions they can take immediately to actively become part of the solution. Youth are supported to build the confidence and skills necessary to build equity and ally-ship in multiple facets of their lives.

Module 2 focuses on providing the basics about GBV, what it is, where we see it happening, what it looks like, and the root causes. Particularly, it focuses on how GBV may show up in young people's lives; in relationships, in schools and online.

2. Understanding gender-based violence (GBV)

3. Becoming part of the solution

White Ribbon has launched Phase 2 of the project and continues to support local community organizations in bringing this curriculum to youth. If you are interested in learning more, please visit allyship.whiteribbon.ca or email Zoey James at zjames@whiteribbon.ca

Project impacts

After two years of piloting the program across the country in multiple urban settings with 121 male-identifying youth participants, evaluation findings indicated positive outcomes at numerous levels of change.

77 of the 121 participants completed a survey and as a result of the program:

83% learned healthier ways to manage their emotions

78% felt better prepared to build equitable and healthy relationships with friends and romantic/intimate partners

76% had a better understanding of the positive roles that they can play in ending gender-based violence

76% reported that they were more likely to intervene if they hear or see someone committing an act of gender-based violence

74% had more empathy and compassion for survivors of gender-based violence

What youth said about the program

Participants shared one key action that they planned to take going forward because of what they learned in the program. Common responses included:

- **Using their learnings to try and be a better person/man.**
  - "Use the information I learned to be a good person."
  - "Identifying examples of toxic masculinity and sexism. Actively changing my mindset and encouraging others to change their harmful beliefs."
  - "Being more accepting."
- **Using inclusive and affirming language.**
  - "To ask and use proper pronouns."
- **Trying to be a better friend and have healthier relationships.**
  - "To talk and share stuff to my friends."
- **Holding their peers accountable and calling out inappropriate language.**
  - "Start calling out language that people use while playing video games."
- **Intervening when they see instances of gender-based violence.**
  - "Start to intervene in GBV I see around me."
  - "Aid in stopping sexism."
  - "Whenever I'm with my girlfriend I will always try to ask for consent and never force anyone to do anything."

Call-in: How boys and male-identifying youth can challenge patriarchal masculinities and promote healthier alternatives

Promoting healthy masculinities through training is a starting place, but it also requires a collective process that involves deep reflection about how harmful masculinities manifest within and impact everyday interactions, behaviours, and experiences. Adhering to patriarchal traits and values not only negatively impact boys and male-identifying youth and their wellbeing, it also denies them their potential to achieve their full humanity.

Boys and male-identifying youth who adopt healthier models of masculinity can fully develop their physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs in a way that benefits not just themselves, but the people around them and their interpersonal relationships, with such impacts reverberating throughout the community and broader society.

Consider the following actionable items to share with boys and male-identifying youth to support gender equity, challenge patriarchal masculinities, and end gender-based violence:

- **Acknowledge women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals' perspectives and lived experiences including oppression, discrimination, and gender-based violence**

- **Think about your own individual privilege and power**

- **Speak up when you hear harmful or sexist language**

- **Encourage others to express a full range of emotions**

- **Understand that consent is essential to healthy relationships**

- **Learn more about where ideas of patriarchal masculinities come from and create safe spaces that allow men to learn more about the history of patriarchal masculinities, and issues of masculinity and violence**

The involvement of boys and male-identifying youth in strategies to prevent and address violence can make a real difference in reducing GBV. Promoting healthy masculinities is one critical part of ongoing efforts to address GBV and advancing gender equality and equity.

Relevant Resource: Learn more about gender equity in this Issue!

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