


# Working With Men and Boys to Challenge Sexism and End Men's Violence

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*It is the individual man, raising his fist at his wife.*

*It is the gang of boys, cheering on the fight in the middle of a tight circle.*

*It is the young man on a date, acting without regard for the desires of the young woman he is with.*

*It is the man, pushed by rage or fear, driving his car to his death.*

*It is the physical or verbal attack, on another man, because of his sexual orientation or religion or skin color.*

*It is the gangs of men – we call them armies – who have been commanded to view each other as less than human, and to view civilians as something even less.*

*It is violence on the playing field.*

*It is the structural institutionalization of violence in our factories, in the design of our cities, in the rigid hierarchies of education, work, politics, and in the privileges conferred by accidents of birth: our color, nation, and physical well-being.*

*It is, perhaps metaphorically, perhaps not, our relationship to our natural environments.*

*It is men's violence in its myriad of forms.*

*This paper sketches a framework for understanding this violence and its relation to the lives and experiences of men. It then looks at two sets of activities in which I have worked to challenge men's violence: the activities of the White Ribbon Campaign, the largest effort in the world of men working to end violence against women and, secondly, work within the educational system.*

## PART ONE:

### THE ROOTS & ARTICULATIONS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE

My previous explorations of men's violence have described what I call "the triad of men's violence." I have looked at the ways that men's violence against women is linked to men's violence against other men and to the internalization of violence, that is, a man's violence against himself. This triad – each form of violence helping create the others – occurs within a nurturing environment of violence: the organization and demands of patriarchal or male dominant societies.

What gives violence its hold as a way of doing business, what has naturalized it as the de facto standard of human relations, is the way it has been articulated into our ideologies and social structures. Simply put, human groups create self-perpetuating forms of social organization and ideologies that explain, give meaning to, justify, and replenish these created realities. It is also built into these ideologies and structures for the more simple reason that it has brought enormous benefits to particular groups: first and foremost, violence (or at least the threat of violence), helps confer on men a rich set of privileges and forms of power. If indeed the original forms of social hierarchy and power are those based on sex, then this long ago formed a template for all the structured forms of power and privilege enjoyed by others as a result of social class or skin color, age or sexual orientation. In such a context, violence or its threat, become means to ensure the continued reaping of privileges and exercise of power. It is both a result and a means to an end.

But men's violence is not simply a result of men's individual and social power and, as Michael Kimmel suggests in his paper, the sense of entitlement to that power.

My work has also analyzed what I call "men's contradictory experiences of power." The very ways that men have constructed our social and individual power is the source of enormous fear, isolation, and pain for men ourselves. If power is constructed as a capacity to dominate and control, if the capacity to act in "powerful" ways requires the construction of a personal suit of armor and a fearful distance from others, if the very world of power and privilege removes us from the world of child-rearing and nurturance, then we are constructing men whose own experience of power is fraught with crippling problems.

And, top of that, the internalized expectations of masculinity are themselves impossible to satisfy or attain. This may well be a timeless problem, but it seems particularly true in an era and in cultures where rigid sex boundaries have been overthrown. Whether it is physical or financial accomplishment, or the suppression of a range of human emotions and needs, the imperatives of manhood (as opposed to the simple certainties of biological maleness), seem to require constant vigilance and work, especially for younger men.

The personal insecurities conferred by a failure to make the masculine grade, or simply, the threat of failure, is enough to propel many men, particularly when they are young, into a vortex of fear, isolation, anger, self-punishment, self-hatred, and aggression.

Within such an emotional state, violence becomes a compensatory mechanism. It is a way of

re-establishing the masculine equilibrium, of asserting to oneself and others one's masculine credentials.

What makes this possible as an individual compensatory mechanism has been the wide-spread acceptance of violence as a means of solving differences and asserting power and control. What makes it possible are the power and privileges men have enjoyed, things encoded in beliefs, practices, social structures, and the law.

Men's violence, in its myriad of forms, is therefore the result both of men's power, the sense of entitlement to the power, and of the fear (or reality) of not having power.

And, finally, it is the result of a character structure that is typically based on emotional distance from others. As both myself and many others have suggested, the psychic structures of manhood are created in early childrearing environments often typified by the relative absence of fathers and adult men. The result of this complex and particular process of psychological development, is a dampened ability to experience what others are feeling and to not experience other people's needs and feelings as necessarily relating to one's own. Acts of violence against another person are, therefore, possible.

This analysis, even presented in such a condensed form, suggests that challenging men's violence requires an articulated response that includes:

the dismantling of the structures of men's power and privilege;

the redefinition of masculinity or, really, the dismantling of the psychic and social structures of gender that bring with them such peril;

organizing and involving men, as it has involved women, to reshape the sexual organization of society, in particular, our institutions and relations through which we raise children.

activities that involve men and boys in actually challenging themselves and other men to end all forms of violence.

The rest of this paper looks at two sets of activities in which I have been involved that address a number of these responses. First is the White Ribbon Campaign. Second is on working in the educational system to reach young men.

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## **PART TWO:**

### **THE WHITE RIBBON CAMPAIGN**

In late 1991, a handful of men in Canada took the first steps down a road seldom traveled by men: We decided we had a responsibility to urge men to speak out against violence against women and we decided to launch what would become a very-large scale public campaign.

We knew that most men were not violent against women. But we also knew that the vast majority of men remained silent. Through our silence, we allowed the violence to continue.

We decided that wearing a white ribbon would be a personal pledge never to commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women.

From the start, the primary goal of the White Ribbon Campaign (WRC) has been to encourage men to look at our own attitudes and behavior and to learn to challenge other men to stop all forms of violence against women. We believe that as more men and boys take responsibility for challenging ourselves and others, then the epidemic levels of violence against women will finally end.

In six challenging years we've moved from an idea organized out of a living room, to active campaigns in schools and communities right across Canada, in various areas of the United States, Australia, Norway, and with growing interest beyond.

In Canada, the primary dates of the White Ribbon activities start at the end of November and run up to December 6, the anniversary of the 1989 massacre of fourteen women engineering students in Montreal, Quebec. Organizers in other countries have chosen dates and events that are relevant to the experiences in those countries.

### **From Pathway to Highway**

Just as the problem of violence against women isn't one on the margins of society, our efforts to reach men can not be marginal. We know that we must find ways to involve the vast majority of men.

We purposely used something that employed a simple symbolic language: wearing a white ribbon didn't require reading ten books or attending an eight-week men's support group. On the other hand, this did not make wearing a white ribbon a simple act. How many times did we hear stories like this: "The first year, I thought you guys were a bunch of male bashers and the whole thing made me angry. The next year I started listening to what you said and it seemed to make sense, but there was no way I was going to wear a ribbon because what would the other guys think? Finally, in the third year I got up the nerve to wear a white ribbon."

We knew that wearing a white ribbon could be a catalyst for discussion and for self-reflection and even personal change.

Many efforts by pro-feminist men to challenge men's violence against women have reached out only to small numbers of men. Walking along a little pathway can be nice: it's quiet and cosy. But there's only room for a few of you. From the start White Ribbon decided to make room for hundreds of thousands, even millions of men and boys. To do so, we had to find the highways where men travel.

First and foremost that has meant working in the school system. We do so to reach boys whose ideas about the other sex and about themselves as men are still forming. White Ribbon has produced a series of education kits that are now used in over a thousand junior highs and high schools across Canada, representing one million students. Many more schools hold annual White Ribbon activities, doing educational work and raising money for local women's programs.

We also want to reach men where they work, and men and women where they shop. So a second and rapidly growing area of our work has been with corporations and trade unions. We have worked hard to develop these partnerships for several important reasons: Most adult Canadians spend a good part of each day at work. A trade union or company can act as a transmission belt, bringing the ideas of White Ribbon to a large audience in offices and on the shop floor.

The corporate partnerships also allow us to reach people as consumers. (This year in Canada, for example, ribbons will be available in the largest drugstore chain, and shoppers purchasing certain products both there and in some other stores will automatically have a portion of the purchase cost go to White Ribbon and will receive information on the problem of violence against women.)

Finally the support of corporations and unions is important because the Canadian WRC does not

receive money from any level of government. It relies entirely on support from these groups and many concerned individuals.

### **Building Unity**

Finding a highway where men can join women in stopping men's violence against women is process of finding common ground among men. We're particularly proud that it is a place where those who have many areas of disagreement about political, economic, and social issues can work together. By building unity, we can not only better address these issues, but men can find ways to work together in a cooperative and positive environment.

In our second year, in 1992, I was cutting ribbons in the office with a man active in the Catholic church. He had worked impressively hard to raise awareness about violence against women. He said to me, "I think we have to address another violence issue. The violence done by abortions." I said to him, "I also think that the abortion issue raises issues of violence. But to me, the issue is the emotional violence done to a woman who is forced to have a child she doesn't want and then perhaps the child who may not be wanted." We calmly argued back and forth and something became clear to me: We had two choices. One would be agreeing to disagree on the issue of abortion. We could agree that sexual assault, and wife beating, and harassment, and genital mutilation, and sexual and physical abuse of the young must be stopped now. And we could agree to work together to end these crimes.

Or we could say, because we can't agree on such an important issue (which abortion certainly is), we can not work together. The implication would be clear: It would mean that no Catholic church (and some others), no Catholic school, no one who opposes abortion would be taking part in the White Ribbon Campaign, and the millions of men whose beliefs lie in this direction would take part in speaking out to end violence against women.

So I said this: "As an individual, I'm going to keep speaking out and writing about the right for a women to chose whether to have a child or not because I believe women should have control of their own bodies and so every child is a wanted child. I'm going to keep giving money and attending pro-choice marches. I'm also sure that you, as an individual, are going to continue to do the opposite. We don't agree. But we agree that many other things certainly do constitute violence against women. We agree these things effect millions of Canadian women. We agree that all men have a responsibility for speaking out against that violence. So let's agree to work together as part of the White Ribbon Campaign where we agree and agree to go our own ways where we disagree."

In a similar vein we have right-wing and left-wing politicians working together, corporate leaders and trade unionists, and many others who usually face each other across a divide.

In agreeing to disagree, we were doing something different than most groups during the whole history of social, political, and religious causes. Rather than focusing on where we disagree and always insisting that, to be pure, we could only work with an increasingly small and fracturous group who we agreed with, we would seek broad unity.

### **Supporting Women's Efforts & Other Activities**

Although the WRC's primary focus is to do educational work to reach men and boys, we also want to support the important work of women's shelters, rape crisis centres, and women's educational programs across Canada. Over the past six years, we have only done this in a somewhat scattered way: we have encouraged schools, workplaces, and communities across Canada to raise money for these women's programs. Women have urged us to do more and, in 1997, the WRC is forming a partnership with two women's organizations and are launching a major fall fundraising effort that is expected to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars that will go to anti-violence efforts across Canada.

At the same time as that, the WRC continues to seek new avenues: avenues to work with men and boys in different areas, opportunities to encourage the spread of the WRC to other countries.

It was a road less traveled. We're glad to see the thousands and thousands of men and boys who are now walking at our side.

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### **PART THREE:**

#### **WORKING WITH YOUNG MEN IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

In recent years there have been three moments that have helped shape my work with young men in high schools.

##### **Creating a New Pedagogical/Emotional Setting**

The first occurred in 1991 when one board of education invited me to design and co-facilitate the male component of a parallel retreat for male and female high school students. I wanted to start with an exercise that would allow each boy to talk about his own experiences as a young man. At our two-day training session, the male teachers who had volunteered to facilitate all insisted that there was no way a group of sixteen- and seventeen-year old males would divulge much of anything. There were be jokes, grandstanding, silence, awkwardness, but nothing approaching the truth. I said -- perhaps optimistically, or perhaps just glibly -- "They'll talk, if you talk." And so the teachers agreed to stop being "teachers" for a moment and to just be part of the group, which would include, to whatever extent felt safe, talking about their own feelings and experiences.

The retreat began and, by the end of the first day, the teacher/facilitators were glowing. The young men not only had opened up, but they actually listened with more interest and respect than any of the teachers had ever before experienced.

There might be many lessons in this one story concerning the role of adults in working with young men and boys. But, perhaps the chief conclusion was that boys want a chance to talk about their lives, their points of confusion, worries, doubts, and joys. They want to escape, even if just for a moment, from the macho pressures that engulf them. In other words, the iron-clad world of male buddying and the armor of manhood is not so impregnable after all. All we need to do is provide a safe, confidential, and encouraging place.

If we truly believe, as I do, that the many things we hate about the attitudes and behaviour of so many young men is not a biology fiat, then there can be only one conclusion: at the same time as we must challenge sexist attitudes and behaviour, we must also provide opportunities and encouragement for young men to reexamine and jettison these negative things.

Providing such an opportunity requires many things, including:

Working with educators to develop what will be for many of them, a new theoretical framework for understanding men's behaviour.

Working with educators to develop practical skills at group facilitation. In particular, this often requires that teachers act as models, both in their willingness to participate in the discussion and to respect discussion guidelines.

Within a group (a classroom, a workshop...) involving students in the development of discussion guidelines. Such a process gives students an opportunity (which they seldom have) to help define the learning environment. (Perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise, but I'm always taken by how similar are the guidelines developed by group after group of both young people and adults. These include: respect different opinions, no putdowns, be honest, share the time, don't force anyone to talk, challenge words or behavior that are oppressive without personally attacking the offending person, and respect confidentiality.)

Providing follow-up activities and support for both students and for educators new to such work.

There is no one format that is "right" to carry out this work. Not only can exercises and workshops be planned that can range from fifty-minute in-classroom activities, to two hour workshops in which selected students are taken out of class to participate, right up to two-, three-, and four-day workshops. But more important is the whole integration of this type of pedagogical/emotional framework into the daily life of our schools.

Whatever the format, when we give young men the opportunity to examine gender issues in a challenging yet non-threatening environment, they open up in remarkable ways. With support and encouragement they examine hitherto unexamined parts of their own lives. Through this they begin to develop greater sympathies and a greater awareness about the oppression of women and other groups. In no way does giving a space for boys to talk about their own experiences and problems mean muting a pro-woman message. Rather it is a recognition that the very ways that men have defined and constructed their power has brought not only rewards, but a price, to men themselves. By allying themselves with women in a struggle for equality and change, men will also free themselves, even if it means giving up very real forms of privilege and power.

### **Ending Sexism = Ending Homophobia**

A second experience was actually an accumulated one. For several years, I heard terrible stories from young women about the harassment they endured. I often retold these stories to boys. But there was something more that I was missing. The light bulb finally clicked for me one day when a group of girls told me about the boys who harassed them in a hallway outside the gym. The boys stood in a line and graded the young women as they passed, giving them numbers from one to ten and making comments about their bodies. The girls said it was humiliating and intimidating. I had heard such stories before. But then they said that a lot of the boys were really nice and would never do it on their own. Some girls even said that some of the boys had said it made them feel uncomfortable.

Finally, I realized what should have been obvious to me all along: Although the girls were the objects and the victims of the harassment, the boys weren't doing it primarily to have an impact on the girls. They were doing it for the other boys. They were proving to the other boys and, presumably, to themselves, that they were real men. The harassed girls were tokens of their masculine credentials.

What does it mean that these young men felt they had to demonstrate (and constantly re-demonstrate) their masculine credentials? It means, as the framework in Part One suggest, that masculinity is a fragile construct, requiring constant nourishment and replenishment. For most men, particularly when young, there is a running dialogue of doubt about one's masculinity. There is enormous terror that other boys will discover one's own fears. There is also enormous fear of ridicule and of violence at the hands of other boys. There is enormous fear of other males.

We have a word for this fear of other males, and that is homophobia. Of course, the term "homophobia" is more commonly used to refer to a fear, or hatred, of gays, lesbians and bisexuals. I

don't want us to lose sight of this specific and important meaning. But I do feel that this specific form of men's homophobia is a product of the broader fear of other men and the fear of not being "manly enough." (In a culture that defines manhood as an ability to dominate women, dominate other men, control ones own unruly emotions, and display the heterosexuality that is compulsory in our society, then it is no surprise that for many men, particularly when they are young, there is an active fear or hatred of homosexuality. To love and desire other men means being vulnerable to them.)

Boys have various means to deal with this combined fear of other males/fear of not being manly enough. Some are violent against other males and against females, some engage in self-destructive forms of behaviour, and some engage in forms of controlling and dominating behaviour that aren't normally considered violent (domination of classroom discussion, control of the hallways, conquest in sports etc.).

While this is an all-too-brief account of the role of homophobia in the construction of "normal" masculinity among teenager boys and young adults, I think it points us to one important conclusion: Just as our work with men must be constructed within a framework of feminist analysis and action, this work must also be constructed within a framework that challenges homophobia in all of its forms.

This means not shying away from issues of sexual orientation. And while homophobia obviously has a much greater and more direct impact on those who self-define themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, the point being made above is that homophobia effects us all in many different ways.

Anti-sexist work must include work to challenge homophobia and to respect diversity.

### **The Rapidly Changing World of Gender Relations Among Youth**

A third, more recent, defining moment, occurred during a workshop I was leading in Canada's northern Yukon Territories. In one session we were dealing with issues of sexual harassment. As in other sessions I've done on sexual harassment there was a fair degree of resistance by the young men. (In this case, most were 16 to 18 years old.) I did my best to reach them all, but I had my eye on one young man who was simmering with anger. Finally he exploded and told us a personal story that was later corroborated by two teachers at his school: One day in the school yard a female student came up behind him, reached through his legs, grabbed his genitals and yanked down. For most people this would be a humiliating experience, but it was even worse for this young man who had been sexually abused as a boy. He turned around and punched the woman. And who got in trouble? He was expelled; nothing happened to her.

One of the things I'm hearing over and over from both boys and girls is the rapidly-increasing amount of sexual-aggression, harassment, and violent behavior by young women. There are reasons for this. Young women are growing up with a sense that they, too, are powerful. Unfortunately, the society's definition of power remains the tried-and-true definitions of patriarchal power: your own power is defined by your capacity to control others and control the world around you. It's no surprise that as young women come into a sense of their own power (a positive thing) a significant number of them will express it within the dominant discourse of our society (a negative thing).

Recognizing this doesn't mean we are anywhere close to having equality in physical violence – most violence is still committed by males, although verbal harassment is rife among both boys and girls. But I think we ignore the rise of girl-on-girl and girl-against-boy violence at our peril. For one thing it means that we fail to address fundamental gender issues as they now effect young women. The other thing, particularly relevant to this article, is that boys and young men don't perceive us as telling the truth if we ignore or play down violence and harassment committed by young women. If we only talk about harassment by boys against girls and don't recognize the reverse, then boys will never take



seriously our anti-harassment message.

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Michael Kaufman.

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