

Gender Norms: A Key to Combating Gender-Based Violence Among At-Risk Youth



TrueChild is an action tank of leading authorities that promotes gender transformative approaches to reproductive health, educational under-achievement, and gender-based violence. Gender transformative approaches are those which highlight, challenge and ultimately change harmful gender norms. TrueChild is especially interested in the challenges faced by at-risk youth, like those who are of color, LGBTQ, or in disinvested communities. To achieve our goals we conduct four activities: 1) Create white papers and other intellectual collateral; 2) Conduct trainings on gender norms; 3) Partners with community organizations to develop model “best practice” programs; and, 4) Convene policy-makers and leading authorities so that research begins to inform practice.

RESEARCH

More than a decade of research—often originating in US colleges and universities as well as a range of international agencies and NGOs—has established strong and direct links between Gender-Based Violence (GBV)—including Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), sexual harassment and date rape—and traditional gender norms.

MASCULINITY

For instance, young men who internalize harsh codes of traditional manhood—as defined by strength, aggression, toughness and female subordination—have less gender equitable relationships in general, and more often engage in violent or abusive behaviors specifically.

BELIEF SYSTEM

They are also more likely to hold a constellation of beliefs that support partner violence, including that:

- Force is acceptable in an intimate relationship;
- Men are justified in coercing sex from a reluctant partner;
- The male determines when and how sex occurs;
- Female defiance or insubordination justifies violence; and,
- Dominance of a female partner is central to manhood.



A Gender Dictionary

“Gender” is used in multiple contexts. Here’s a quick guide.

Gender Transformative
A term coined by leading reproductive health authority Geeta Rao Gupta and the WHO—refers to approaches that highlight, challenge and ultimately change harmful gender norms and beliefs.

Gender Norms

Socially-constructed ideals, scripts, expectations for how to be a woman or a man; in sex—as in partner violence—they determine who does what, to whom, when, and how.

Gender Expression

How we express feeling feminine and masculine through dress, hair and adornment .

Gender Traits

Physical or personal characteristics commonly considered feminine or masculine (e.g., hairy chest or hourglass figure)

Gender Roles

Social and behavioral norms for how men and women are expected to act: being a doctor or nurse, being martial or maternal.

Gender Identity

An inner sense of being male or female, useful when discussing transgender individuals who feel a conflict between their sex and gender identity.

SELF-JUSTIFICATION

Studies of perpetrators have also found that they have a strong system of self-justification for abuse, often asserting that female partners were out of control and brought it on themselves and that they, as males, had a responsibility to re-establish control. They see themselves as the real victims. Such notions are deeply implicated with ideas of masculinity, control, and power.

FEMININITY

Gender norms can affect victims as well. For instance, traditional machista codes of femininity can encourage young Latinas to be submissive, obedient, deferential to males, and tolerant of infidelity or sexual coercion. It can also encourage them to believe they are incomplete without a man and thus must put up with abuse to hold onto a male partner.

Such attitudes make young women more willing to submit to partner violence as the price of a relationship, and to accept male dominance as a natural, inevitable part of being a woman.

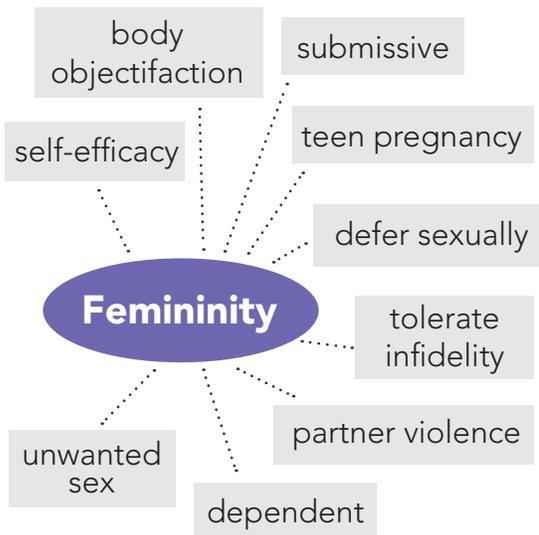
RITEs OF PASSAGE

In fact, learning to master traditional masculine and feminine norms is a major rite of passage for nearly every adolescent or teenager.

GENDER INTENSIFICATION

This can be especially true during the “gender intensification” years of late adolescence and early teens when interest in traditional gender norms intensifies and accelerates, and belief in them solidifies.

Gateway Belief System



GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE

Findings like these have created an increased focus on and commitment to what leading authority Geeta Gupta called “gender transformative” programs and policies. Approaches which are gender transformative highlight, challenge and ultimately change belief in harmful norms of femininity and masculinity, and in the case of men engage them as full partners and allies.

INTERNATIONAL WORK

A broad range of international agencies—like WHO, UNFPA, USAID, UNAIDS—as well as NGOs like Promundo and International Center for Research on Women, have been addressing how harsh codes of manhood motivate abuse; using this as the foundation for new initiatives to combat gender-based violence and increase gender equity for women and girls. In doing so they have compiled an impressive record of effectiveness across a wide variety of cultures.

USAID no longer funds new programs that lack a strong gender analysis—including gender norms—and its www.IGWG.org website coordinates all information on gender transformative initiatives. WHO developed an in-depth report to document the increased effectiveness of gender transformative programs for women and girls (“The ‘So What’ Report: A Look at Whether Integrating a Gender Focus in Programmes Makes a Difference in Outcomes”).

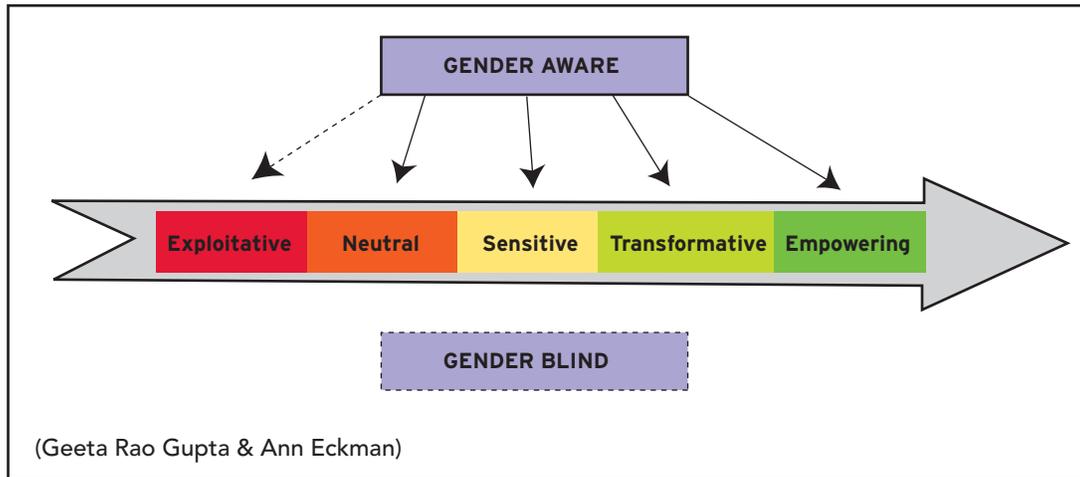
THE U.S.

Yet the US lags behind. In 1995 Hortensia Amaro, a leading expert on young people of color, wrote in one of the most oft-cited reproductive health papers ever that the US tends to pursue gender equity and improved health and violence outcomes “in a gender vacuum” (“Love, Sex, Power: Considering Women’s Realities in HIV Prevention”).

DISCONNECT

That remains true today. There is a wide and growing disconnect between research and practice. Most domestic GBV programs and policies still lack a strong, specific focus on challenging gender norms. Beliefs about femininity among women in prevention or victim assistance programs are often ignored altogether, and masculinity is often only addressed by treating men as potential perpetrators.

Gender Integration Continuum



The "Man Box"

"We're in this box, and in order to be in that box, you have to be **strong**, you have to be **tough**, you have to have **lots of girls**, you gotta **have money**, you have to be **a player or a pimp**, you gotta to be **in control**, you have to **dominate other men**, and if you are not any of those things, then people call you soft or weak or a p*ssy or a chump or a f*ggot and nobody wants to be any of those things. **So everybody stays inside the box.**"

—Byron Hurt

Beyond Beats and Rhymes



COMING SHIFT

Clearly to make GBV programs and policies more effective, they need to specifically address internalized codes of masculinity and femininity, because understanding gender norms is central to challenging gender violence. And that is finally starting to happen.

Gender transformative approaches are quietly gaining broader domestic acceptance. For instance, in the last year the White House, CDC, and the Office on Women's Health have all requested briefings or trainings on gender transformative programs and policies. A small but growing number of domestic organizations like Futures Without Violence, Men Can Stop Rape and CALCASA have initiated gender transformative approaches to combating partner violence.

International-facing organizations like Engender Health, Population Council and International Planned Parenthood have implemented gender transformative initiatives as well. And a TrueChild convening at the Ford Foundation to explore launching a National Council on Gender that would promote gender transformative approaches drew affirmative responses from 47 prominent researchers, funders, policy-makers and NGOs.

OUR WORK

The idea that addressing gender norms makes GBV programs more effective is finally gaining wider acceptance. TrueChild is dedicated to leading and partnering in the effort to promote anti-violence policies and programs that challenge harmful codes of masculinity (and femininity).

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TrueChild.org

Let Every Child Shine.