NEW PATHS TO PREVENTION

Engaging more boys and men in ending violence against women

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END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Violence against women and girls is one of the most significant problems facing UK society. It is a pervasive violation of women's fundamental human rights. It has recently been recognised as a national threat at the same level as terrorism and serious and organised crime.[1] However, it shows little signs of abating. A violence against women and girls' offence is reported to the police every two minutes in England and Wales; women are 27 times more likely than men to be harassed online; and a third of 17-21-year-old young women have received unwanted sexual images.[2,3] The forms that violence against women takes shapeshift over time and place, but what remains constant is that the vast majority is perpetrated by men. So many women's and girls' lives are being held back by sexism, harassment and violence on a day-to-day basis.[4] This puts *all* men and boys,[5] in *all* communities, in an ideal place to support the government's mission to halve violence against women in a decade,[6] and, ultimately, to end it completely.

Men as agents of change

It can be difficult for men and boys to know how to become active in ending violence against women. Research shows that men who do get involved in this work have different 'routes in', including through their job, being raised in a feminist household, not conforming to masculine norms when growing up, being introduced to the topic at university, being 'catapulted in' due to a female family member being killed through men's violence, or through their own experiences of such violence.[7] This briefing summarises the evidence about what works to motivate *more* men and boys to become active in preventing violence against women and girls and offers recommendations for how this could be applied in the UK.

A VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS' OFFENCE IS REPORTED TO THE POLICE EVERY TWO MINUTES IN ENGLAND AND WALES

Why more men should become involved

Gender-based violence causes harm to women and girls that are loved by men and boys; most of whom want to live in a world which is fair and peaceful. Yet this is not possible whilst violence against women – which the World Health Organisation identifies as a major cause and consequence of gender inequality[8] – remains so widespread. This violence is holding all of us back. It is rooted in the same social expectations which pressure men and boys to be in control, self-sufficient, tough, risk-taking, stoical, and hypersexual. These masculine norms are linked to a multitude of negative outcomes, including high suicide rates, mental and physical health problems, and lower educational attainment.[9] 39% of men die prematurely in the UK, before the age of 75, often from avoidable health conditions.[10] Yet boys and men are often punished if they resist pressures to never show 'weakness' and rewarded for conforming to the status quo, even if that means causing harm to others or themselves.[11] Men's violence against women is therefore closely connected to men's violence against other men and boys (e.g., homophobia), and to violence towards themselves.[12] Men who more rigidly follow restrictive gender norms are more likely to engage in all three.[13]

Men as beneficiaries of society-wide change

Gender equality is therefore good for *everyone* – it is not a 'zero-sum game'.[14] Transforming the restrictive masculine expectations that uphold violence against women should thus be an urgent priority for men and boys.[15] This is not as straightforward as simply addressing individual men who publicly display so-called 'toxic' masculinities, however. These norms are embedded and reproduced at all levels of society, from the media, to sport, to education, and transforming them requires holistic, systems-led change that involves men and boys directly in the conversation and, crucially, in action. Now is a critical juncture to take this work forward with more people than ever reflecting on issues of masculinity after movements such as #MeToo and #EveryonesInvited.

Supporting boys and men

There has been growing attention towards the role of online spaces, including pornography, gaming, social media, and the manosphere, in proliferating narrow ideas of masculinity, with emphasis on traits such as economic success, physical strength, pro-natalism, and power over women.[16,17] In this context, tech companies and individual influencers alike are profiting from exploiting the insecurities boys and men feel through mechanisms such as algorithmic radicalisation and the monetisation of misogynistic content.[18,19] This is at a time when many boys and men are feeling lonely and isolated, and facing significant economic struggles amidst the cost-of-living crisis and years of austerity, creating fertile conditions for the far-right (as seen by the 2024 riots in which gender-based violence was weaponised).[20] We are facing anxiety-inducing global crises such as war and climate catastrophe, influenced by 'strongman' expressions of masculinity.[21] In this context, influential figures are encouraging a sense of 'instructed victimhood' based on the notion that boys and men are being persecuted by feminism and that women are to blame for their problems.[22] However, these groups cannot provide the sense of belonging and connection that boys and men crave, and ultimately deepen their problems by encouraging investments in highly competitive, self-reliant, invulnerable notions of 'being a man'. The only way we can improve the lives of boys and men is by joining together with women and girls and building an equitable society in which everyone is free from the gendered expectations boxing us in.

HOW DO WE ENGAGE MEN AND BOYS IN MEANINGFUL CHANGE?

There is a growing body of research internationally on how to prevent gender-based violence and involve men and boys in such efforts. This evidence base is relatively under-developed in the UK, where prevention has received less attention than in some other countries. However, there is plentiful research here, and globally, demonstrating that prevention work can have transformative impacts on boys and men, and that investing in it ultimately saves resources.[23,24]

Building relationships

A key insight from practice and research is that lecturing boys and men is likely to have little impact and could push them away.[25] To become agents of change, this is something they must become invested in themselves. To gain boys and men's ears we therefore need to show that we care about them and their lives, whilst helping them to understand what women, girls, and LGBTQ+ people are experiencing. This means creating safe spaces for participatory dialogue, listening, empathising, and building relationships of mutual trust.[26,27] This has been a core finding of the **Taking Boys Seriously** research in Northern Ireland. It is emphasised by organisations such as **Beyond Equality**, who have been instigating 'brave discussions' with men and boys to rethink masculinities for over 10 years in the UK. Relationship-building can create openings for reflection, taking on new ideas, and seeing the world in different ways. Creative methods can be used to break down barriers and increase empathy;[28] for instance, **Tender** use drama and the arts to foster a supportive environment in which to engage with young people about healthy relationships. Another novel approach is to combine these conversations with activities caring for the environment and animals.[29] Building relationships with boys and men takes time, demonstrating the need for more than one-off interventions, and for skilled practitioners such as youth workers who can engage with them on an ongoing basis.[30,31,32]

> TO BECOME AGENTS OF CHANGE, THIS IS SOMETHING THEY MUST BECOME INVESTED IN THEMSELVES

Multidimensional

We must understand the complexity of boys and men's social positions, which are never shaped by gender in isolation.[33,34] Because of factors including social class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and disability, many boys and men have their own experiences of marginalisation.[35] This can create additional obstacles to challenging sexism, for example in the workplace, where minoritised men may already be perceived as 'troublesome' by their employers. There can be a particular reluctance to recognise the vulnerabilities of Black boys and men, who continue to experience over-policing and stereotypes about being inherently 'dangerous'.[36] If men's violence is named at all, it is often Othered and associated with specific groups, such as migrant men, as if they are uniquely violent, even though it is a society-wide problem.[37,38] Drawing the links between these intersecting inequalities can provide opportunities for empathy and mobilise a shared mission for social change.[39] It is therefore vital for prevention work to be relatable to boys and men's everyday experiences (e.g., avoiding making heteronormative assumptions), and to collaborate with and be led by communities themselves rather than imposed 'top-down'.[40]

Holistic

Equally important to working with boys and men directly is training and supporting practitioners encountering them on a day-to-day basis.[41] This demonstrates why a holistic, multi-level, 'social ecological' strategy for prevention is needed:[42,43,44,45] for instance, a 'whole-school' approach, involving teachers, parents, leaders, support staff, coaches.[46,47] We cannot place responsibility for social change solely on young people; this is something all parts of the community must be involved in. For example, in workplaces this could mean: regular training and dialogues with staff across the organisation about gendered and other inequalities; ensuring support is in place for victim-survivors; leaders driving cultural change; a network of staff, including men, showing leadership among their colleagues in challenging harmful norms; policies and procedures on preventing gender-based violence; and addressing structural gender inequalities within the organisation.[48,49] **White Ribbon UK** have been advancing efforts to engage men in organisations with their workplace accreditation scheme, and their ambassador and champion model highlights the role of community mobilisation in prevention.[50] A holistic perspective applies to society in its entirety, with consciousness raising needed across the life course, from a young age,[51] and at key moments such as when becoming a father, starting a job, receiving healthcare, entering retirement.[52] In Australia, the government has established an independent national prevention organisation, **OurWatch**.[53] They have developed a framework, 'Change the Story', to drive coordinated whole-of-society change, and call for the development of sustained investment in local, regional, and national prevention 'infrastructure'.[54]

A HOLISTIC, MULTI-LEVEL, 'SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL' STRATEGY FOR PREVENTION IS NEEDED

Systems change

Clearly then, engaging individual boys and men is not enough; violence prevention also requires cultural and systemic shifts.[55] The gender norms boys learn from birth are not just perpetuated among their peers, they are embedded in our institutions.[56,57]

For instance, when boys are given toy weapons rather than dolls at nursery; those who succeed at sport are celebrated above their peers at school; men who forgo family needs are promoted over others at work; heroic film protagonists are routinely strong, silent, and violent men; and media and politics demand decision-makers who prioritise 'toughness' over care or collaboration. Preventing gender-based violence requires addressing the social structures which systematically value women less than men,[58] and the cultural forces such as pornography which normalise notions that men should dominate over women.[59,60] This makes government policy core to prevention; for instance, in which sectors of the economy are prioritised.[61] Given men's over-representation in positions of power, they have a vital role in advancing structural change, so educating and mobilising those in leadership roles is crucial.

Gender-transformative

Gender equality is therefore central to work with boys and men.[62] It is not enough to raise awareness about issues such as healthy relationships, men's mental health, or LGBTQI+ inclusion. Nor is it sufficient simply to be sensitive to differences in women and men's experiences.[63] To be genuinely *preventative*, we must actively work to shift the gender norms and inequities at the roots of these issues.[64,65] Organisations such as **Lifting Limits** demonstrate that this can and should be done from as young an age as possible. If rigid notions of masculinity, such as always being 'in control', are at the heart of men's violence, then prevention requires breaking down these stereotypes and promoting alternative ways of being.[66,67] This 'gender-transformative' approach enables links to be made across multiple intersecting issues: for example, discussing the devastating impacts that men's violence also has on boys and men themselves,[68,69] or the ways in which expectations of being 'in control' also inhibit boys and men from recognising their own struggles and asking for help.[70] Exploring these vulnerabilities and providing support for boys and men with their own experiences of trauma is an important aspect of prevention too.[71,72]

A positive vision

Research on work with boys and men emphasises the need for an 'asset-based' approach which builds upon the positive contributions they are already making, rather than a deficit model, which sees them as a 'problem' to be 'fixed'.[73] For instance, many men and boys care deeply for their children, partners, parents, friends, community, and environment, despite care often being associated with femininity. This should be expanded upon by helping boys and men to resist norms which obstruct close, emotionally open, mutually caring relationships which can help to offer paths away from violence and alienation.[74,75] Challenging sexism and misogyny is itself an expression of care. This is an example of a hopeful vision for men and boys about the vital role they have in building a more equitable society – a role they can feel proud of.[76]

Work with boys and men should be framed as a positive intervention which takes us beyond punitive 'after-the-fact' responses.[77] This is one of the principles behind the evidence-backed bystander intervention approach advocated by organisations such as **Kindling Interventions** and **Plan UK** in Wales, which encourages boys and men to become active bystanders in their communities.[78] 'Influencer' figures such as YouTubers can help to transmit such messages. However, it is important to recognise that the biggest 'role models' for boys and men tend to be those close to them (and do not have to be men).[79] Public communication campaigns can help to instigate transformative conversations (such as those initiated by **Zero Tolerance Scotland**, or in **Greater Manchester**), but should be supported by deeper engagement to have lasting impacts.[80] It is also important to be sensitive to how gender is constructed within campaigns, to avoid reinforcing masculine notions of 'heroism' or 'protecting' women for example.[81]

Embracing discomfort

Of course, when it comes to preventing gender-based violence these can't always be solely positive conversations. This is an uncomfortable topic which can evoke anxieties about speaking out, or shame about instances in which we too have been complicit in sexism and misogyny.[82,83] Research suggests that it is important not to shy away from this discomfort.[84] Part of being moved to take action involves recognising how this issue affects us personally, rather than it simply being a problem 'elsewhere'.[85] Helping boys and men to navigate the emotions they feel – which these issues bring up in all of us – why they feel them, and how these can be useful motivators for change, is therefore important.[86] This demonstrates the need for *mandatory* education and training around preventing violence against women to ensure it is not just 'preaching to the converted'.[87]

Relational and accountable

Engaging boys and men cannot be done in isolation. Whilst men have a responsibility to talk to each other about this problem, it is also vital to ensure that the voices of women, girls, and LGBTQI+ people – who have been leading these efforts for decades – are heard.[88] Indeed, research suggests that listening to the women and girls in their lives can be a key motivator for change among men.[89,90,91,92] This helps to ensure that work by and with men and boys is supportive of women's leadership and accountable to victim-survivors, and does not 'take over' the conversation (or funding) at their expense.[93] The lives of women and men are not separate from one another – they are constantly intertwined. For instance, men's poor health affects women and girls and vice versa. This is why it is important not to treat issues which affect one group as 'separate' – and to recognise that patriarchal norms and expectations are holding us *all* back.[94]

RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT LISTENING TO THE WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THEIR LIVES CAN BE A KEY MOTIVATOR FOR CHANGE AMONG MEN

CULTIVATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE: 10 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Ending violence against women and girls and engaging more boys and men in this mission requires a whole-of-government approach.[95] Each government department has a crucial part to play. Below are 10 key policy suggestions which can enable us to start making significant headway in involving boys and men in halving this violence in a decade.

1. **The full spectrum of violence prevention work needs to be significantly expanded and nationally consistent to meet the scale of the problem.** This must include primary (e.g., gender transformative education, training, and policies), secondary (e.g., early intervention for young people engaging in harmful behaviours), and tertiary (e.g., behaviour change programmes for those who have perpetrated abuse) prevention called for by organisations such as **Respect UK**. Men should be involved in the expansion of this workforce. Rigorous longitudinal evaluations should be funded to expand the UK evidence base. This should link directly to increased sustainable funding for specialist victim-survivor support services.

2. **Support and fund all schools, colleges, and universities to develop whole-of-institution approaches to preventing gender-based violence** in collaboration with specialist organisations, including a focus on engaging men and boys and promoting gender equality across the curriculum. Government should vocally support and increase the prioritisation of healthy relationships education from nursery onwards, covering topics including emotional and relationship skills, gender norms, LGBTQ+ relationships, and digital and media literacy, with the upskilling of specific RSHE teachers.[96] Addressing gender stereotypes and gender transformative approaches should be a mandatory part of initial teacher training. Teachers and careers advisors should support boys and men to explore non-traditional, caring-oriented skills and career paths. The Office for Students' new Condition of Registration E6 for universities to protect students from harassment and sexual misconduct provides an opportunity for institutions to embed and deepen ongoing gender transformative prevention work with all staff and students, as well as improved support and justice mechanisms.

3. **As part of the new National Youth Strategy and rollout of Young Futures Hubs, recognise the central role of youth work in preventing violence against women and girls**, and invest in a new generation of youth workers together with infrastructure within communities such as youth centres. Ensure workers receive training and support to address restrictive gender norms, and how they intersect with social class, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. One key area for investment is consistent, specialist, gender-sensitive support for children and young people who have experienced domestic or sexual abuse to help them lead happy and healthy lives.[97]

4. **Collaborate with and resource specialist organisations to co-produce with boys and men innovative communications campaigns** around preventing violence and abuse and addressing harmful masculine norms in settings such as social media, gaming, and sport. These could involve influential men from diverse backgrounds who are already fnding ways to resist these norms.

5. **Increase government regulation of industries profiting from harmful gender norms**, such as social media and pornography companies. Ofcom should be bolder in what they require from tech platforms to prevent harm – such as reducing algorithmic radicalisation and monetisation of misogynistic content. This should draw on positive regulatory levers such as the Online Safety Act, and a statutory Code of Practice should be developed which is legally enforceable. This work could be driven by the creation of an Online Safety Commission, akin to Australia's **eSafety Commissioner**.[98] Online interventions to engage with boys and men being pulled into the Manosphere should be trialled and funded.

6. **Based on the new legal duty "to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment and create a safe working environment",[99] provide more awareness and support to employers** about their role in preventing violence against women, including engaging and training men employees as agents of change, shifting restrictive gender norms at work, and addressing organisational gender inequalities. Initiate awards to incentivise employers. Government should act to improve pay and conditions in 'social infrastructure' such as social care and education to attract more men to these professions and improve women's economic positions.[100]

7. **Increase paternity leave provision and introduce paid parental leave targeted specifically at fathers/partners** (without taking away leave available for mothers or disadvantaging lone parents) to normalise men's involvement in caregiving. Support more men to attend ante-natal and early childhood activities, and collaborate with organisations such as the NSPCC, National Childbirth Trust, and Children's Society to disseminate guidance for parents about how to challenge gender stereotypes and develop digital and media literacy for them and their children.

8. **Make the connections between violence against women and other gendered policy issues, such as serious youth violence and knife crime** (in which masculine norms also often play a central role[101]), and bring agencies and organisations together to address them simultaneously, e.g., through Violence Reduction Units, as exemplified by the **Welsh Violence Prevention Unit**. Policymaking on violence against women should be future-oriented, cognisant of its relationship with issues such as the climate emergency and the growth of artificial intelligence.[102,103]

9. **Recognise the interrelatedness of men's and women's health within the forthcoming Men's Health Strategy**; that improving men's wellbeing requires working to change the patriarchal norms at the roots of many of the problems they face; and that an intersectional approach is needed to address the central role of social class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and disability as well as gender in shaping men's health.[104,105] Ensure healthcare practitioners receive pre- and post-qualification training on the relationship between gender norms and wellbeing to help them support men effectively with mental and physical health problems and behaviours which they may find concerning, learning from Ireland's **ENGAGE: National Men's Health Training Programme**.[106]

10. **Men in politics and other positions of influence nationally, regionally, and locally should recognise their responsibility to speak out** against sexism, harmful masculine norms, and violence against women, and actively promote policies which help to end it and build gender equality, learning from **gender-sensitive parliaments**.[107]

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