Building a Movement of Men Working to End Violence Against Women

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ABSTRACT Michael Kaufman discusses the need to both address and involve men in ending violence against women (VAW), a few of the pitfalls and guiding principles, and shares his thoughts on what is the most developed example of this work, that is, the White Ribbon Campaign.

KEYWORDS gender based violence; men against violence; responsibility; White Ribbon Campaign

Tending to men’s stuff

My new vegetable garden last summer went like this: days of labour turning the heavy clay soil, digging in fresh top soil and compost, planting, watching the first shoots poke through the ground, tending the still fragile plants, watering and weeding, and, two months later, feeling great pleasure when I spotted the first solitary tomato ripe enough to eat. Then suddenly it went wild: a tangle of tomatoes, potatoes, zucchini, cucumber, peppers, corn, pumpkins, herbs and eight varieties of lettuce. It had required much patience and hard work, but the explosion of green stuff in the course of one or two weeks seemed almost a surprise.

You might say I have been one of a handful of men tending another garden over the past 20 some years. Men’s stuff, as I sometimes described it (rather than the more pretentious, and much less accurate, title ‘the pro-feminist men’s movement’ – less accurate in the sense that when you knew the names of most participants, the word ‘movement’ seemed a tad pretentious). Work with men, young and old, on gender issues. Work with men to end violence against women (VAW). Building healthy workplaces, free of harassment. Building healthy relationships and shifting men’s roles in the family. There were lots of rows, some well attended, others less so. But, like that first tomato, the pickings were few. Successes were often measured in satisfaction or in connection with one or two other men and with new friendships around the world. The inspiration gleaned from the work of other men and women. The look of relief and the
words of thanks by some teenage boy at the end of a talk in a high school auditorium. The letter or phone call or personal word about what one of my books had meant to someone.

The somewhat cozy nature of this work has been turned on its head over the past year. Suddenly, everywhere I turn (or visit or read about) there is yet another initiative to address or involve men and boys, about gender issues in general and ending VAW in particular. Like the garden that explodes in a tangle of summer glory, these events and initiatives, conferences and workshops, research and organizations, have not popped out of nowhere. The groundwork was laid by the ongoing work of women’s organizations around the world. But, unlike the development of feminism in North America, Europe and Australia, it seems to me that in much of the rest of the world, feminism has developed with a strong sense of the need to reach and involve men as a central aspect of the feminist project. Although full of concerns and much justifiable caution, women and women’s organizations in Latin America, Africa and Asia are insistent about the need for programmes and initiatives to reach men. The groundwork has also been laid by the hard work of a growing number of men and men’s organizations writing, researching, and organizing on gender issues and on ending VAW.

In spite of so much work, I worry that many of the newest initiatives may not yet be drawing on the accumulated lessons of working with men on these issues.

**Why both address and involve men and boys in ending VAW?**

In various articles and book chapters, I have explored the causes of men’s violence, focusing on the relationship of two sets of factors. On the one hand, men’s social power and privileges in male-dominated societies and the social permission of violence against women, and, on the other hand, men’s contradictory experiences of power, childhood experiences as witnesses or recipients of violence, and the impossible emotional demands patriarchy places on boys and men to fit into the tight pants of masculinity. This second set of factors, of course, must not be seen as an excuse for the violence, but as part of its causal chain (Kaufman, 1985; 1993; 1994; 2000).

The relationship of boys and men to violence against women is multifaceted and very complex. However complex, it is a relationship that touches all men directly or indirectly: far too many men are committing the violence. Meanwhile, the vast majority of men have remained silent about the violence and through this silence have allowed the violence to continue. And finally, even among those many men who do not use violence, their lives are still touched deeply by the construction of the same hegemonic masculinities that, at times, entail the use of violence.

The need for public education campaigns that challenge men to stop the violence should be apparent. Unfortunately, in most parts of the world, efforts have been infrequent or non-existent. There are even fewer efforts to reach boys at a time when they are forming their self-definitions as men and their relationships with other males and females.

Beyond the importance of addressing boys and young men, I believe that some of the most effective ways to address young men and boys on this issue actually require involving them in efforts to end VAW. In a report to the government of the province of Ontario in Canada, I suggest this is so for several reasons (Kaufman, 2001: 70–73).

VAW is not an activity easily amenable to behavioural modification. It is very different from, say, educating young people about drunk driving and other issues that can be addressed largely through media campaigns and the provision of information. VAW occurs because of a complex and contradictory range of factors deeply embedded in culture, economy, law, and, most intractably, the psychic structures of masculinity. By and large, it is not the result of lack of information, although misinformation may in some cases fuel it.

The gender expectations placed on boys tend to emphasize control through aggression. Not only does this limit their human potential, but it ups the stakes when it comes to violence and conflict: the ability to dominate becomes a display of manhood. Only by involving boys and men in a redefinition of manhood will we effectively challenge these patterns of domination and control.

Thus, for reasons I have elaborated elsewhere...