

## ENGAGING MEN IN ACTING FOR PREVENTION\*\*

Rus Ervin Funk\*

### A Framework of Prevention

Preventing sexist violence<sup>1</sup> means ending the violence before it begins. Since it is men who perpetrate almost all of almost all sexist violence (INSTRAW, 2002), prevention means working with men so they stop choosing to be violent, abusive, and sexist, while also working to change society to ensure that women are valued as fully as men.

Theoretically, engaging men combines public health and social capital perspectives. Public health provides a framework for understanding prevention as eliminating violence before it begins. The public health perspective also contributes the “ecological framework,” which is the understanding that violence has both causes and implications across several layers: intra-personal, inter-personal, relational or familial, cultural and societal.

Engaging men adds elements of social capital theory to this public health perspective. According to social capital theory, the “capital” of our communities is made up as much -- if not more -- by personal connection, social resources, citizen participation, feelings of trust, culture, etc. (Health Development Agency, 2004) as it is made up of mortar, pavement and income. By developing social capital, a number of social ills, such as men’s violence, can be prevented.

A common theme shared by both public health and social capital is the necessity of working across ecological levels in a coordinated and strategic manner. Some of the activities that flow from this kind of perspective include:

- i) In-depth educational efforts
- ii) Social marketing campaigns (particularly social norms marketing)
- iii) Policy advocacy
- iv) Male engagement
- v) Youth involvement and leadership
- vi) Community development activities

A model of prevention across this spectrum is shown in Table 1.

---

\*\* A version of this article originally appeared in the Winter 2006 Issue of *Partners in Social Change* 7(2). A publication of the Sexual Assault Prevention Resource Center of the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs.

\* Rus Ervin Funk is the Research and Prevention Specialist at The Center for Women and Families in Louisville, KY. The Center for Women and Families engages individual and community in the elimination of domestic violence, sexual violence, and economic hardship through service, education and advocacy. He is also the author of *Reaching Men: Strategies for Preventing Sexism and Violence* to be published by Jist Publications, March of 2006

<sup>1</sup> “Sexist violence” refers to rape/sexual assault, domestic violence, dating abuse, pornography, prostitution, stalking, sexual harassment, street harassment, and other forms of abuse or violence that are perpetrated against a person because of sexism.

TABLE 1

PREVENTION EFFORTS FROM AN ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK					
	Intrapersonal	Relational	Organizational	Community	Socio-cultural
<b>Prevention Efforts for teen girls</b>		Train parents to talk with girls re: healthy dating	Healthy relationship content throughout school curricula; Schools policies	“girl power” groups throughout community	“Valuing women & girls” media campaign
<b>Prevention Efforts for teen boys</b>	Masculinity and respect classes	Training parents to talk with boys about healthy dating	Healthy relationship content throughout school curricula; Schools policies	“boys of respect” groups	“Choose Respect” media campaign

### Engaging Men as a Form of Primary Prevention

Since men perpetrate almost all sexist violence, preventing violence involves men. In addition, men are also in relationships with other men. Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1997) show that most men who perpetrate violence are supported in their attitudes and behaviors by some of the men close to them. As such men are also in a position to support or challenge other men’s pro-violence attitudes. This is not to say that women are not also in these positions; however, men are differently positioned in relationship to other men and, as such, have a different means to challenge or support other men in practicing gender respect toward women.

One of the first steps in engaging men is to define sexist violence as something that men could and *should* care about. Once defined as a men’s issue, a challenging balancing act follows: men must take sexist violence personally enough to be committed to act, but not so personally that they take blame for all sexist violence. This is a serious challenge given that all men perpetrate various forms of sexism, including abuse. Men’s work requires them to address their own behaviors and attitudes as fervently as they work in their communities.

There are additional barriers to engaging men. Space does not allow for a full discussion of these barriers, but perhaps the biggest barrier is how men have been trained away from being allies for women. Research increasingly suggests that being friends with women is one of the one of the leading causes of male youth being bullied (Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Mac an Ghail, M, 1994; Martino, 1999; Nayak and Kehily, 1996; Pheonix et al, 2003). Engaging men means asking men to be advocates for and friends with women, which runs counter to the lived experience of being bullied or witnessing bullying (often severely) for the very same thing. Engaging men, therefore, requires strategically planning to assist men in developing personal methods for overcoming the barriers that they recognize within themselves.

Additionally, advocates need to be aware of their own assumptions about working with men. Two key assumptions are that sexism and violence are forms of men’s violence and that men are not the problem. For many people, these statements appear contradictory; however engaging men to prevent violence occurs at the intersection of these two statements. If activists shy away

from defining these forms of abuse as *men's* violence, we become disingenuous. If we view men as the problem then we risk pushing men away. Either way, men are not truly invited to join the efforts.

### Intersectional Theory

Not all men are alike and men do not experience sexism and violence the same (Connell, 1995). Intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1991) suggests that each person, at any point in time, lives in the world at the intersection of various identities (gender, sexual orientation, class background, race/ethnicity, etc.). Because of the complex ways sexism, violence and male privilege weave in and throughout these identities, engaging men for prevention requires attention be paid to the unique distinctions of these intersections. All men also receive a meta-message about being entitled to use violence or be abusive under certain circumstances.<sup>2</sup> In short, engaging Jewish men is, in some ways, different than engaging Christian men; engaging African American men is different than engaging European American men; engaging male youth is different than engaging adult men, etc.

On a related note, men come to men's violence, sexism, and entitlement from different places. Some are outright and openly hostile, others are disinterested, still others are interested but overcommitted, and a few are actively involved. Working with men also means engaging men from where they are along this continuum in a way that moves them one step along the path, rather than attempting to move men to being active regardless of where they come from.

### On Accountability

Lastly, any work to engage men in preventing sexist violence must include processes and structures to ensure accountability to the local feminist leadership. There are those who believe accountability means that men do what the feminist leadership wants them to do. In some ways, however, this leaves men in the position of choosing which feminists (or women) to be accountable to. Like any group of people, feminists do not always agree with each other. Men are then left with a decision. They can either do something that some feminists want them to do and not be accountable to some feminists, or do nothing and be unaccountable by any definition.

An alternative definition of accountability focuses more on the process rather than an outcome. From this definition, accountability means men are transparent about their decision making, explain the decision they have made, explain how they came to that decision, and take responsibility for the outcome. It means men seek input from the feminist leadership before making their decisions, and when they make decisions that are harmful or to which feminists disagree, have a means by which they apologize and make amends.

Whatever definition of accountability one uses, it is important to be clear about this definition before engaging men in prevention. Once this definition is clarified, engaging men includes working with men to develop sound structures and processes to ensure this accountability.

### Conclusion

---

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to César J. Alvarado for his assistance, challenge and support to help develop this understanding.

Engaging men in prevention is a necessary process. Men are part of the community in which men's violence occurs, men are harmed by men's violence, and men can have a valuable role to play in preventing men's violence.

## REFERENCES

- Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities*. University of California Press. Berkeley, CA.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of color." In *Stanford Law Review*. 43 (July) 1241 – 1310.
- Epstein, D, and Johnson, R. (1998). *Schooling Sexualities* Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Funk, R. E. (2002). A Coordinated Collaborative Approach to Address and Combat Teen Dating Abuse. International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women. *Partners in Change: Working with Men to End Gender-Based Violence*. Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic.
- Health Development Agency (2004). *Working with and for Communities: An HDA Briefing*
- International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (2002). *Partners in Change: Working with Men to End Gender-Based Violence*. Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic.
- Mac an Ghail, M (1994). *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities and Schooling*. Buckingham. Open University Press.
- Martino, W. (1999) "Cool Boys," "Party Animals," "Squids," and "Poofers": Interrogating the Dynamics and Politics of Adolescent Masculinities in School. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 20(2). 239 – 263.
- Nayak, A. and Kehily, M. (1996). Playing it Straight: Masculinities, Homophobias and Schooling. *Journal of Gender Studies* 5(2).
- Pheonix, A., Frosh, S., and Pattman, R. (2003). Producing Contradictory Masculine Subject Positions: Narratives of Threat, Homophobia, and Bullying in 11 – 14 Year-old Boys (Transformations from Youth Through Relationships). *Journal of Social Issues*. 59(1) 179 – 196.

# ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT EDUCATING MEN\*

People often have assumptions about educating men about sexual and domestic violence. These assumptions taint educational programs with men. Before considering educating men about sexual and domestic violence, consider the assumptions that you have about men, men's reactions to a presentation, and what you think men think about these issues. For example:

What do you think men think about rape, domestic violence and pornography?  
Why do you think men haven't gotten more involved in the movement to end violence against women?  
What do you think men think about women who work on these issues?  
What do you think men think about men who work on these issues?  
What do you think men think about feminists and feminism?  
How do you expect men to respond to you?  
How do you expect men to respond to your presentation?

Take a moment to answer these questions in writing. Notice your immediate reactions to the questions and the emotions you feel as you consider educating men about sexual and domestic violence. Reflect upon your reactions (both your thoughts and your emotional reactions) and what those reactions mean for you as an educator/advocate, what these mean for the program for you work, and what it means for the men who participate in your presentations.

Now, consider how your answers differ depending on different groups of men: Fraternity men, male athletes, Christian men, Gay men, African American men, Latino Men, youth men, college men, European American men, etc. How do your assumptions change as the group you imagine working with changes?

---

\* Taken from *Reaching Men: Strategies for Preventing Sexism and Violence* by Rus Ervin Funk – to be published, Spring, 2006 by the Jist Publications.

Below is a list of beliefs that are useful when educating men about sexual and domestic violence.

- Everyone has experienced various forms of violence and abuse.
- Everyone has the right to be free from violence, abuse and threats
- The problem of violence is both a social and a justice issue, as much as a personal one.
- Men are **not** the problem.
- There is more to those who perpetrate sexist violence than the violence they perpetrate (i.e. men are more than “rapists,” “batterers,” or “pornographers”).
- Men do care.
- Men, like women, have an unlimited and inherent capacity to feel empathy for others.
- There is nothing natural or innate about sexist, violent or abusive behaviors.
- Being violent or abusive is a choice.
- Men can change.
- There is much to benefit males by working to end violence and abuse, and by challenging sexism.
- Males can work effectively alongside women and become strong allies in the work to promote social justice and human rights.
- We can all handle being angry as well as any other emotions that arise.

As you read these beliefs, notice your reactions. Consider how adopting these assumptions may impact on your efforts to educate men and the way that you develop your educational presentations.