Challenging Restrictive Gender Norms:
A Key to Decreasing Partner Violence in At-Risk Communities

"6% of women (641,000) in California experienced at least one incident of domestic violence during the past 12 months."

– California Women's Health Survey, 2008, CDPH

CALIFORNIA COUNCIL on GENDER

We would like to specially thank Stacy Alamo-Mixson, Shari Dworkin, Ellen Eidem, Mike Messner and Terri Thorfinnson for their input and feedback on this report.

A Gender Dictionary

Gender Lens or Gender Analysis
Being aware of the impact of gender equity and/or gender norms on a problem or issue.

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

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.

Gender Mainstreaming
Addressing disparities between women and men in policy and programs with the goal of achieving full equality.

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

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

Gender Transformative
Gender transformative programs and policies highlight, challenge and ultimately change harmful norms of masculinity and femininity.

Research

More than a decade of basic research has established strong links between Gender-Based Violence (GBV)—including Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) [1-7], Domestic Violence (DV) [1, 3, 4, 6, 7], girlfriend abuse [2-4, 7, 8], sexual harassment [7, 9-11], and sexual assault [7, 12-14]—and traditional gender norms. For example, a literature search on *masculinity* and *partner violence* returns thousands of studies, and the issue is highlighted in the CDC's 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey.

Masculinity

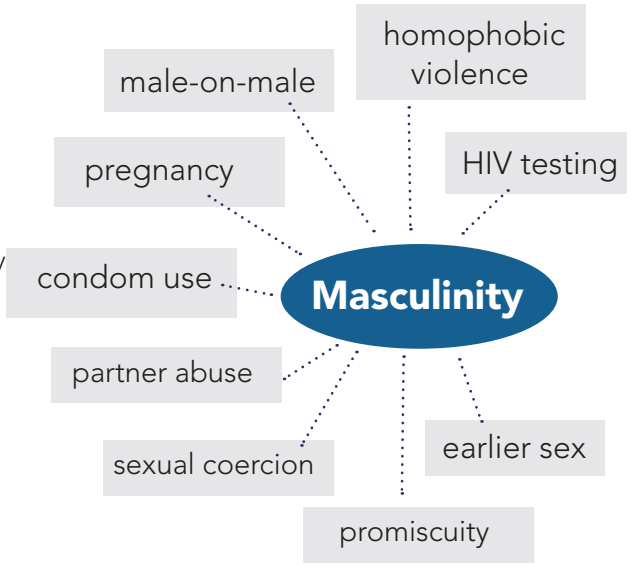
Young men who internalize constraining codes of manhood—as defined by strength, aggression, dominance, and emotional toughness—are more likely to hold a constellation of beliefs that support partner violence, including that:

- Force is acceptable in an intimate relationship [2, 4, 7, 8];
- Men are justified in coercing sex from a reluctant partner [12, 15, 16];
- Men determine when and how sex occurs [4, 8];
- Women who defy gender roles or challenge men's authority "deserve" violence; and [17-21],
- Public control and/or dominance of a female partner is central to manhood [4, 7, 8].

Such males have less gender equitable beliefs and relationships generally, and more often engage in violent and/or abusive behaviors specifically [22-24].

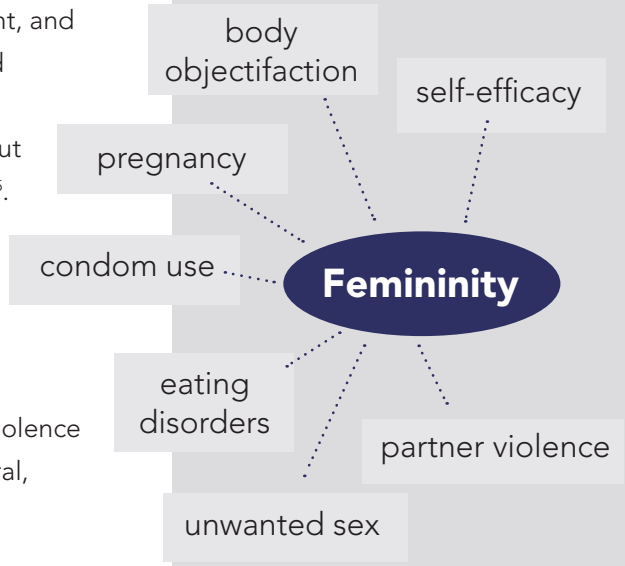
Self-Justification

Studies of perpetrators have also found that they have a strong system of self-justification for abuse, often asserting that female partners brought it on themselves by not carrying out feminine responsibilities (e.g. household labor, cooking, child care, "taking care" of their man) [4, 25], being "demanding" (asking for personal or financial needs), and being "irrational" or emotionally out of control [17, 20]. Such men justify their behavior by asserting that they had a responsibility to re-establish control, rationality and respect in the relationship. When punished for their violence, they often assert that they were the true victims [17, 26].



Femininity

Gender norms can affect victims as well. For instance, women who internalize traditional codes of femininity as defined by being submissive, obedient, and deferential to males are more tolerant of infidelity, sexual coercion, and psychological, physical or economic abuse [27-33]. Some women may be encouraged to believe they are incomplete without a man, and must put up with violence or coercion in order to hold onto a male partner [16, 34, 35]. This can be exacerbated by economic inequalities, child-rearing responsibilities, and higher incarceration rates among males, all of which can leave women dependent upon abusive partners with few options [36-43].



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.

It is not only attitudes about traditional femininity that can affect victims. Some new data points point to victims' ideas about masculinity as being important in survivor's repeat victimization [44]. Women who buy into beliefs that violence is a natural part of manhood, and "all men are that way" are less likely to recognize or flee from abuse partners, to see that there are alternatives, or to avoid abusive relationships in the future.

While such findings do nothing to justify violence partners, they do seem to open an avenue for intervening with repeat victims who seem to move from one abusive male to another.

Rite of Passage

Beliefs about masculinity or femininity appear to be learned fairly early. In fact, mastering traditional masculine and feminine norms is a major rite of passage for nearly every adolescent or teenager. 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 [45-48].

CALIFORNIA IPV STATISTICS

- **Almost 10% of women under 45 (@250,000) experienced IPV in the last 12 months (2002).**
- **44,000 arrests for domestic violence (2006).**
- **166,000 calls to report domestic violence(2010).**
- **Black women are over twice as likely to be assaulted as White women.**
- **Poorer women almost twice as likely to be assaulted.**

Sources:

EPICgram, CA Dept of Health Services, 2002

California Department of Justice, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, 2006

Violence Policy Center, Violence Against Women in California, 1991-1999; EPIC Proportions Report No. 11

Structural inequalities certainly shape gender norms. And definitions of masculinity are affected by race, class and ethnicity and certainly differ across cultures. Yet certain male norms are consistent in virtually every subgroup. And these become the templates against which every group--and virtually all men--construct ideas about what masculinity and being a man means to them.

– Michael Kimmel, PhD, SUNY Stony Brook

Gender Equity & Structural Inequality

Partner violence is also linked to gender inequality, and unequal relationships between men and women. Men not only have physical power, but usually can exercise more economic power – through higher and better paying jobs—and social resources—through ties to other men in positions of strength [42, 43, 49]. Where they are acknowledged as heads of families, they may also exercise important kinds of marital and family authority.

As Amaro, an authority on gender in communities of color, has noted in discussion of J.B. Miller's work, "one of the consequences of permanent inequality is that 'subordinates are encouraged to develop personal psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the dominant group [including] submissiveness, passivity, docility, dependence, lack of initiative, and inability to act, decide or think' [50, " 51].

Adding to this imbalance, many women see attracting an older, more powerful man as an important proof of femininity. An older male may also have psychological resources well beyond those of a younger, less mature mate.

Reproductive Health

Differences in relationship power and structural inequality can be especially important in reproductive health, and are intricately tied to teen pregnancy prevention, STIs/HIV, condom negotiation, and negotiation on when and where sex happens [37, 52-57].

Amaro notes that, "For women, this often means that sexual behavior occurs in the context of unequal power and in a context that socializes women to be passive sexually and in other ways [54] [1995 Gender & Sexual Risk Reduction]

Condom negotiation can trigger violence against women, and many women report that fear of reprisal or abuse is one of the main reasons they feel they can't discuss, initiate, or insist upon condom use [51, 58-62].

Low-Income Communities

The impact of narrow and constraining gender norms can be exacerbated in low-income communities, where gender codes *on the street* can be especially narrow, and penalties for transgressing them harsh [56, 63-65].

In environments where money, jobs and resources are scarce, public control of a female partner may be one of the few ways males can demonstrate public masculinity. In such circumstances an unruly female partner may be seen as a threat to notions of masculine "respect" and status. Some studies have found that it is the most economically marginalized men who are most likely to deploy traditional ideals of manhood [66–69]. While socio-economic status is

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"The foundation for any educational curriculum for engaging young men in HIV prevention should be critical reflections on societal constructions of gender norms and sexuality, including the impact of rigid masculine stereotypes."

important, race and ethnicty also impact gender nomrs. For instance, lower-income Black, Latino, white and Asian males may all have somewhat different ideals around manhood and/or the need to dominate in a relationship.

Gender Transformative

Because of such findings, there has been an increased focus on and commitment to what leading authority Geeta Rao Gupta called "gender transformative" programs and policies.

Approaches which are gender transformative try to highlight, challenge, and ultimately change belief in narrow norms of femininity and masculinity, and in the case of men, engage them as full partners and allies in combatting gender violence and creating more equitable relationships.

International Work

A range of international agencies--like PEPFAR UNAIDS, USAID, and WHO—as well as leading NGOs like CARE, EngenderHealth, International Center for Research on Women, Promundo, and Sonke Gender Justice—have been addressing how dominant notions of manhood, combined with structural and interpersonal power inequalities motivate abuse, and use 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 regions and populations.

For instance, USAID no longer funds new programs that lack a strong gender analysis. And PEPFAR – the President's AIDS initiative in Africa—has made combating harsh codes of masculinity and increasing gender equity for women central to its giving in three dozen countries.

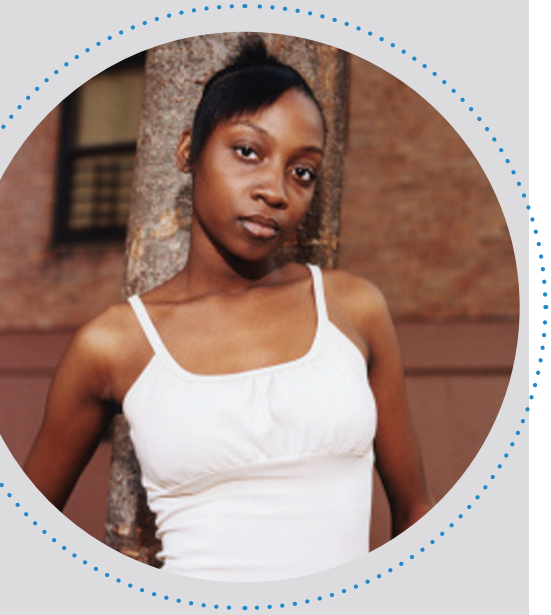
The U.S.

Yet in this area, the US lags behind. As Amaro first noted back in 1995, the US tends to pursue gender equity and improved health and violence outcomes "in a gender vacuum" (Considering Women's Realities, 1995) That observation still remains largely true today.

Many if not most domestic IPV programs and policies still lack a specific focus on challenging narrow gender norms. Those that do may focus solely on males, address men solely as potential perpetrators, or overlook the links between femininity and partner violence.

"Traditional" masculinity is often set up as a monolith--and monolithically bad. But traditional masculinity is riven with contradictions: on one side violence, domination, competition and aggression, but on the other imperatives to be men of honor, integrity, provider, protector, speak truth to power and do the right thing. By setting some parts of traditional masculinity off against the others, we can open dialogs that engage males and don't push men away.

– Michael Kimmel, PhD, SUNY Stony Brook



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.

And a small but growing number of leaders like A Call to Men, NOMAS, Futures Without Violence, Men Can Stop Rape, ScenariosUSA, and CALCASA have adopted gender transformative approaches to combating partner violence.

Our Work

The idea that addressing gender norms makes GBV programs more effective is finally gaining wider acceptance. With help from a core group of researchers, policy-makers, non-profits and funders, TrueChild has launched a California Council on Gender dedicated to leading and partnering in the effort to promote the importance of gender norms through white papers, curricula development, and training.

Recommendations

1. Prevention initiatives must incorporate a strong, specific focus on challenging rigid masculine norms known to lead to partner violence.
2. Prevention efforts and policies should address men, and engage them as full partners and not only as potential perpetrators.
3. Programs and policies that aim to help female survivors should begin addressing beliefs about femininity and masculinity that have been linked to serial abuse.
4. Programs and policies that aim to help female survivors should begin addressing how gender roles and inequities often leave survivors feeling silenced, isolated, and powerless.
5. Studies which address partner violence should include gender norms as a variable in ways that reconnect it with race and class.
6. Reproductive health efforts initiatives that focus on condom use, infidelity, pregnancy and other intimate partner negotiations must begin tracking how gendered power imbalances and coercion impact women.
7. Groups that are already promoting the "gender lens" in IPV efforts but limiting that to woman and girls must expand their analysis to include men and masculinity.
8. Philanthropic institutions must begin supporting innvoative programmatic efforts that target rigid gender norms.

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