

# Sexual violence prevention with men and boys as a social justice issue

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Efforts to reduce and prevent sexual assault over the past three decades have shown an increasing emphasis on engaging men and boys in prevention. For example, there is an increase in projects and initiatives aimed at men and boys in violence prevention sectors. There is also a proliferation of projects and organizations with a defining focus on engaging men and boys in violence prevention. An increased focus on engaging boys and men in violence prevention is true for the violence prevention field in general, as well as violence prevention efforts within specific settings, such as universities. In North America for example, historically most prevention efforts were “risk reduction” or “risk avoidance” programs focused on how young women could lessen their risks of victimization (for a review, see [Orchowski et al., 2020](#)). However, a 2014 survey of 83 universities found that half were engaging men in prevention efforts as well through gender-neutral approaches, and one-quarter were using gender-neutral *and* gender-informed approaches to engage men in prevention ([McGann, 2014](#)). The violence prevention plans of state and national governments in various Western countries also show an increased attention to engaging men and boys as one stream of prevention activity. In addition, a field of “engaging men” or “work with men and boys” has developed internationally, involving gender-conscious initiatives and interventions aimed at men and boys ([Flood, 2015a](#)). Although gender-conscious initiatives and interventions internationally address various issues including parenting, sexual and reproductive health, parenting, and education, violence against women is a significant focus ([World Health Organization, 2011](#)). The field is represented at the international level by *MenEngage*, a network of hundreds of organizations involved in engaging men in building gender equality, and many devote energies to men’s roles in stopping gender-based violence. And finally, there is a growing body of scholarship assessing the effectiveness of this work, including systematic and narrative reviews ([Barker, Ricardo, & Nascimento, 2007](#); [Dworkin, Treves-Kagan, & Lippman, 2013](#); [Graham et al., 2019](#); [Ricardo, Eads, & Barker, 2011](#)).

## Rationale for engaging men and boys in prevention of sexual violence

Efforts to engage men and boys in the prevention of sexual violence are driven by a rationale that informs violence prevention work with men and boys in general. This rationale is as follows:

*First and most importantly, efforts to prevent violence against women must address men because largely it is men who perpetrate this violence. Second, constructions of masculinity – the social norms associated with manhood, and the social organisation of men’s lives and relations – play a crucial role in shaping violence against women. Third, and more hopefully, men and boys have a positive role to play in helping to stop violence against women, and they will benefit personally and relationally from this.*  
(Flood, 2018, p. 4)

Whereas the rationale for engaging boys and men in prevention is clear, what does the field of sexual assault prevention work with men and boys look like in practice? Toward this goal, the following commentary is intended to characterize the international field of efforts to engage men and boys in preventing sexual violence and other forms of violence, acknowledging that this field is heterogenous, and some of this may apply less well to particular countries’ efforts [Table 1](#).

## Features of sexual assault prevention work with men and boys

The first feature of sexual assault prevention work with men and boys is that, at least internationally, much of the work is conducted by feminist and women’s rights organizations and networks, although this is less true in some countries such as the United States. A global survey of organizations that seek to engage men in violence prevention found that three-quarters collaborated with women’s organizations (Kimball, Edleson, Tolman, Neugut, & Carlson, 2013). Many organizations involved in this work grew out of women’s rights movements, partner with them, and have strong feminist agendas (MenEngage Alliance, 2016). However, as the “engaging men” field has grown its links to feminist efforts may have weakened, and emerging male-led programs, campaigns, and organizations may not have feminist agendas or ties to women’s rights movements (COFEM, 2017; MenEngage and UNFPA, 2013, p. 10).

Second, there is a siloing of prevention activity, such that efforts addressing sexual violence largely are separate from those addressing intimate partner violence. Many education programs among boys and young men are focused on either sexual violence and consent, on the one hand, or intimate partner and dating violence on the other. This may reflect the history of the emergence of services and organizations, with a separation between those focused on sexual assault and those focused on domestic

**Table 1 Recommendations for advancing prevention.**

- Efforts among men and boys to prevent sexual violence should be seen as a social justice project, addressing an important form of social injustice.
- A feminist social justice approach has three elements: recognize sexual violence as a social injustice, address the social inequalities at the root of this violence, and draw on social action to make change.
- Initiatives engaging men and boys should tackle the social inequalities expressed and sustained by sexual violence, seeking to change patriarchal structures, norms, and practices.
- Prevention efforts’ use of an intersectional approach should include attention to multiple forms of social difference and inequality and to privilege as well as disadvantage.
- The field should include attention to intramale violence and abuse associated with heterosexism and the policing of masculinity.
- Sexual violence prevention efforts should give greater emphasis to mobilizing men and boys for collective action, working in alliance with feminist advocates and other social justice movements.

violence. In any case, this siloing of prevention activity is troubling given that sexual and intimate partner violence tend to co-occur, there is overlap in the risk and protective factors associated with each, and prevention strategies for either may be productive in preventing the other.

In addition, in sexual violence prevention work with men and boys there has been very little attention to domains and industries identified in some feminist work as key sites of sexual violence and exploitation, namely pornography and prostitution. This is true of the violence prevention field more widely, and there are heated debates among feminists and others over how to understand these domains and appropriate interventions in them (Coy, Smiley, & Tyler, 2019; Moran & Farley, 2019). In any case, while there are growing efforts for example to address men's demand for and use of commercial sexual services (Matthews, 2018), and some mentions of issues of prostitution and pornography in discussions of engaging men (Minerson, Carolo, Dinner, & Jones, 2011, p. 16), this is only very rarely addressed in sexual violence prevention curricula aimed at men and boys.

A third feature of sexual assault prevention work with men and boys is that much of it is conducted through face-to-face education. In order to understand the range of prevention initiatives, one common framework is the "spectrum of prevention." This identifies six levels of intervention, organized from micro to macro: (1) strengthening individual knowledge and skills; (2) community education; (3) educating providers; (4) engaging, strengthening, and mobilizing communities; (5) changing organizational practices; and (6) influencing policies and legislation (Davis, Parks, & Cohen, 2006, p. 7). Much of the sexual assault prevention work with men and boys, like violence prevention work more generally, takes place at the second of these levels. Face-to-face education with boys and young men addressing sexual consent and coercion is a common strategy. The next most common set of strategies are to do with social marketing and communications, with various media campaigns seeking for example to encourage norms of sexual consent among young men (Flood, 2018, pp. 228–229, 243–244). Efforts at other levels, particularly toward the macro end of the spectrum, are far less common, although there are increasing calls for these (DeGue et al., 2012).

Fourth, the deployment of sexual assault prevention among men and boys is uneven. For example, rape prevention education is relatively well established on university campuses in the United States. This likely reflects the impact of the Clery Act (1990) that mandated that colleges and universities that receive federal funding should have policies and procedures in place to prevent crimes, including sexual offenses (Vladutiu, Martin, & Macy, 2011). In contrast, in Australian universities sexual violence prevention education has been virtually nonexistent. This changed radically in 2017, when a national survey documented significant rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment among university students (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). In response, most of Australia's universities now have scrambled to implement consent education, with many now providing short, online-based curricula to their undergraduate student populations. Another setting where sexual violence prevention education among largely male populations takes place is in the military, with both face-to-face and communications-based efforts in this context (Flood, 2018, pp. 291–293).

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## Sexual violence prevention as a social justice project

Sexual violence is an issue of social injustice, and engaging men and boys in its prevention and reduction must therefore be conceptualized as a social justice project. Thus it is important to explore how sexual violence is a matter of social injustice, and then the implications of this for efforts to prevent and reduce sexual violence are noted.

First, what does “social justice” mean? This term is used in a bewildering variety of ways. It can be used in ways which align with radical, progressive, or left-wing political agendas, *and* in ways that align with conservative and neoliberal frameworks (Hudson, 2016). Second, the concept’s use is expanding, across both scholarly disciplines and fields of political activity (Barrett & Lynch, 2015). Nevertheless, one simple way to define social justice is in terms of *fairness*. Social justice thus refers to the “[f]air distribution of opportunities, rewards and responsibilities in society” (Hudson, 2001, p. 278). If social justice refers to “the fair allocation of human rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits,” then social justice also requires “addressing social and economic inequalities and seeking to eliminate discrimination and oppression” (Reamer, 2014, p. 269). Viewed narrowly, social justice requires the fair treatment of individuals. Viewed more broadly, social justice also requires large-scale social change to remove structural inequalities (Reamer, 2014).

There are three ways in which sexual violence is a social justice issue. Here the focus is on men’s sexual violence against women and girls, although later other forms of violence are considered. First, men’s sexual violence against women and girls has been framed above all as an issue of *gender injustice*. Sexual violence causes *harm*. It is very well documented that this violence harms women’s physical and emotional health. Second, men’s sexual violence against women is fundamentally linked to *power and inequality*. Men’s violence both maintains, and is the expression of, men’s power over women and children. Men’s violence is an important element in the organization and maintenance of gender inequality (Maynard & Winn, 1997). Indeed, sexual violence has been seen as a paradigmatic expression of the operation of male power over women. Third, men’s violence against women has *ethical and political consequences*. It is a fundamental barrier to gender equality. Men’s violence is a threat to women’s autonomy, mobility, self-esteem, and everyday safety. It harms women’s health, restricts women’s sexual and reproductive choices, and hinders their participation in political decision-making and public life. A human rights approach increasingly has been extended to violence against women: women’s rights are human rights, and men’s violence against women is a violation of these rights (Walby, 2005). Men’s violence limits women’s human rights and their rights to full citizenship.

Efforts to address sexual violence have their roots in feminist advocacy. Feminist activism made men’s violence against women a public issue and a social policy concern (Phillips, 2006). While earlier waves of feminism had brought public attention to domestic violence, the emergence of second-wave feminisms in the early 1970s included focused advocacy on this and other forms of violence against women. Feminist groups and organizations sought to provide support and services for the victims and survivors of men’s violence, criminalize violent behavior, impose sanctions on its perpetrators, and establish legal and other protections for victims. More widely, women’s movements have sought to undermine cultural and institutional supports for violence against women through community education, advocacy, and law and policy reform. Feminist movements have been a key driver of the adoption of policy and programming on sexual and domestic violence against women, with a review of policies in 70 countries over 4 decades finding that the existence of a strong, autonomous women’s movement is a critical factor in putting the issue on national and transnational policy agendas (Htun & Weldon, 2012).

Whereas advocacy and prevention efforts on sexual violence have their roots in feminism, not all feminisms embody a social justice approach. Feminism in general is defined by a recognition of an imbalance of power, with women subordinate to men; a belief that gender inequalities are social in origin and can be changed; and an emphasis on women’s autonomy and empowerment (Hannam, 2006). At the same time, feminism is internally diverse, it includes different and incompatible ideologies and practices, and some strands of feminism are at odds with social justice approaches. Liberal

feminism, for example, is focused on individual empowerment and formal equality rather than structural and systemic change, as exemplified by contemporary exhortations for women to “lean in” in the corridors of power and wealth (Rottenberg, 2014). On the other hand, both radical and socialist feminisms embody social justice orientations in their critiques of sociopolitical structures. While radical feminism focuses on women’s oppression as women in a social order dominated by men (Mackay, 2015), socialist feminism emphasizes that patriarchy and capitalism interact as two oppressive systems of social organization and power (Beasley, 1999). Social justice feminisms are said to be structural in emphasis, oriented toward social action that makes material changes to people’s lives, aimed at revealing and dismantling sociopolitical structures and ideologies that perpetuate oppression, and aware of the coexistence and intersection of multiple oppressions and committed to a coalition of agendas (Gray, Agllias, & Davies, 2014).

Feminist approaches are not necessarily oriented toward social justice, and in turn, social justice approaches certainly are not necessarily feminist. Looking for example at progressive social movements, most historically have neglected gender issues and condoned patriarchal structures and relations. In contemporary human rights, antiracist, and indigenous movements, take-up of gender issues often has been only as the result of advocacy by women activists both within and outside the movement (Horn, 2013, pp. 44–45). Even social justice movements in which women play active roles as movement members or leaders may not take up feminist-informed approaches. Still, there are mixed-sex social justice movements that do embrace women’s rights and gender justice, and important examples of alliances between feminist and other social justice movements (Horn, 2013, pp. 47–49).

More than any other strand of feminism, it is radical feminism that has emphasized men’s violence against women as a cause and consequence of patriarchal social relations and that has pioneered efforts to eradicate it (Mackay, 2015; Robinson, 2003). This does not mean, however, that radical feminist approaches are universal, or even dominant, in the violence prevention field. To what extent, then, do efforts to address sexual violence, and to engage men and boys in prevention, take a feminist, social justice approach?

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## Violence prevention for social justice?

A feminist and social justice approach to sexual violence prevention has three defining features. It: (1) Addresses sexual violence as a social injustice; (2) Addresses the social inequalities at the root of this violence; and (3) Works for change through social action, including community empowerment and liberation. These three core features are described in detail in the sections that follow.

### A feminist social justice approach

A social justice approach to sexual violence, first, addresses sexual violence as a social injustice. Violence against women has been widely framed in violence prevention fields in countries such as Australia as an issue of public health. Public health approaches are oriented toward social and collective determinants of health and wellbeing, emphasize comprehensive and multilevel interventions, and focus on prevention (Chamberlain, 2008; McMahan, 2000; Noonan & Gibbs, 2009). Both public health and feminist approaches are underpinned by attention to social inequalities and recognize the need for change at multiple levels of the social order. However, public health approaches are more likely to

frame violence against women as a contributor to poor health than as a social injustice. Nevertheless, if we look at the most influential framework for prevention in Australia, *Change the Story*, produced by *Our Watch* (2015), this is a public health framework and also a clearly feminist framework. *Change the Story* shows a robust feminist attention to systematic and structural gender inequalities. This is an instance, therefore, of what one could call a “feminist public health” approach.

Among international efforts to engage men and boys in the prevention of sexual violence, there is widespread agreement that this work must be feminist. It must be guided by feminist content and framed with a feminist political agenda (Flood, 2018). This endorsement is visible in the frameworks adopted by the international network *MenEngage* and by other prominent organizations such as *Sonke Gender Justice* (South Africa), *Men Can Stop Rape* (United States), and the *White Ribbon Campaign* (Canada). As *MenEngage*’s strategic plan states, for example,

*We acknowledge that we build on the heritage of feminist women’s rights organizations and movements and ground our work firmly in feminist principles. We seek to strengthen our work by embracing a women’s rights perspective and feminist analysis, including placing inequalities in privilege and power that result from patriarchy at the heart of our work with men and boys.*  
(MenEngage Alliance, 2017)

At the same time, few organizations or projects focused on engaging men in sexual violence have well-developed feminist theoretical frameworks (Burrell & Flood, 2019), as is true of the violence prevention field more generally (Morrison, Hardison, Mathew, & O’Neil, 2004; Whitaker et al., 2006).

A second feature of a social justice approach is that it addresses the social inequalities, and especially the gender inequalities, at the root of men’s violence against women. Ideally, efforts to prevent men’s violence against women are aimed at changing the social conditions that support and promote violence against women and children. They aim to change patriarchal structures, norms, and practices. A social justice framework recognizes that sexual violence is rooted in power, privilege, and socially determined injustices and seeks to transform these (Hong, 2017; Hong & Marine, 2018).

How do violence prevention efforts in Australia and other countries measure up to this? Feminist and feminist-informed approaches provide the most common theories and concepts among violence prevention programs in Australia (Carmody et al., 2009), and an orientation to the gendered drivers of violence against women is highly visible in the national prevention framework influential in Australia, *Change the Story* (Our Watch, 2015). In practice however, primary prevention efforts in Australia often have focused more on the “micro” than the “macro.” They have focused more on individuals and relationships rather than institutions and structures (Flood, 2018). They have focused on cultural factors, especially attitudes, neglecting structural and institutional inequalities. State and national governments in Australia, while giving rhetorical emphasis to reducing and preventing domestic and sexual violence, sometimes also have sustained policies that maintain the gender inequalities that drive that violence. Although this is true of other countries as well, violence prevention discourse and practice in middle- and low-income countries have shown greater emphasis on structural gender inequalities and the need to improve women’s economic and political conditions.

What about in the “engaging men” field? Feminist orientations are visible in the “content” of the work to engage men and boys in the prevention of sexual violence: in its typical curricula and campaign messages. Influential curricula and programs in the field show feminist agendas, content, and indeed impacts (Dworkin & Barker, 2019, p. 1663). Promundo’s recent *Manhood 2.0* curriculum, aimed at young men, is typical in including content focused on gender, power, and patriarchy (Promundo-US &

University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, 2018). It has a clear focus on questioning sexist masculine norms and harmful and disrespectful behaviors, and its authors emphasize the need to challenge structural power inequalities (Kato-Wallace et al., 2019). Similarly, in an analysis of six male-based sexual violence prevention programs on six college campuses in the United States, program leaders and coordinators emphasized challenging masculinity and gender inequality. They identified hegemonic masculinity and unequal gender relations as having a direct, causal link to violence, and saw challenging hegemonic masculinity and men's unfair privilege in the gender social structure as integral to achieving violence reduction and prevention (McGraw, 2013). In an international survey of men who had attended violence prevention events, two-thirds reported that the events included gender, gender roles, and power among their topics (Allen, Carlson, Casey, Tolman, & Leek, 2018), although there is not the detail to know how feminist this content was.

There has not been any systematic analysis or comparison of the curricula or agendas of programs engaging men and boys in violence prevention, and it is not clear how common are feminist orientations. A recent systematic review examined male-focused sexual violence, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence perpetration programs that have been evaluated using randomized designs and have measured changes in perpetration behaviors longitudinally (Graham et al., 2019). It noted wide variation in format (in terms of numbers of sessions, session length, and program duration), delivery approach, topics, types of activities, and educator type and training among the seven programs (namely, Coaching Boys into Men, Men's Discussion Groups, the Men's Project, The Men's Program, RealConsent, the Sexual Assault Prevention Program for College Men, and a video program). While the review states that most programs addressed gender norms in some manner, it does not provide sufficient detail to assess the programs' curricula or content.

While a feminist social justice approach should be built into programs' approaches and curricula, this does not require that it must be highly visible to participants on their initial entry into the program. Many men and boys may already feel defensive and hostile about the issue of men's sexual violence against women (Berkowitz, 2004). Many agree to some extent with sexist and violence-supportive norms, overestimate other men's rape-supportive attitudes, feel loyalties to other men, and have negative understandings of feminism and violence prevention (Flood, 2018, pp. 116–136). Thus efforts focused on appealing only to men's ethical and political concerns with social injustice may fall on deaf ears or provoke withdrawal and even backlash. Positive and strengths-based approaches are likely to be more effective in fostering men's initial engagement and participation. Advocates and educators in men's violence prevention tend to call for approaches that personalize the issue by appealing to men's care and concern for the women and girls they know, appeal to higher values and principles, show that men will benefit, start where men are, and build on strengths (Flood, 2018, pp. 145–173). At the same time, rape prevention programs among men and boys should not be so oriented to the "positive" that they neglect to challenge rape-supportive norms and behaviors, encourage critical attention to patriarchal gender inequalities, and nurture socially just practices and relations among their participants.

Feminist attention to patriarchal inequalities also is visible among many of the leaders and representatives of organizations that engage men and boys in preventing violence against women and girls. In an international study, based on interviews with 29 representatives of such organizations in Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania, and North and South America, program representatives' approaches to prevention showed an "emphasis on transforming the sexist underpinnings of violence against women" (Storer, Casey, Carlson, Edleson, & Tolman, 2016, p. 261). They focused on upstream and macro approaches, seeking to challenge the social norms and institutions that foster this violence. Program representatives

also referred to the feminist *practice* of their work. In describing the challenges they faced in this work, two-thirds spoke of the tensions in asking a privileged social group to examine their deeply held beliefs about being a man and to critically evaluate their privilege. The representatives also identified institutionalized male power within governmental, media, criminal justice, and religious and other community institutions as a significant barrier, reinforcing patriarchal notions of masculinity and impeding their efforts to gain support, resources, and legitimacy (Casey et al., 2013).

Progressive and social justice orientations are a common influence on men's pathways to involvement in profeminist and antiviolence advocacy, alongside other factors such as sensitization to the issue of violence against women through relations with women. Studies among male advocates find that some men come to activist involvements addressing sexual and domestic violence because of preexisting commitments to social justice or gender justice, involvements in other organizations and movements focused on social justice, and critical awareness of intersecting injustices borne of their experiences as queer, ethnic minority or men of color (Flood, 2018, pp. 141–142).

Feminist orientations are not universal, however, among the organizers of and advocates for this work. Whereas feminisms are diverse, some programs and advocates fall short even of the basic orientations identified earlier as defining of feminism, or of more robust social justice feminisms. In a violence prevention project focused on young men in the former Yugoslavia, interviews with peer educators and coordinators found that some framed men as victims, saw the gender order as equally harmful for men and women, and expressed hostility and suspicion toward feminism (Labiris, 2013). In a study in Canada among 11 men and 1 woman involved as activists in intersectional men's work, while they expressed a strong social justice politics themselves, they felt that this was lacking among much of contemporary men's work. They defined a social justice approach as involving a broad systemic analysis of power and oppression and acknowledging the connections between heteropatriarchy and other systems of oppression including white supremacy and capitalism. These activists perceived that much of today's men's work lacks this political analysis and fails to engage in the more radical aspects of this work (Rosenberg, 2012).

A strong social justice orientation is explicit in one of the prominent and pioneering programs for engaging men, Mentors in Violence Prevention, developed in the United States by Jackson Katz and colleagues. *Mentors in Violence Prevention* (MVP) was one of the first bystander-focused programs in the sexual assault fields, and developed in particular to engage men, although it now works with women as well (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011). Katz and colleagues emphasize the social justice roots of the program. Like other social justice approaches, MVP begins “with the premise that structural and systemic inequalities are the context for, if not the root cause of, most interpersonal violence.” It addresses the complicit silence of members of dominant groups and encourages them to interrupt and challenge the practices that are micro-level expressions of macro systems of injustice (Katz, 2018). Organizations engaging men in violence prevention in some other countries also have their roots in social justice activism, such as *Sonke Gender Justice* in South Africa whose work builds on the legacy of community organizing in opposition to apartheid (Peacock, 2003).

The founder of Mentors in Violence Prevention counterposes its feminist and social justice orientations with trends in bystander-focused work in the violence prevention field. As the field has turned increasingly to “bystander intervention,” some programs and approaches have emerged that address violence perpetration in degendered or gender-neutral ways and that frame bystanders' roles in an individualistic and events-based fashion (Katz, 2018; Katz et al., 2011; Miller, 2018). These are said to neglect the gendered and patriarchal character of much violence, the gendered norms that constrain



intervention, and people's roles in either undermining or perpetuating larger systems of inequality. However, while it is important that feminist and social justice orientations be incorporated into programs, this can be done more explicitly, while in others they may guide the program but be more implicit in its curricula, reflecting compromises between what is correct theoretically and politically and what may work pedagogically (Senn, 2011).

While general, feminist orientations are typical in the engaging men field, structural-level interventions are rare. In a review of interventions aimed at heterosexual men across outcomes including violence, HIV and STIs, sexual risk behavior, and gendered norms and attitudes, only one of the 15 interventions addressed structural-level factors (Dworkin et al., 2013). The engaging men field has been criticized for a focus on individualized masculinities—on the harmful aspects of individual male beliefs, roles, and behaviors—and a neglect of the systemic and structural forces that produce these (Dworkin, Fleming, & Colvin, 2015). Masculinities are collective practices shaped by economic, political, and social patterns and inequalities and by processes or forces at the macro-social or structural level (such as migration, globalization, and civil conflict). The field's approach may overemphasize men's agency and choice, placing the onus on individual men to overcome entrenched societal-level problems and pinning hope for changes in gender “on the shoulders of individual men instead of helping to shift structures that shape masculinities” (Dworkin et al., 2015, p. 6). Here therefore, violence prevention work with men falls short of the feminist social justice emphasis on changing patriarchal social conditions and structures.

The feminist orientation of work to involve men and boys in violence prevention may have intensified, nevertheless, because of a growing emphasis in the field on the need for “gender-transformative” approaches. “Gender-transformative” increasingly is identified as an important standard for work in the “engaging men” field, with a series of publications assessing interventions against this standard or holding it up as a guiding principle for this work (Barker et al., 2007; Casey, Carlson, Two Bulls, & Yager, 2016; Dworkin et al., 2013; Fleming, Lee, & Dworkin, 2014; Wells, Flood, Boutillier, Goulet, & Dozois, 2020). Although the term is defined in varying ways, typically it refers to efforts intended to transform gender inequalities and generate more gender-equitable relations.

The emergence of a “gender-transformative” standard is positive for the field, in encouraging an explicit orientation toward progressive change in gender relations. At the same time, there are five limitations to note. First, the term is used in uneven and even fuzzy ways for interventions with differing domains and levels of intended impact, from shifting gender norms, to encouraging more gender-equitable interpersonal relationships, to transforming structural gender inequalities. Second, while the term may suggest a binary of “transformative” and “nontransformative” interventions, it may be more useful to think in terms of a continuum from least desirable to most desirable approaches, as described in Gupta's (2000) original model and other more recent formulations (UNFPA & Promundo, 2010; World Health Organization, 2011). Third, the term is used primarily for interventions *intended* to transform gender relations, rather than only for interventions *proven* to do so, that is, for interventions with robust evidence of positive impact in actually “transforming gender.” Fourth, we should not assume that the only change-making programs are those that describe themselves as “gender transformative.” The notion “gender transformative” is not yet robust enough, nor is the evidence for gender-transformative programs' greater efficacy either universal or conclusive enough, to use this as a necessary criterion for program selection. Other programs also may transform gender norms and inequalities without labeling themselves as such. Fifth, if to be “gender-transformative” is to transform gender roles and relations in progressive ways then this seems synonymous with feminism, so why not call it “feminist”? Perhaps

the term “gender-transformative” signals an approach which is distinct from or a subset of feminist interventions, although how is unclear. More likely, the use of the term “gender-transformative” is pragmatic in the many contexts where the term “feminist” is too risky, but this use also may represent a muting of the feminist and politicized orientations of this work. The violence prevention field already has been depoliticized to some degree (Flood, 2018, pp. 48–49; Hong, 2017, pp. 30–31), and the popularity of the term “gender-transformative” over the term “feminist” simply may reflect this.

To what extent can rape prevention programs and workshops, one of the most common sexual violence prevention strategies, embody a social justice approach? Social justice approaches are intended to make substantive social change, and rape prevention programs will only do so, first, to the extent that they adopt elements of effective educational practice. While there is not the space here to describe these in detail, we know that effective programs employ a whole-of-institution approach, in which their educational work is part of a program of change in the institution’s policies, processes, and structures. They are guided by an evidence-based framework and a robust theory of change. They have sufficient duration and intensity in multisession training to generate change, they use interactive and participatory teaching methods, and their educators are knowledgeable and skilled. And they are engaging and relevant for and inclusive of their participants (Flood, 2018, pp. 183–226). However, even if rape prevention programs meet these standards of effective educational practice, their ability to embody social justice, to generate meaningful social change, is limited if they are not complemented by other strategies oriented toward social action. Thus face-to-face programs in schools, colleges, and universities must be complemented by wider efforts at social change, as what this chapter identifies as the third element of a social justice approach.

### Addressing intersecting inequalities

Feminist social justice approaches are defined in part by the recognition of interlocking oppressions (Kalsem & Williams, 2010, pp. 181–182). The violence prevention field shows increased emphasis on an “intersectional” approach, grounded in the recognition that gender and gender inequalities intersect with other forms of social difference and inequality, thus shaping violence perpetration and victimization. An intersectional approach to engaging men in violence prevention begins with the fundamental point that men’s lives, like women’s, are structured not only by gender but also by other forms of social division and difference (race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.). There is thus diversity and hierarchy among men and boys. In turn, violence perpetration and victimization are shaped by these intersecting forms of disadvantage and privilege, and violence against women is linked to other forms of social injustice (Flood, 2018). Thus work with men and boys, like any prevention work, must be intersectional.

The engaging men field shows a widespread acknowledgment of the need for an intersectional approach, including a recognition of diversity in men’s experience of power and privilege (ICRW, 2018, p. 21). In practice, however, there are at least three limits to the engaging men field’s adoption of an intersectional approach. First, it is focused particularly on ethnic difference, and there has been less attention to differences and inequalities associated with sexuality or class (Flood, 2015b, pp. S164–165). Most gender-transformative programming with men has ignored sexual minority men and transgender men (Dworkin et al., 2015). Second, this adoption focuses on disadvantage and neglects privilege. There is far more attention to the intersections of ethnicity with disadvantage and far less to the intersections of ethnicity with *privilege*, although these are two sides of the same systems of

injustice. When it comes to perpetrators or offenders for example, there has been more attention to how ethnic minority and indigenous men's experiences of the criminal justice system are structured by disadvantage, and far less to how *white* men's experiences are structured by privilege. Third, to the extent that there is sustained attention to privilege in the engaging men field, for the most part this involves acknowledging and addressing *men's* privilege—the privileges that antiviolence educators and advocates have as men—rather than the privileges associated with other, intersecting forms of social injustice.

An intersectional approach to men and gender demands attention not only to men's and boys' privilege but to their disadvantage, and to hierarchies and inequalities among men and boys themselves. Influential scholarly frameworks for understanding men and masculinities long have emphasized that masculinity is organized in part through relations of hierarchy and subordination among men themselves (Connell, 1995, pp. 77–81). They have emphasized that patriarchal relations and constructions of masculinity are sustained through men's and boys' gender policing of other men and boys, and in particular through homophobic teasing and harassment, as Kinsman (1987) noted for example over 30 years ago. Antisexist and violence prevention programs aimed at men and boys therefore have often included content challenging homophobia and heterosexism.

However, in addressing homophobia, prevention programs have focused more on how easing this will open up space for more gender-equitable masculinities and improve boys' and men's relations with girls and women, and less on challenging homophobic violence and abuse in and of themselves. Not only is homophobia an important precursor to boys' dating and sexual violence perpetration against women and girls, but homophobic bullying and harassment is an important form of violence and abuse in its own right (Brush & Miller, 2019, pp. 1646–1647). In practice,

*gender transformative programs focus mostly on how boys/men should interact with girls/women, rather than how boys/men interact with each other and the ways in which gender-harassing behaviors occur among and within groups of boys.*  
(Brush & Miller, 2019, p. 1647)

Violence prevention work among boys and men therefore should do more to challenge homophobic teasing and bullying (Hollander & Pascoe, 2019; Orchowski, 2019), in order to advance the aim of “unhinging the production, performance, and policing of heteronormative masculinity” (Orchowski, 2019, p. 1677).

More widely, there are calls to address boys' and men's experiences of a range of forms of interpersonal violence. For example, there should be greater attention to “the everydayness of gendered violence”—the embeddedness of gendered violence in boys' and men's everyday socialization and wider gender relations (Hollander & Pascoe, 2019, p. 1683). In seeking to democratize the gender order, prevention efforts should address not only men's domination of women, but men's domination of other men, including violence against men by other men (Dworkin et al., 2015).

Perhaps the harder task is to address men's and boys' violence victimization at the hands of women and girls. Efforts to address men's violence against women often are met with the cry, “What about women's violence against men?” (Flood, Dragiewicz, & Pease, 2018). While this often expresses resistance and backlash rather than a heartfelt concern for male victims, there is nevertheless a genuine issue of male victimization to address. In scholarship on domestic or intimate partner violence, there is heated debate over the gendered patterns of this violence, with a divide between feminist researchers arguing for gender asymmetry and the preponderance of men's violence against women, on the one

hand, and family conflict researchers arguing for greater gender symmetry in both perpetration and victimization, on the other (Flood, 2018, pp. 21–23). The weight of evidence is that, regarding intimate partner violence among adults, far more of this violence is perpetrated by men than by women, far more of the victims are women rather than men, and there are a series of further gender contrasts in perpetration and victimization (Allen, 2011; Meyer & Frost, 2019). In any case, some curricula and toolkits for engaging men and boys in preventing partner and dating violence acknowledge the fact of victimization among men and boys, including violence perpetrated by women (Miruka, 2013, pp. 17, 48; Sonke Gender Justice, 2018, p. 57), although others do not (Promundo-US & University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, 2018; USAID, 2011).

When it comes to sexual violence, the engaging men field long has recognized that child sexual assault's victims include boys, largely at the hands of adult men. Such acknowledgments are visible, for example, in some curricula aimed at men and boys (Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape, 2004; Population Council, 2006, p. 51). On the other hand, attention to sexual violence against *adult* men has been much slower to emerge. A review of the field suggests that among prevention interventions aimed at men, acknowledgment of adult male victims is more common in programs on intimate partner violence than in programs on sexual violence. However, particularly in countries and regions characterized by militarism and civil conflict, there has been attention to conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, and this attention increased significantly this century (du Toit & le Roux, 2020). The engaging men field has taken up this issue to some extent, particularly among international networks and those working in the global South (MenEngage and UNFPA, 2013). Prevention work in an international context is discussed in further detail in Chapter 15 in this volume. Whereas there is generally a consensus among feminist advocates on the need to acknowledge and respond to male victims of conflict-related sexual violence, there is debate over how best to do so. A fully “gender-neutral” approach would threaten hard-won attention to violence against women and girls in conflict and humanitarian settings (Ward, 2016). Feminist scholars and advocates have noted that in fact, a gendered approach is *necessary* in understanding violence against men and boys, the contrasts between this and violence against women and girls, and importantly, how violence against men and boys in conflict and elsewhere is shaped by patriarchal gender hierarchies (du Toit & le Roux, 2020; Ward, 2016).

Looking beyond conflict settings to sexual violence more broadly, recent studies have lent support to calls for attention to women's sexual violence against adult men. Survey research by Stemple et al. (Stemple, Flores, & Meyer, 2017; Stemple & Meyer, 2014) seems to support the idea that rates of sexual coercion by women against men are at similar levels to men's against women. Just as the violence prevention field is under pressure from antifeminist “men's rights” advocates and others to frame intimate partner violence as gender symmetrical, these studies are likely to prompt increasing pressure to frame sexual violence as gender symmetrical. However, just as there are debates over the methods such as the “Conflict Tactics Scale” used in those studies that find an apparent gender symmetry in the prevalence of domestic violence, there are questions over the methods and analysis used in Stemple et al.'s research. Other research on male sexual victimization should suggest that when male survey respondents answer questions affirmatively about forced or coerced sex, this may mean something very different from what is conventionally thought of as sexual victimization (Gavey, 2018, pp. 181–198, 243–248). We therefore need more nuanced accounts of the nature and extent of both women's and men's victimization, including critical scrutiny of simplistic claims about gender symmetry.

## Taking social action

A third element of a social justice approach is that it works for change through social action, including community empowerment and liberation. Community development certainly is a feature of violence prevention activity in Australia, yet it is underdeveloped. Efforts to change those characteristics of settings—of schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods—and of communities that increase the risk for violence are rare. Community-level strategies have been described as a vital next step in prevention (DeGue et al., 2012), but they are uncommon. One important form of community strategy is community mobilization: bringing individuals and groups together through coalitions, networks, and movements to broaden prevention efforts (Texas Council on Family Violence, 2010). It may comprise community action teams designed to involve communities in building strategies for community prevention, coalitions among community groups and agencies, and activist organizations and networks engaged in advocacy. While community mobilization is underdeveloped in Australia for example, feminist organizations and advocates continue to be powerful voices in community debate and policy formation. And the domestic violence and sexual assault sectors are important sites for furthering feminist agendas and making social change (Carrington, 2016).

If a social justice approach involves working for change through social action, how does the engaging men field measure up? This section of this commentary focuses on community mobilization, assessing the extent and character of mobilizations in the name of sexual violence prevention among men and boys. There are three features to note: the extent of men's antiviolence advocacy has increased considerably, men often make positive personal change as part of their participation, and there is a widespread emphasis on accountability to women's and feminist constituencies.

The last four decades has witnessed a significant increase in men's antiviolence advocacy. While there is little data on the scale of men's involvement in collective public advocacy against men's violence against women, the numbers of men involved are likely to be greater than at any other time in history. Some men mobilized in antisexist and antirape men's groups in the 1970s in response to the beginnings of second-wave feminism, but their numbers now are dwarfed by large organizations and regional and international networks focused on or involved in engaging men and boys in prevention (Flood, 2018, pp. 256–263). These in turn are only a small fraction of the range of organizations and networks addressing sexual and domestic violence.

Part of a social justice approach to engaging men in violence prevention is the assumption that activists and advocates will seek to *live the change* they intend to see in the world. This embodies a “pre-figurative” politics, in which men are expected to practice nonviolence and gender justice in their own lives and relations. In two reviews of a series of qualitative studies among male antiviolence advocates, many do report shifts toward more antipatriarchal practice in their own lives (Flood, 2014; Flood & Ertel, 2020). At the same time, these studies also find signs of some men's ongoing complicity in patriarchal practices and privilege.

A further dimension of a social justice approach to social action is an emphasis on accountability—the assumptions that struggles against oppression should be led by those who are oppressed, and those who are oppressed have a better understanding of the system than those who are privileged or advantaged (Cohen, 2000). There is a widespread acceptance in the engaging men field that this work must be accountable to feminist and women's rights constituencies, visible among men's antiviolence advocates (Macomber, 2014; Rosenberg, 2012), in international dialogs on engaging men (MenEngage Alliance, 2016), and in local and international standards for this work (MenEngage, 2018; Pease, 2017; Wells et al., 2020). On the other hand, the actual practice of accountability is less well established.

Definitions of accountability are more uneven (Flood, 2018, pp. 92–96), and international feminist networks such as the Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM, 2017) have expressed concern about reductions in accountability to women and girls caused by a lack of feminist analysis, evidence-free programming, male-led efforts that do not support women's leadership, and uncritical shifts toward men's priorities and needs.

There are three important limitations to community mobilizations among men for violence prevention: (1) few men are involved; (2) there has been little attention to powerful men and institutional actors; and (3) there has been little alliance with other social justice movements.

Men are largely absent from collective advocacy aimed at ending sexual and domestic violence, with most of this work done by women and women's rights organizations. This is the first limitation. Even in instances where significant numbers of men participate in antiviolence campaigns or networks in some capacity, they are not necessarily mobilized in grassroots networks.

An example of this dearth of mobilization comes from the White Ribbon Campaign in Australia. White Ribbon is an international campaign to invite men to wear a white ribbon on and around the *International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women* or the *16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence* to show their opposition to men's violence against women. The campaign is active in over 60 countries, but Australia's has been perhaps the biggest. In 2014 there were over 1000 community events in White Ribbon's name, over 2400 men had signed on as public "Ambassadors" for the campaign, and by early 2015 over 150,000 people had signed the online "Oath" never to commit or condone violence against women. White Ribbon thus at the time was a significant presence in the violence prevention field in Australia. However, only one-third of the community events in 2014 were organized by men, many of the key staff and the CEO of the national organization were women, and white ribbons sometimes were worn by women rather than men (Flood, 2018, p. 262). In addition, the Australian campaign did little to foster grassroots networking among men, and a 2015 survey of its Ambassadors found that one-fifth felt that the campaign lacked a grassroots feel (Bell & Flood, 2019).

Difficulties in getting men to "do the work," or even just to turn up, also are visible in other kinds of prevention efforts aimed at men. In a US assessment of how the campuses that are part of the Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) Campus Program are engaging men in the prevention of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, dating violence and stalking, responsibility for engaging men on campus largely was in the hands of women, as directors of Women Centers, as prevention coordinators, and in other positions. In addition, the most frequent challenge reported by universities and colleges, identified by 79% of the 83 institutions surveyed, was getting more male-identified students, faculty, administration, and staff involved, while the second most frequent challenge (identified by 64% of institutions) was building and sustaining male-identified student leadership (McGann, 2014).

Still, there are some examples of substantial or widespread collective antiviolence mobilizations among men. These include national efforts in countries in the global South, campus antirape groups, and other initiatives aimed at mobilizing men (Flood, 2018, pp. 256–263). Grassroots social movements, involving men and women acting in alliance, are vital to promote community and societal-level change (Dworkin et al., 2015).

When men *do* participate in advocacy events and campaigns addressing sexual violence, their understandings and activism may be limited, as three US studies of public events find. In studies of "Walk A Mile in Her Shoes" marches, one found that men's adoption of stereotypically feminine shoes and dress involved only tokenistic disruptions of gender boundaries and a homophobic avoidance and

renunciation of challenges to heterosexuality (Bridges, 2010), while another described among participants a lack of awareness of sexual violence and stereotypical performances of femininity (Kamis, 2016). Similarly, among men who took part in an antiviolence “Slutwalk” event, few made links between men’s perpetration of sexual violence and cultural definitions of masculinity that valorize competition, aggression, and the sexual conquest of women (Barber & Kretschmer, 2013). Advocates should not demand, of course, that every man who turns up to a sexual violence protest march or meeting must have a fully developed political consciousness, but involvement ideally involves the development of this awareness and of further social action, either prior to participation or through activities incorporated into the event itself.

A second limitation of men’s antiviolence work’s contribution to social action is its neglect of powerful men and institutions. As a recent review of the “engaging men” field notes, there has been a greater focus on engaging men and boys at the level of individuals and communities than at the levels of policy and structures (ICRW, 2018, p. 22). This is a critical area for growth in the field.

Much of the face-to-face education work with men and boys for sexual violence prevention takes place among men with little institutional power, such as university students. In some instances this work takes place with men in disadvantaged social locations—men who are black, indigenous, or in poor communities—and calls on them to recognize themselves as empowered social actors with responsibility to prevent men’s violence against women (Salter, 2016). The same is true of the international “engaging men” field more generally, in that often it engages the men with the least social power, and not the men with power (ICRW, 2018, p. 23), and as noted earlier, it shows too much attention to individual male beliefs and roles and not enough to structural and collective forces. It is unrealistic and unfair to expect disadvantaged men to be able easily to transform structural inequalities. On the other hand, such men may be able to transform the inequalities in their own social relations with girls and women, and strategies of community mobilization may empower such men in collective social action.

Men with institutional and structural power—political leaders, CEOs, and others—rarely have been the targets of sexual violence prevention efforts aimed at men. There are, however, some isolated examples in the “engaging men” field of such advocacy. Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa has adopted political advocacy to confront men in public office who make sexist or violence-supportive statements or whose track record on these issues is poor (Peacock & Barker, 2012). In “engaging men” work on workplace gender equality rather than violence prevention, one stream of activity focuses on senior male leaders, involving them as advocates of workplace initiatives or, to use the term of a well-established Australian program, as *Male Champions of Change*. There is some evidence that senior male leaders are more able to act as advocates for gender equality than their female counterparts, because of the gendered character of leadership in which men can take for granted far more their gender, are accepted by male peers, and thus have greater agency and protection (de Vries, 2015).

Prevention efforts also have only rarely challenged collective and institutional actors, particularly state actors (governments), and their perpetration of collective violence, including sexual violence for example in contexts of conflict and militarism. Exceptions to this come particularly from organizations with strong, established social justice agendas such as the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The Men and Masculinities stream within the Gender, Power and Sexuality program of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) has sought to highlight the use of violence as an instrument of institutionalized power and control and to address lack of accountability and corruption in state institutions (Shahrokh, Edström, & Greig, 2015). In India, Kenya, and Uganda, activists in the *Mobilising Men* program, also developed by the IDS, have lobbied local governments to enforce domestic violence laws

and pressured authorities on university campuses to adopt adequate institutional processes for responding to sexual harassment (Greig & Edström, 2012).

The third limitation of efforts to engage men in sexual violence prevention, in social justice terms, is their lack of alliance with other social justice movements. In countries such as the United States and Australia such alliances are virtually nonexistent. The extent of such alliances may vary radically by country and region, and in countries in the global South such as India and South Africa such alliances seem more common. Organizations such as the Centre for Health and Social Justice in India and the Institute of Development Studies have sought to bring new voices and constituencies into the discourse on engaging men and boys, in part by emphasizing the inclusion of other social justice movements including feminist, transgender, and Dalit rights movements (Shahrokh et al., 2015). The positive impact of such efforts was visible at the second *MenEngage* Global Symposium in India in 2014, with significant levels of participation from diverse social justice networks.

There are growing calls in the engaging men field for alliances between men's work for gender equality, the women's rights fields, and other social justice movements, visible for example in the publications of the international *MenEngage* network (MenEngage, 2014). *MenEngage's* most recent strategic plan emphasizes alliance with women's rights organizations, networks, and movements, but also with actors and agencies in the fields of social justice, climate justice, child rights, youth empowerment and rights, sexual and reproductive health rights, civil and political rights, indigenous population rights, and human rights (MenEngage Alliance, 2017).

There are compelling reasons for efforts engaging men and boys in preventing violence against women and girls to link gender injustice to other forms of social injustice and build alliances with other social justice efforts. As argued in the conclusion to "*Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention*," "First, both gender in general, and violence against women in particular, are shaped by multiple, intersecting forms of inequality and oppression. [...] Second, efforts to engage men must reckon with the inequalities and hierarchies among men themselves, the complex patterns of privilege and disadvantage which shape men's lives. Third, forging partnerships between gender justice and other social justice struggles and movements – such as those addressing sexual diversity, sexual rights, and economic justice – helps to make social change [...] If advocates, programs, and movements engaging men can build collective solidarity with other progressive efforts, they will intensify the support for and momentum towards justice" (Flood, 2018, p. 386).

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## Next steps

The field of work engaging men and boys in preventing sexual violence has grown in both scale and sophistication over the past four decades. Inspired in large part by feminist advocacy and scholarship, much of this work seeks to shift the patriarchal behaviors, ideologies, and inequalities at the heart of this violence. Over its recent history, initiatives and networks engaging men have shown some orientation toward a (feminist) social justice approach, characterized by a focus on the gender inequalities that underpin men's violence against women, an intersectional approach, and attention to social and structural forces. The actual practice of prevention, however, falls short of these aspirations, with only a partial adoption of intersectional approaches, a neglect of structural change and institutional actors, and limited collective mobilizations and few alliances with other progressive movements. The social justice character of prevention work aimed at men and boys is limited, uneven, and may be being diluted by trends toward depoliticization in the prevention field more generally.



What are the next steps for the field? A recent publication identified and discussed six key tasks, of which four are particularly strongly related to a social justice approach: maintain a feminist agenda, work in partnership with women's rights and movements, link gender justice to other forms of justice, and politicize men and masculinities (Flood, 2018, pp. 384–389). The future of work to engage men is influenced by wider social and political forces, both negative and positive, including the rise of patriarchal and authoritarian movements and governments; organized backlash and resistance to feminism; other global forces including economic change, militarism, and pandemics; and of course developments in violence prevention fields themselves. But advocates, educators, and researchers also have some degree of individual and collective agency. We must continue the work of involving men and boys in sexual violence prevention, refining our practice, extending our reach and impact, and contributing to progress toward gender justice.

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