

MS. FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN

# supporting boys' resilience:

A DIALOGUE WITH RESEARCHERS,  
PRACTITIONERS, AND THE MEDIA



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THE MS. FOUNDATION SUPPORTS THE EFFORTS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS TO GOVERN THEIR OWN LIVES AND INFLUENCE THE WORLD AROUND THEM. THROUGH ITS LEADERSHIP, EXPERTISE AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT, THE FOUNDATION CHAMPIONS AN EQUITABLE SOCIETY BY EFFECTING CHANGE IN PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS, LAW, PHILANTHROPY AND SOCIAL POLICY.

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OUR WORK IS GUIDED BY OUR VISION OF A JUST AND SAFE WORLD WHERE POWER AND POSSIBILITY ARE NOT LIMITED BY GENDER, RACE, CLASS OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION. WE BELIEVE THAT EQUITY AND INCLUSION ARE THE CORNERSTONES OF A TRUE DEMOCRACY IN WHICH THE WORTH AND DIGNITY OF EVERY PERSON IS VALUED.

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RESEARCHERS, PRACTITIONERS,  
AND THE MEDIA

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# why boys?

TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF WOMEN AND GIRLS in our society, men's and boys' lives must change as well. For over three decades, the mission of the Ms. Foundation for Women has been to support the efforts of women and girls to govern their own lives and influence the world around them. This work has been done with the awareness that the lives and futures of women and girls are interwoven with those of men and boys, and that the gender order in our society has harmful effects on all members of the human community.

A focus on boys is crucial. Boys—and the men that they become—are active participants in and gatekeepers of a rigid gender order that structures our lives, informs our public policy, and creates and defeats possibilities for boys and men, and for girls and women. Masculinity, as it is culturally constructed, puts forth a constricted, often destructive, version of boyhood and manhood that limits the full range of emotional and behavioral potential that boys inherently possess.

In March 2004, the Ms. Foundation for Women held a symposium to address and explore these issues of gender and masculinity: “Supporting Boys’ Resilience: A Dialogue with Researchers, Practitioners, and the Media.”<sup>1</sup> The symposium explored ways to support boys’ resilience by helping them remain healthy, strong, and confident in the

face of obstacles. Leading members of the academic, media, and direct-service communities gathered to present and participate in a dialogue with an audience consisting of funders, academics, and direct-service practitioners. In a series of presentations, panel discussions, films, and breakout sessions, the presenters and attendees engaged in a challenging, complex, and sometimes difficult conversation about boys’ resilience, their resistance and capitulation to culturally constructed images of masculinity, and the possibilities of giving new meaning to manhood.

This document is a description of that conversation and a presentation of those possibilities. It begins with a discussion of feminist reflections on boys and men as allies. It goes on to address the obstacles—both perceived and real—to the healthy development of boys, and emphasizes the need to build resistance and resilience in the face of these obstacles. Next, it outlines new possibilities for boyhood and manhood and provides a rationale and prescriptions for rethinking masculinity as constructed by society-at-large, the media, and the social science literature. It then interrogates the connection between masculinity and violence, and highlights specific strategies for breaking this link and healing the wounds it has wrought. This document ends with charting the remaining challenges we face in supporting boys’—and, interrelatedly, girls’—resilience.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first of three symposia to be held in the Ms. Foundation's Gender Symposia Series, planned as a series of dialogues about the role of gender in society.

# feminist reflections on boys and men as allies of girls and women

FEMINIST WOMEN HAVE LONG PROMOTED THE development of healthy boys. As Marie C. Wilson, Ms. Foundation for Women President Emerita, noted, feminist women have understood that raising healthy boys is necessary for raising healthy girls and creating a healthy society. Susan Wefald, Director of Institutional Planning at the Ms. Foundation, reminded us that adherence to narrowly defined gender roles for boys and men, as well as for girls and women, is a major obstacle to achieving women's equality. Carol Gilligan, professor at New York University and author of *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*,<sup>2</sup> stated that the joining of men and women is absolutely critical in our efforts to challenge the patriarchal order that divides us and to create a just society. Patriarchy, as explained by Gilligan, is:

*... an anthropological term, describing families and cultures that are headed by fathers. [Patriarchy] is a hierarchy or priesthood in which a father or some fathers control access to truth or power or God or knowledge ... As such, patriarchy is an order of domination, privileging some men over others and subordinating women. But in divid-*

*ing men from men and men from women, in splitting fathers from mothers and daughters and sons, patriarchy also creates a rift in the psyche, dividing everyone from parts of themselves.*<sup>3</sup>

Gilligan described how individuals, relationships, and societies are forced toward disconnections dictated by patriarchal culture. For boys, this disconnection comes early in life when they are pressured to distance and differentiate themselves from their mothers to prove their masculinity. To the extent that masculinity is defined in opposition to femininity, boys learn that they cannot and should not be like their mothers if they want to be "real men." Likewise, mothers are pressured to disconnect from their sons in the name of being "good mothers." Women raise sons, know them, and love them, yet the forces marshaled to separate sons from their mothers are enormous. The psychological establishment sanctions and encourages this separation, and emphasizes the importance of boys' autonomy, independence, self-sufficiency, and disconnection (both literal and symbolic) from their mothers. Thus, sons are taught to aban-

<sup>2</sup> C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> C. Gilligan, *The Birth of Pleasure*, Vintage Books, New York, 2003, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*.

don women starting with the very first woman in their lives, the woman they love best: their mother.

Gilligan's early pioneering research with young girls revealed their capacity to comprehend the world of human relationships and responsibilities with a remarkable degree of acuity, sensitivity, and outspokenness.<sup>4</sup> This research begged the question, if girls could read the relational world so astutely, couldn't boys, too? Gilligan asserted that the work of bringing boys back into connection with themselves, with their mothers, and with other women, boys, and men is essential for democracy and for fostering the psychological qualities necessary for citizenship. She pointed out that there is a fundamental tension between democracy and patriarchy: democracy requires love, partnership, and having a voice; patriarchy, on the other hand, relies upon disconnections and silences. The initiation into patriarchy for boys and girls requires a sacrifice of relationship with parts of themselves and with others, and compromises possibilities for full and genuine connections.

To reassert loving and democratic relationships between men and women and to subvert the patriarchal order that promotes the rifts within and between us, Gilligan maintained that men and women must join together as allies. That is, men and women together must support boys' (and girls') healthy resistance to pressures to conform to destructive societal norms. For boys, these pressures to conform to hegemonic masculinity diminish the capacities so very necessary for navigating the human world: emotional vulnerability, connectedness, and compassion.

Wilson observed that it is as if boys in our culture are forced to dissociate, to cut off their heads from their hearts and bring only parts of themselves into their relationships and into the world. Gilligan added that a democracy cannot thrive when it comprises a mass of dissociated people unable to bring themselves into authentic relationship with themselves and one another. Working together as allies, women and girls and men and boys face the task of finding a way to allow boys, and all people, to bring their whole, undiminished, uncompromised selves into the world of relationships.

# obstacles to healthy development for boys

MICHAEL KIMMEL, PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY at the State University of New York at Stonybrook and spokesperson for the National Organization for Men Against Sexism, outlined two types of obstacles to healthy development for boys: 1) those obstacles that are said to be in the way of boys, and 2) those obstacles that really are in their way. An examination of these obstacles—both perceived and real—lends insight into the current sociopolitical climate within which masculinities both shape and are shaped by public discourse and lived experience.

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## PERCEIVED OBSTACLES

Within the context of a social landscape marked by the increasing participation of women in public domains, there has been a conservative backlash against the feminist movement. As exemplified by Christina Hoff Sommers's book, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*,<sup>5</sup> political pundits and psychologists have put forth the notion that boys need to be “rescued” from feminists. It is against this backdrop that these myths, or the perceived obstacles to healthy development for boys, have emerged:

### ■ Myth 1: (All) Boys Are in Trouble

There is indeed evidence that boys are in trouble. As measured by many quality of life indi-

cators, boys lag far behind their female peers in various emotional, educational, and behavioral domains. Boys are, for example, more likely to be diagnosed with ADD, more likely to drop out of school, and more likely to be victims and perpetrators of violent crimes than are their female peers. However, alarmist headlines like one that recently appeared in the *New York Times*, “On campus, men are vanishing,” do not tell the whole story. In actuality, not all men are vanishing from college campuses. Only some are, and typically they are men of color and men of low socioeconomic backgrounds. White men—especially those of the middle class—continue to thrive in many academic and social contexts. The truth of the matter is, institutional racism and classism constrain possibilities for some men and expand possibilities for others. Boys' lives play out differently along differing racial, cultural, and social trajectories.

### ■ Myth 2: Schools Feminize and Pathologize Boys

Another of the obstacles boys are said to face is their feminization in schools. Schools are accused of enforcing an expectation of a “feminine” docile conformity to obedience in, for example, the insistence that boys sit still, take naps, or speak quietly. This is construed as the pathologizing of

5 C. Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*, Simon & Schuster, 2000.



a naturally rambunctious boyhood and the promulgation of the message that boyhood is defective. However, as Kimmel pointed out, this position exaggerates differences between boys and girls which are often less notable than differences among boys and girls, and misses the point that interventions designed to benefit girls (e.g., attention to new learning styles) may also be beneficial to boys. Feminist efforts to improve opportunities and access to resources ought not to be conceptualized in terms of a zero-sum game such that a gain for girls is considered a loss for boys.

## REAL OBSTACLES

The myths surrounding boys' development often obscure the obstacles with which we must wrestle to promote healthy development in boys:

### ■ Traditional Ideology of Masculinity

Kimmel noted that the traditional ideology of masculinity is the chief obstacle to healthy development in boys. This masculinity ideology, described as a “cultural myth” by Joseph Pleck<sup>6</sup> and named the “boy code” by William S. Pollack,<sup>7</sup> represents the values of European American culture and shames young men towards impossible extremes of separation, emotional invulnerability, toughness, and stoicism:

*“...the middle-class, white, heterosexual masculinity is used as the marker against which*

*other masculinities are measured, and by which standard they may be found wanting. What is normative (prescribed) becomes translated into what is normal. In this way, heterosexual men maintain their status by the oppression of gay men; middle-aged men can maintain their dominance over older and younger men; upper-class men can exploit working-class men; and white men can enjoy privileges at the expense of men of color.”<sup>8</sup>*

### ■ The Invisibility of Gender

One of the most insidious characteristics of the traditional ideology of masculinity is its invisibility to men and boys. Men are treated as if they have no gender, much in the same way that White people are treated as if they have no race. Kimmel recalled a conversation between two female colleagues—one White and one Black—in which the White woman stated that when she looks in the mirror she sees a “woman.” The Black woman, on the other hand, stated that the image she sees reflected is that of a “Black woman.” Thus for the White woman, race was invisible, while for the woman of color, it was visible and unforgettable. Gender—a mechanism, like race, that both assigns and denies privilege—functions much this same way: men are often considered “genderless” and gender has become a code word for female in this culture. Privilege, Kimmel maintained, keeps privilege invisible. Gender must be made visible to boys, as

<sup>6</sup> J. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> W.S. Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, Random House, New York, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> M.S. Kimmel & M.S. Messner (Eds.), *Men's Lives: Third Edition*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1995, p. 2.

it is as central an experience for males as it is for females. However, the chief impediment to making gender visible to boys is the unfounded fear that gender equality will result in some kind of a loss to boys and men.

#### ■ Money

The distribution of public funding reveals a great deal about the systemic and institutionalized perpetuation of masculinity. Kimmel maintained that there is a dearth of public funding for school bond issues (e.g., teacher training and support, after school programs, etc.) that could support and enhance boys' development by the implementation of new programs, policies, and procedures. Meanwhile, Kimmel noted that large amounts of public funds are being directed to initiatives like the erection of sports complexes, in what he referred to as a "masculinization" of public funding.

#### ■ Silence

Another set of obstacles centers around the levels of silence and ways in which boys shut down in front of other boys. Boys often assume voices of posturing, posing, false bravado, and impenetrability. When constrained by the traditional ideology of masculinity, other languages—those of compassion, emotional openness, and vulnerability—often are unavailable to them.

#### ■ Homophobia

Kimmel asserted that the cornerstone of traditional masculinity is homophobia, or

the fear of being thought gay. The single most common put-down among boys and men is, "That's gay." Boys police other boys out of their own fear of being seen as "weak," a "sissy," a "faggot," not being "man enough." It is of special note that these insults are not about sexuality per se, but rather about masculinity. Calling a man "gay" is, above all else, an affront to his manhood; as such, homophobia is one of the most imprisoning aspects of the boy code.

#### OBSTACLES VS. OPTIMISM

Despite the many obstacles, both real and imagined, that boys face in the development of healthy manhood, there are reasons for great optimism. Kimmel cited the rise in students' cross-sex friendships as a hopeful sign of increased understanding among boys and girls. In addition, as feminist women continue to promote the development of healthy boys, there is a greater contribution to the development of a healthy society for men and women alike. Feminism has helped women become more confident, strong-minded, and successful, thus gaining greater access to traits traditionally considered "masculine." By the same token, Kimmel challenged symposium participants to help boys gain greater access to their innate capacities for sensitivity, connectedness, and emotionality, traits that traditionally have been deemed "feminine." Encouraging the experience and expression of the full range of human emotional and behavioral capacity offers boys and girls alike the freedom to be whole.

# building resistance

JANIE WARD, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF Education and Human Services at Simmons College, and Project Director for the Alliance on Gender, Culture, and School Practice at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, spoke of the need to develop a framework for resistance and resilience. Ward defined resistance as a process by which adults engage with young people to help them figure out how to oppose others' ideas about who they are and should be in this culture. Resistance, Ward noted, is an essential inoculation in a toxic social environment. Drawing from her research with African-American youth, but making links to all youth, Ward emphasized the importance of helping children learn to recognize—and oppose—the various “isms” and phobias that contour their lives. She stressed the importance of breaking the silence around racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, and of speaking the unspeakable in homes, schools, and after-school programs.

Ward implicated all adults—parents, teachers, counselors, and friends, among others—in this process, and put forth a model of resistance-building that is grounded in four basic but powerful injunctions:

**1 Read It:** The first step of the model is to be aware about what is going on and to talk about it. We must read the relational world

in which we live and teach the children in our lives to do the same.

**2 Name It:** The next step in the model bids us to find a vocabulary for the cultural experiences and messages that shape and often succeed in limiting us. Ward reminded us of how vulnerable children are to taking in cultural messages about who they are. For African-American boys, these messages often include the iconic images of the “gangsta” or pimp, and almost always include the cultural command to assume a “cool pose.” The cultural obsession with sex and materialism, our substandard school systems, the prison industrial complex, the onslaught of stereotypical media images, the prevailing silence, disinterest, and dishonesty about race—all shape the lives of African-American children and their non-Black counterparts. Adults play an important role in helping children interpret the social world and allowing them to imagine, as Ward described it, “a sense of self greater than anyone’s disbelief.” Children without a critical cultural analysis are vulnerable children, as they are at risk for coming to see themselves through the often distorted lenses of others.

**3 Oppose It:** Opposing, or resisting, the cultural strictures that structure our lives is the third step of the model. Not all resistance is healthy resistance, however, and Ward distinguished between two modes:

**Resistance for Survival** is a short-term strategy described as an attempt to put together what others have tried to take apart. Resistance for survival can be seen in the “tough guy” stances assumed by some African-American boys. These boys—the ones no one can handle, the ones who are always being sent to the principal—are engaging in a mode of resistance designed to protect a fragile sense of self rather than affirm a sturdy sense of self.

**Resistance for Liberation**, in contrast, is self-affirming. Within this framework, children come to understand that they themselves are not flawed; it is the society that demeans and devalues them that is flawed. Resistance for liberation sets the stage for a liberatory masculinity

that, in turn, leads to freedom from gender constraints. It is a resistance strategy that is designed to affirm, rather than to protect, the self.

**4 Replace It:** Adults are charged with helping boys replace the myths of masculinity with the truths of their lived experience. Adults may share their knowledge of resistance, be models of resistance themselves, and welcome boys into the community of resistance. Adults may create safe spaces where boys can build and sustain healthy relationships, challenge homophobic behavior, learn media literacy, and feel invited to be their whole, full selves. Strategies of resistance for survival must be replaced with those of resistance for liberation to achieve a liberatory humanity.

# new possibilities for boyhood and manhood

IN AMERICAN SOCIETY-AT-LARGE, IN THE media, and in the social science research, new possibilities for boyhood and manhood are being envisioned, and masculinity is being rethought.

## RETHINKING AMERICAN MASCULINITY

*“Stand on your own two feet. Be a little man. Be a big boy. Big boys don’t cry. Don’t be a mamma’s boy. Don’t act like a sissy. Don’t act like a fag.”*

These all-too-common admonitions give voice to the central messages of the “boy code” that defines and dictates American masculinity. William S. Pollack, Director of the Centers for Men and Young Men, Director of Continuing Education at McLean Hospital, and Assistant Clinical Professor (Psychology) in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, reminded symposium participants that achieving this masculinity is an impossible task for boys. The values of the dominant European American culture—or “boy culture”—emphasize toughness, stoicism, and violence, and, at the same time, shame boys against emotional vulnerability and relational interdependence. In a process Pollack called “gender straightjacketing,” boys become disconnected from their own feelings and from their normative characteristics of vulnerability and need for connection. Anger, which is a precursor to violence,

often is the only emotion that boys are allowed to express.

Pollack suggested that behind the anger so often expressed by boys is the stifled genuine voice of the struggle for connection.

Boys respond to the culturally enforced code of silence—the “boy code”—which demands that they hide their vulnerability at all costs and avoid the shame associated with it. The sadness, vulnerability, fear, isolation, and despair boys often may feel remains hidden and hard to detect by parents, teachers, and mental health workers, and boys’ yearnings for love and affection often are repressed.

The toughness and “cool pose” so often assumed by boys are really emotional masks of bravado. Pollack argued that the more we sustain healthy vulnerability in young males, the healthier they will become. He spoke of the need to promote new models of manhood that are connection-based and that allow boys to resist the violence and posturing that have been considered the traditional hallmarks of masculinity. Honoring rather than disavowing healthy vulnerability in boys will lead to a new manhood in America.

Kevin Powell, a poet, journalist, essayist, public speaker, hip-hop historian, political activist, and author, also discussed the necessity of, and some of the challenges inherent in, redefining the American male. On a community level, Powell spoke of the

“father void” in the Black community where so many sons are being raised by mothers alone. He related his own childhood struggle with self-definition as a boy in the confounding shadow of an absent father: “I knew I didn’t want to be like my father, but I didn’t know how I was supposed to be.” On an institutional level, Powell spoke of the media as one of the foremost shapers of American masculinity, and noted that movies that are particularly appealing to African-American youth often depict a florid, glorified violence and feature the message that young Black boys must “man up.” On a global level, Powell stated that the current sociopolitical atmosphere of war underscores the false notion that violence is the solution to all conflict and reinforces a concept of manhood as defined by the “pistol or the penis.”

Drawing from his personal history, Powell charted his own developmental process of definition and redefinition as an American male. He described a childhood induction into the patriarchal order that offered a limited and distorted range of possibilities for boys and men, and for African-American males in particular. Powell relayed how, by the time he entered college, his identity as a man was defined by violence, lashing out, flexing, posturing, control, and a sense of superiority over women. When this violence of inner experience dangerously erupted into outward acts of aggression against women, Powell sought help. He spoke about his personal process of redefining himself as a man, which included learn-

ing how to listen to women, being honest with his own investment in patriarchy, and writing about his internalized sexism and misogyny.<sup>9</sup> Integral to this process of change was Powell’s relationship with a counselor. Within the context of this relationship, Powell had access to a safe space in which he could speak openly, for the first time in his life, with an older, trusted man about his feelings.

Powell asserted that for a “radical revolution of values” to take place, boys and men must create a new paradigm and a new language. Powell reminded symposium participants that there is no such thing as a universal male experience, and claimed that we cannot be silent about the ways in which culture, class, sexuality, and gender affect our lives. Echoing Ward’s mandate, Powell emphasized the need for boys and men to learn how to read, name, oppose and replace the “isms” that shape all our lives. Counselors, mentors, teachers, parents, and other adults have an important role in this transformative process. The work of rethinking American masculinities, challenging and redefining the “boy code,” and creating a liberatory masculinity requires an enduring effort on the part of men and women alike.

#### **RETHINKING MASCULINITY IN THE MEDIA**

The media is profoundly implicated both in reinforcing and redressing the boy code; indeed, it is one of the primary pedagogical forces of our time. Jackson Katz, in his educational film, *Tough Guise: Violence, Media,*

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<sup>9</sup> Powell has published several articles on these topics, including, “Confessions of a Recovering Misogynist” (*Ms. Magazine*, January 2000), and “The Sexist in Me” (*Essence Magazine*, September 1992).

*and the Crisis in Masculinity*, vividly described the media’s role in perpetuating hegemonic masculinity. Katz revealed how mainstream media images—from sports, television, Hollywood films, and music videos—help to promote violent masculinity as a cultural norm. He showed that media images of manhood play a pivotal role in making, shaping, and maintaining specific attitudes about manhood.

Patti Miller, Director of the Children & the Media Program at Children Now, a research and action organization based in New York and California, further described the powerfully influential force of media on child and adolescent development. She reminded us that children, especially boys, are active users of entertainment and sports media, and spend hours watching television and playing video and computer games. Miller reported that two-thirds of American children have television sets in their bedrooms, and spend an average of six hours per day watching them. Children spend more time in front of the television than being read to; in fact, they spend more time with media than they do with any other single activity.

Miller highlighted key findings from a recent review of the research on media’s messages about masculinity and its impact on boys:<sup>10</sup>

■ **Violence:** Media images of violence are pervasive. Violence is used to solve problems and achieve goals; it is depicted as justified,

harmless, and without consequence. Male characters typically are portrayed as violent and angry.

- **Martial Metaphors:** Sports action is often described in military language. The playing field becomes a battlefield, and sports commentators tend to use terms like “attack,” “leave them hurt,” “battle lines are drawn,” “fighting,” and “taking aim” to describe the action.
- **Vulnerability and Emotions:** On television, men seldom cry. When they do, it is in isolation. Furthermore, men rarely are presented or perceived as sensitive.
- **Identity Roles:** In primetime television, men are depicted as police officers, lawyers, business owners, and other professionals. They are associated with the working world (exterior spaces), as opposed to the world of the home (interior spaces). Men are defined by their careers, whereas women are defined by their relationships.
- **Homophobia:** Gay men are rarely, although increasingly, seen in non-comedic primetime roles. The message is sent that gay men are fodder for jokes and are not to be taken seriously.

These findings beg many questions about the media’s role in shaping gendered behavior: Why is there so much gratuitous, glamorized violence on television? Can men be shown to express a full range of emotions

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<sup>10</sup> *These research findings are presented comprehensively in the following Children Now publications: “Boys to Men Entertainment Media: Messages About Masculinity” (1999), “Boys to Men Sports Media: Messages About Masculinity” (1999), and “Fair Play? Violence, Gender, and Race in Video Games” (1999).*

without being shamed? Is comedy used to enforce gender role stereotypes and homophobia? How might the media's stereotyped portrayals be redressed? How might other, healthier, possibilities for boyhood and manhood be portrayed?

Marjorie Cohn of Nickelodeon, in her discussion of her network's programming, offered some partial responses to these questions. Cohn spoke of the importance of showing many diverse portrayals of boys: boys sharing emotions, boys breaking stereotypes, boys engaging in cross-ethnic friendships. She also acknowledged the need for media programming to dig even deeper and produce shows conceived by people other than the White, middle-class males who currently create the majority of television shows.

There is an undeniable need to provide boys and girls the conceptual and practical tools for reading media images critically. Young people must be supported in their quest to make sense of the apparent contradictions between the truth of their realities and the media's account of the truth. Teaching young people to engage in a critical analysis of harmful media images diminishes these images' insidious capacity to shape and distort self- and others' perceptions. The media has the power to portray more authentic versions of the male experience. It should be held accountable

for the potentially damaging images it projects, and be encouraged "to provide boys a fuller, more complete picture of the men they can become."<sup>11</sup>

#### RETHINKING MASCULINITY IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the empirical study of boys and men that has come in the wake of the path-breaking feminist research on girls and women. Feminist psychology has generated important knowledge about gender, innovative research methodologies, and new understandings about human development, which in turn have begun to impact the ways in which boys and men are studied.<sup>12</sup> Ritch Savin-Williams, Professor of Human Development at Cornell University, is among the cohort of scholars who are rethinking masculinities in the social science research. His work on gay teens offers new insights into the nature and significance of same-sex sexuality for boys.

In his discussion of the "new" gay teen, Savin-Williams introduced the concepts of "post-gay" and "gayishness."<sup>13</sup> These terms capture the contemporary reality of teenagers, who increasingly are engaged in the renegotiation and redefinition of their sexualities to such an extent that sexual identity labels—like "gay"—are rendered meaningless. The teenagers in Savin-Williams's study used labels like "pansexual," "het-

<sup>11</sup> *Children Now*, "Boys to Men Entertainment Media: Messages About Masculinity," 1999, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> An important collection of such research on boys from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds is presented in Niobe Way's and Judy Chu's edited volume, *Adolescent Boys: Exploring Diverse Cultures of Boyhood*, New York University Press, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> R. Savin-Williams, *The 'New' Gay Teen: Post-gay and Gayishness among Contemporary Teenagers*. Harvard University Press, in press.



eroflexible,” “queer boi,” “trisexual,” “transnyboy,” “omnisexual,” “boidyke,” and “multisexual,” among others, to describe themselves. With terms like these, teenagers literally are reshaping the language to reflect more accurately their reality and to acknowledge and name both their gender and their sexuality.

Societal constructions of gay teens have been changing and evolving right alongside teens’ individual and collective self-definitions. With the invention of the concept of “gay adolescence” in the 1970s came the prevailing message that gay youth were in deep trouble: suicidal, despairing, drug-addicted, and lost. Savin-Williams named the consequences of these negative constructions (which, he noted, were based on flawed research), describing how they pathologize gay youth and feed the agenda of the religious right. Savin-Williams also

noted that these negative constructions divert attention from those teens who are most at risk, ignoring the fact that the majority of gay youth are resilient and, in fact, really quite ordinary.

Today, researchers and practitioners understand that young people have a range of same-sex attractions and that the spectrum of sexualities is broad. Many gay teens are resilient and proud, and say they feel supported by the vast majority of their peers. Despite the persistent presence of regressive social forces and institutions, trends and images in the popular culture signal the assumption of (rather than entreaties for) the acceptance of homosexuality. Savin-Williams anticipated a future in which gay adolescents will not be considered unusual. Instead, they—and the fluid spectrum of sexuality they possess—will be recognized as nothing more or less than ordinary.

# breaking the link between masculinity and violence

THE FILM *TOUGH GUISE* ILLUSTRATED HOW manhood, as it is culturally constructed in our society, is related to power, control, and violence. Instances of extreme violence (like the school shootings at Columbine and elsewhere) are cast into relief against a backdrop of normative, everyday violence such as that enacted on athletic playing fields, in international public policy, in interpersonal relationships, and by cultural heroes such as Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator or Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa. In social, political, and economic institutions, regular men are seen acting violently. Violent masculinity is culturally normative, rather than unusual, unexpected, or intolerable; it is the roadmap by which boys become men. Violence relies on a lack of emotional connection, a distortion of relationship. The effects of men's violence are

felt not only by women, but also by children and by other men with less power.

Katz asserted that the key step in reducing violence is to change definitions of manhood and develop a new language of accountability and connection. This is an undertaking in which men must play a central part.

Kimmel pointed out that the very phrase "violence against women" is grammatically incorrect. It contains an object (women), but no subject (men). The rampant use of the passive voice when talking about crimes against women serves to shift the focus from male perpetrators and onto female victims and survivors.

Katz noted that traditionally, strategies to prevent men's violence against women have not been "preventive"; instead, they have

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## BOYS, RACE, AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE

According to Michael Kimmel, violence is racialized in the public imagination. At the symposium, he reported that there have been 28 instances of school shootings since 1990. In 27 of these 28 instances, the perpetrators were White; in all instances, the perpetrators were boys from rural or suburban environments. Part of the reason that these shootings have been so shocking to Americans is that they were committed by "regular kids" (read: White boys). The reality is

that school shootings are an overwhelmingly White male phenomenon. However, there is an implicit racist cultural assumption that suggests that behavior like this is in the purview of inner city kids of color, not their White peers from the suburbs. Lethal violence involving youth long has been a feature of life in urban communities of color, so the media tends to report it matter-of-factly. However, when White kids (boys) kill in the suburbs, it becomes front-page news and

prompts a national debate about "youth violence." Kimmel noted how these shootings also illustrate the destructive power of the "boy code." Boys who have committed school shootings unilaterally have described being tormented and bullied at school for being "different," for not adhering to the rigid code of athletic masculinity, toughness, or "jock culture." Sadly, their revenge assumed one of the most extreme and distorted forms of violent masculinity.

been cautionary or accusatory injunctions aimed at women. Women have been admonished to proverbially “take back the night” by, for example, being careful to guard their drinks to avoid being slipped the “date rape drug,” or by being counseled to leave abusive relationships, or by being warned not to dress provocatively. Rarely have men been charged with the directive to “give back the night,” or to join with other men, or with women, to create safety in communities and interpersonal relationships. Focusing on women’s role in men’s violence against women with questions such as, “What was she wearing?” or “Did she try to fight him off?” has served to divert attention from the more appropriate, more politically charged questions such as, “Why are men doing this to women?” and “How can we make them stop?”

Ending men’s violence against women has been left up to women for far too long; the time has come for men to participate in the struggle for social change. Katz was among several panelists in the symposium who described their practical, community-based efforts to work with men to redefine manhood and break the link between masculinity and violence.

#### MENTORS IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM

In addition to creating *Tough Guise*, Jackson Katz, a former all-star football player, founded, in 1993, the Mentors in Violence Prevention Program (MVP). Based at Northeastern University’s Center for the Study of Sport in Society, MVP encourages

men to engage actively in the prevention of men’s violence against women. Through MVP, what traditionally have been seen as “women’s issues”—rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence—become men’s issues as well. MVP aims to help athletes at all levels—high school, college, and professional—to develop an awareness that does not equate strength in men with dominance over women.

Don McPherson, a former National Football League (NFL) quarterback, was formerly National Director of the MVP Program.

McPherson, who now serves as the Executive Director of the Sports Leadership Institute at Adelphi University, spoke of men’s responsibility to work proactively to end violence against women. He stated that violence against women stems from men’s attitudes about women and from the rigid, restrictive policing of masculinity that pits men against women. McPherson noted that in our society we do not raise boys to be men, rather we raise boys not to be women. Boys are raised on a diet of negative, misogynistic injunctions—“Don’t act like a girl,” “Don’t be a pussy”—that are based on the degradation of girls and women. The command to “be a man” becomes a code for an emotional shutdown that boys learn almost as soon as they learn to cry. McPherson asked, “Do we make our boys stronger by making them tough?” The answer is no. “Being a man” debilitates men and undermines their empathic capacities; it silences them into complicity. Men are made weaker by the demands that they be strong.

Strategies employed by MVP include encouraging men to break the complicit silence that quietly but powerfully condones the violence of men against women. MVP teaches young men how to be emotionally connected, empowered bystanders who are able to confront abusive peers and, moreover, offers them specific scripts and strategies by which to do so. The program creates a safe physical and emotional space for boys and men to work together to model and enact transformative ways of being in relationship to one another and to girls and women.

#### **MEN STOPPING VIOLENCE**

Sulaiman Nuriddin is the Men's Intervention Programs Team Manager at Men Stopping Violence, an organization that works locally and nationally to dismantle sexist belief systems, social structures, and institutional practices that oppress women and children and dehumanize men themselves.

Challenging male domination and patriarchy, Nuriddin and his colleagues work directly with men who are violent, many who have been court-ordered to attend the center's class-based intervention programs, and others who have chosen to participate of their own accord. Nuriddin described two prevention and intervention strategies that he utilizes to challenge sexist structures, foster an understanding of male privilege, prevent violence, and promote change among these men:

**1 Men Modeling Behaviors for Boys.** An integral part of the program is men demonstrating for boys ways to avoid abusive behaviors. Nuriddin and his colleagues noticed that

the men who entered their program often had sons at home who had borne witness to the abuse they had committed. These boys were invited to the intervention sessions so they could now bear witness to their fathers engaging with, challenging, caring for, supporting, and learning from other men. Comprising group meetings, journal writing, and mentoring, the program is designed to transform beliefs about what it means to be male.

**2 Community Engagement.** For these antiviolence efforts to be successful on the individual level, they must involve the community as well. Men and boys leave the special space created by the program and return to their neighborhoods, where their new ideologies, behaviors, and commitments are not reinforced and are even undermined. Nuriddin and his colleagues saw the need to create a critical mass of men trained to do this work in their communities. Just as fathers were encouraged to invite their sons to participate in the program, so now are boys encouraged to invite their friends. The men and boys challenge themselves, one another, and their communities to stop men's violence against women.

#### **WHITE RIBBON CAMPAIGN**

Another example of a program that provides men with ideological and practical tools that aid in their personal transformation, challenge the established gender order, and promote human rights is the Canadian-based White Ribbon Campaign founded by Michael Kaufman. The White Ribbon

Campaign is the largest effort in the world of men working to end violence against women. As a part of this effort, men around the world are urged to wear a white ribbon each year for one to two weeks, starting November 25, the international day for the eradication of violence against women.<sup>14</sup> During this time, men are encouraged to speak out about the problem of violence in their homes, workplaces, places of worship, and communities. Wearing a white ribbon serves as a pledge to never commit, condone, or remain silent about men's violence against women.

The White Ribbon Campaign is a nonpartisan, decentralized, grassroots campaign that is alive in many different countries. With its public education and action kit, it offers a framework for men to create spaces for discussion and action in their own communities. This campaign, like the Mentors in Violence Prevention and Men Stopping Violence programs, combats the overwhelming social silence and cultural complicity surrounding men's violence against women. These programs encourage a kind of reflection, self-interrogation, and discussion that leads to personal and collective transformation and action by men. By turning men into public educators and active witnesses who resist committing or condoning men's violence against women and who accept accountability for their actions, these pro-

grams contribute to the safety and human rights of all people, and help create a more just and less violent world.

Following the presentation of the Mentors in Violence Prevention program, Men Stopping Violence program, and White Ribbon Campaign, panelists and audience members engaged in a conversation about the broad spectrum of men's violence against women. It was acknowledged that physical violence exists along a continuum that includes the emotional violence of sexist joking, verbal sexual harassment on the street, and other domineering, demeaning forms of thought and behavior. The conversation also turned to the importance of addressing men's violence not only on the individual, local, institutional levels, but also on the international level. Women's bodies at home and abroad often are seen as little more than commodities that can be bought or sold for the comfort and pleasure of men (as is evidenced by the U.S. Military's unwritten recruitment and reward strategy that involves the exploitation of female bodies overseas). There is a need to change the social norms that create the context for men's violence within and beyond our borders. The issue of men's violence is not a "woman's issue"; it is a legitimate human concern that shapes society, affects interpersonal relationships, and drives public and international policy.

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<sup>14</sup> In Canada, ribbons are worn until December 6, Canada's National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.

## remaining challenges

PEDRO NOGUERA, PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY AT the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University, closed the symposium with a discussion of the remaining challenges faced by those of us committed to the work of supporting boys' resilience. Casting the self-described voice of pessimism, Noguera raised his reservations about the possibility of undoing patriarchy. It is, indeed, difficult to conceive of a movement on the part of those with privilege (in this instance, men) to relinquish that privilege and redistribute their power. Noguera noted that there are great limits to this work because it asks those who are benefiting to make significant, and perhaps ultimately insufferable, sacrifices.

The symposium, with its primary focus on change and growth at the individual and community levels, paid less attention to the ways in which institutional structures of power reinforce patriarchy. Militarism, politics, and capitalism are all structures that promote and are fueled by the dominance of some people over others. We cannot focus on the individual without acknowledging the contexts and circumstances that shape their behaviors and produce or preclude their possibilities. The answers to the problems inherent in hegemonic masculinity lie beyond simply expanding the range of emotions available to individual men. Prescriptions for addressing and redressing these issues cannot overlook the structural imbalance of power which privileges mid-

dle-class White men over working class men and men of color, differently marks their access to resources, and variously shapes their opportunities and life chances.

Noguera reminded us that this is not a simple story of victims and victimizers. He spoke of groups of men who are themselves victims of a certain sort—of racism and/or of poverty. He noted that it is hard to convince certain men that they are powerful when they do not have jobs, when they cannot provide for their families, when they are subject to daily discrimination. Noguera asked, “What does it mean to be asked to give up power when you feel powerless?” Men’s relationship to gender-based domination must be located within the context of the social injustices that structure society for women and men alike.

Bringing African-American males into focus, Noguera spoke of the multitude of social problems they face, including an unemployment rate of 50 percent, a declining life expectancy, and appallingly high rates of incarceration. In schools, African-American boys struggle with lagging grade point averages, high expulsion rates, and poor graduation rates. Further, research shows that African-American boys become increasingly disidentified with academic achievement as they move from 8th to 12th grade, such that by the time they finish high school, there is no longer a relationship between these boys’ self-esteem and their grade point averages.<sup>15</sup>

This research finding suggests that these boys, so often disidentified with school, are seeking affirmation elsewhere. In a society such as ours, in which there is little ego affirmation for men of color, a traditional masculinity ideology may be the last thing to hold onto.

Noguera conceded that masculinity for all men, regardless of race or class, must come to stand for attributes that affirm rather than diminish humanity. However, he reminded symposium participants that it is a complicated undertaking to endeavor to remove the “tough guise” from boys who are living on tough streets; boys living in hostile environments will be victimized if they show weakness. Noguera said we must respond to the reality of the various worlds in which boys live and develop their assorted—and unequal—masculinities. Among the societal institutions that produce culture—media, family, places of worship, and schools—schools are the sites of socialization that we have the greatest ability to influence. Noguera reminded participants that gender socialization within schools is an essential part of the hidden curriculum. A new set of curricula must be developed—and in this area there is a dearth of theory and research to guide us—to promote an affirmative and liberatory masculinity for boys of all races and classes.

## CONCLUSION

This symposium provided an important space within which to address critical questions about masculinity. However, many difficult questions remain only partially or not at all explored: How do we shift the focus from

changing the violent behavior of individual men to mobilizing men to challenge systems of gender violence and related structures of oppression in the United States and abroad? How do we include the voices and experiences of men who are not White and not Black? That is, how do the experiences of Asian boys and men, or Native American boys and men, inform and expand this conversation? Where are the examples of men and boys, in their everyday lives, being resilient and resisting a capitulation to hegemonic masculinity? How can we more effectively involve mothers and women in this work?

We must create changes in society on the cultural, structural, and individual levels so as to enlarge the space for boys to be human beings; we must substitute a masculinity that is synonymous with invulnerability and indifference with one that is constituted by openness and compassion. As Jackson Katz and J. Earp propose in their *Tough Guise Teaching Guide*:

*“In the final analysis, what’s required is a full-scale transformation in how we imagine, define, and model masculinity—a personal and institutional re-visioning of manhood that specifically and forcefully affirms courage as something far more noble than simply possessing physical prowess and power. This means nothing less than holding to a vision of masculinity that is entirely at odds with senseless violence, bullying and posturing, and entirely in keeping with grace, compassion and the guts to stay loyal to what’s right.”<sup>16</sup>*

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15 J.W. Osborne, “Race and Academic Disidentification,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89, 1997, pp. 728-735.  
16 J. Katz & J. Earp, *Tough Guise Teaching Guide*.

# symposium participants and acknowledgments

## SYMPOSIUM SPEAKERS

■ **Marjorie Cohn** is Executive Vice President, Development and Original Programming, at Nickelodeon. In this role, Cohn oversees all of Nickelodeon’s ongoing program development and current series production activities in New York, Los Angeles, and Canada. In her previous position of Senior Vice President, Production, she managed production of all animation and live-action series for Nickelodeon including such hits as *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron*, *Boy Genius*, and *Nick News* with Linda Ellerbee.

■ **Carol Gilligan’s** landmark book, *In a Different Voice*, is described by Harvard University Press as “the little book that started a revolution.” Following *In a Different Voice*, she studied women’s psychology and girls’ development and co-authored or edited 5 books with her students. She was a member of the Harvard faculty for over 30 years, and in 2002, she became university professor at New York University School of Law. Her most recent book is *The Birth of Pleasure*.

■ **Jackson Katz**, a former all-star football player, founded the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Program at Northeastern University’s Center for the Study of Sport in Society in 1995. Katz is the creator of award-winning educational videos for college and high school students, including *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*.

■ **Michael Kaufman** is the founder of the White Ribbon Campaign, the largest effort in the world of men working to end violence against women. His books include *Cracking the Armor: Power, Pain and the Lives of Men* and *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays By Men on Pleasure, Power and Change*.

■ **Michael Kimmel** is a sociologist and author who has received international recognition for his work on men and masculinity. His books include *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* and *The Gendered Society*, which has been hailed as the touchstone works for courses in Gender Studies. His newest books are *Privilege*, and *The Encyclopedia on Men and Masculinities*. He is a national spokesperson for the National Organization for Men Against Sexism and has lectured and run workshops at hundreds of colleges, universities and organizations.



■ **Don McPherson** is the Executive Director of Sports Leadership Institute at Adelphi University, and a former National Football League quarterback. He has worked in many capacities to encourage men to work proactively to end violence against women, including as National Director of Mentors in Violence Prevention Program.

■ **Patti Miller** is Director of the Children & the Media Program at Children Now, a national research and advocacy organization. She oversees independent research projects on children and the media and monitors public policy development in the communications field as it affects children.

■ **Pedro Noguera** is Professor of Sociology at the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University. Before coming to NYU, he served as the Judith K. Dimon Professor of Communities and Schools at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His most recent book is *City Schools and the American Dream*.

■ **Sulaiman Nuriddin** is the Men's Intervention Programs Team Manager at Men Stopping Violence (MSV). MSV works locally and nationally to dismantle sexist belief systems, social structures, and institutional practices that oppress women and children and dehumanize men themselves.

■ **William S. Pollack** is Director of the Centers for Men and Young Men and the Director of Continuing Education (Psychology) at McLean Hospital, and Assistant Clinical Professor (Psychology) in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. His books include *Real Boys' Voices* and *Real Boys—Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood*.

■ **Kevin Powell** is a poet, journalist, essayist, public speaker, hip-hop historian, political activist, and author of numerous books, including *Who's Gonna Take The Weight? Manhood, Race, and Power in America*.

■ **Ritch Savin-Williams** is professor of Human Development at Cornell University. His books include *Gay and Lesbian Youth: Expressions of Identity* and *The Lives of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals: Children to Adults*.

■ **Janie Ward** is Associate Professor of Education and Human Services at Simmons College. Currently on leave from Simmons, Janie has become Project Director for the Alliance on Gender, Culture and School Practice at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her books include *The Skin We're In: Teaching Our Children to Be Emotionally Strong, Socially Smart and Spiritually Connected* and *Gender and Teaching*.

■ **Marie C. Wilson**, President of the White House Project and President Emerita of the Ms. Foundation for Women, has been an advocate of women’s issues for more than 30 years. In 1998, she cofounded The White House Project to change the cultural and political climate to get more women elected to office, including the U.S. presidency. In March 2004, she released her new book, *Closing the Leadership Gap: Why Women Can and Must Help Run the World*.

#### SYMPOSIUM MODERATORS

■ **Niobe Way** is Associate Professor, Department of Applied Psychology at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Education. Her research interests focus on the social and emotional development of low-income, urban adolescents. She has authored and edited numerous books and journal articles on this topic, including her latest book coedited with Judy Y. Chu, *Adolescent Boys: Exploring Diverse Cultures of Boyhood*.

■ **Susan Wefald** is Director of Institutional Planning at the Ms. Foundation for Women, where she sets a strategic course in the three key areas of transitions in gender roles, public policy and leadership. She recently co-authored the book *Raise the Floor: Wages and Policies That Work for All of Us*, which presents national minimum needs budgets for adults and families; proposes a realistic federal minimum wage; and advocates policies to supplement wages to ensure that people can meet their basic needs.

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#### AUTHOR

■ **Allyson Pimentel, Ed.D.**, is a graduate of Harvard University's program in Human Development and Psychology. She currently works as a researcher in the Social Personality Program at the City University of New York and a psychologist at NYU-Bellevue Hospital Center. Her research and clinical work focus on gender issues in ethnic minority communities and psychological development across the lifespan.

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