



'Cool Your Head, Man': Preventing gender based violence in *favelas*

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ABSTRACT Gary Barker presents results from an action-research project that sought to identify more gender-equitable young men in a low income setting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where violence against women (VAW) was common. The research identified factors that may have contributed to the young men's alternative values and were incorporated into a community intervention that seeks to change young men's attitudes toward women.

KEYWORDS adolescent boys; Brazil; domestic violence; gender socialization; poverty; value system

Introduction

The extent of men's violence against women (VAW) has been widely documented in many parts of the world. Increasingly, programme staff and policy-makers are seeking to engage men in preventing this violence. In a few settings around the world, programme interventions are also seeking to reach younger men and boys. How can we engage young men in gender violence prevention? Will boys be interested in working on the issue? If VAW is ubiquitous in some settings, can we find young men who are opposed to it? In this article, we will discuss an action-research project in low income settings, or *favelas*, in Rio de Janeiro that has sought and succeeded in engaging young men in gender violence prevention.

Why work with younger men? We have decided to focus on young men, specifically adolescent and young adult men aged 15 to 21, because there is a compelling reason to believe that styles of interaction in intimate relationships are rehearsed during adolescence, providing a strong empirical and theoretical basis for working with young men in reproductive health issues, relationship needs and gender equity (Erikson, 1968; Archer, 1984; Ross, 1994; Kindler, 1995). Research with adolescent males in various parts of the world suggests

that patterns of viewing women as sexual objects, use of coercion to obtain sex and viewing sex from a performance-oriented perspective often begin in adolescence and may continue into adulthood (Bledsoe and Cohen, 1993; Jejeebhoy, 1996). While it is clear that men's behaviours and attitudes change over time, relationships and contexts, how young men interact with their partners in their early relationships may set the tone for their styles of interaction with women over their life courses.

Gender violence in Brazil

The extent of men's VAW has become a major concern for policy-makers and advocates working on behalf of women's rights in Brazil. An estimated 300,000 women report being the victims of violence by their husbands or partners each year in Brazil. Limited research suggests that as many as 20 percent of adult women in Brazil have experienced violence from an intimate partner (Heise, 1994). A recent study in middle and working class neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro found that nearly 13 percent of women reported suffering violence from a partner in the last year (Instituto Brasileiro, 1999). Governmental and non-governmental organizations at the federal, state and municipal level have implemented limited shelter and legal support services for women victimized by domestic violence, and started numerous awareness-raising initiatives. However, relatively little has been done in Brazil to involve adult or adolescent men in the prevention of domestic violence.

Where does men's VAW come from in the Brazilian context? Qualitative and quantitative research in Brazil suggests that domestic violence, as well as sexual violence, are sometimes part of the sexual or gender scripts in which dating and domestic violence are viewed as justifiable by men when women betray informal marriage and cohabitation contracts – for example, if they have an outside relationship, or if they do not fulfil what are seen as their domestic responsibilities (Barker and Loewenstein, 1997). Men who believe they are entitled to these things may resort to violence when they are denied these benefits of patriarchy (Kaufman, 1993). Our interactions with men also found that

young men sometimes condone domestic violence among their peers, providing mutual support for each other.

Domestic violence in Brazil, as in other parts of the world, is often associated with economic stress. Some men, when they are unable to fulfil their traditional role as provider, may resort to violence in an attempt to re-assert their traditional male power (Kaufman, 1993). In studies in the US, men who have or perceive themselves to have few other sources of self-worth and identity may be more likely to resort to violence in their intimate relationships (Archer, 1994). Similarly, traditional *machista* views about sexuality in which men view women as sex objects without sexual agency are also associated with domestic and sexual violence. Our interviews with adolescent and adult men suggest that unemployment is a factor associated with domestic violence. Data from a hospital-based centre assisting women victims of domestic violence in Rio de Janeiro found that one-third of their male partners who used violence were out of work at the time of the violence – a rate of unemployment about twice the national average (Instituto NOOS, personal correspondence).

In some parts of the world, research has found that men who witnessed domestic violence in their own families of origin, or were themselves victims of abuse or violence in the home, are more likely to use violence against their own female partners and children – creating a cycle of domestic violence (Archer, 1994). There is evidence in Brazil that boys are subject to higher rates of physical abuse (excluding sexual abuse) in the home than girls, a factor that may be related to some men's subsequent use of violence in their intimate relationships. A study in Rio de Janeiro in low income neighbourhoods found that 61 percent of boys reported having been victims of physical violence from their parents, compared to 47 percent of girls (Gonçalves de Assis, 1997).

Men's silence about other men's violence contributes to domestic violence. Our research with low income young men in one *favela* in Rio de Janeiro found that while more than half of 25 young men interviewed reported witnessing violence in their homes, the majority said that they felt powerless to speak out against this violence

(Barker, 2000). The young men often used the refrain *entre marido e mulher ninguem mete colher* (between a man and woman no one should intervene). They also feared that if they intervened, the violence would be directed toward them. Boys who are raised to believe that VAW is normal may be more likely to repeat this violence in their own intimate relationships. Overcoming the silence of men who witness other men being violent toward women is a key starting point for our work.

Results from baseline research

These general tendencies and values about gender based violence are widespread in the two communities where we work. In both *favelas* key informants reported that there is a prevailing view among men in the community that reproductive health is a woman's responsibility; that men are allowed and expected to have occasional outside sexual partners while women must be faithful; that men's involvement in domestic tasks, including child care, was limited; and that many adult and young men tolerated and used VAW, although not to the extent of men in the *ommandos*, the drug trafficking gangs that hold significant power in the community. Men in the *ommandos* were described as beating their women like dolls, while many other men in the community were said to use violence when the woman had done something to deserve it.

However, if these are the prevailing norms, our research found and focused on the exceptions. In previous research in Rio de Janeiro (1994–5), we interviewed 58 adolescent and young adult men aged 15–30 in focus group discussions. In each focus group of 8 to 10 young men, there were one or two young men who questioned the prevailing views that male sex was uncontrollable, that VAW was justifiable in cases of infidelity and the general lack of male responsibility for reproductive health (Barker and Loewenstein, 1997). One factor emerged in all of the interviews: nearly all reported and described in detail relationships or interactions with a relative or family friend or someone in their social circle who modeled non-traditional gender stereotypes.

Building on this first study, in 1999, we started a one-year qualitative research project with a group

of young men identified by community leaders, staff at health clinics, and local NGOs as acting in ways that are more gender equitable than the prevailing norms in the community. Research methods included observation and interaction with 25 young men aged 15 to 21 two days a week for one year; focus group discussions with young men, young women and adults in the community; a three-part life history interview with nine boys; interviews with family members of some of the boys; and key informant interviews in the community (Barker, 2000).

In life history interviews with some of these young men – those whom we called more gender equitable – we sought to identify those factors that apparently contributed to them having more progressive values and attitudes related to gender. Analysis of life history interviews and focus group discussions identified several factors that may contribute to alternative views about attitudes toward women. As in the case of our first research project, having one or more important relationships with individuals who modeled alternative ways of being a man or alternative gender roles was extremely significant. Second, belonging to an alternative peer group that reinforced a more gender-equitable version of masculinity emerged as important. Some of the young men were part of an ongoing peer group that was non-gang-involved and also sought to project and support more respectful ways of interacting with women. For example, some of these young men are fathers and can be seen in public spaces taking care of young children, something the rest of the peer group supported.

In addition, many of the more gender-equitable young men showed significant self-reflective abilities, that is the ability to make sense of past life difficulties. Many of these difficulties were related to the roles and behaviour of men in their lives. For example, many of the young men reported that their fathers had abandoned the family. More than half of the young men reported witnessing a man using violence against a woman in their home – whether a father, stepfather or a sister's boyfriend – and perceived the impact of this violence on the family. In such cases, some of the young men were able to talk about how male violence affected their family and how they wanted to avoid this in their

own relationships. It also emerged as important when families intervened against such violence, sending a message to the men who used violence, but also to the other younger men in the families, that such violence was unacceptable.

From research to action: programme development

The baseline study provided ideas on how to tap into local norms and local assets that were already working, albeit to a limited extent, to reduce or respond to gender based violence. In sum, there were within the community, the young men's families and the young men themselves belief systems that opposed VAW and sought more gender-equitable relationships.

Building on these findings, our first step was to recruit as many of these more gender-equitable young men as we could to work as peer promoters with us. We also engaged several adult men from the community who showed an interest in the issue, some of whom had already formed a group called 'Male Consciousness' that engaged men in various community service projects. We hired these men to act as facilitators for the project, engaging them as positive role models for the young men, who in turn act as positive role models for other young men.

Our direct interventions and activities with the young men started by listening to the young men's stories and impressions of gender based violence. Based on these personal stories, the young men wrote a play and a photonovela that uses their language and words to enjoin other young men not to use VAW. The play tells the story of a young couple who meet, decide to form a family and have two children. The man loses his job and the woman ends up supporting the family (a common occurrence in the community as more service industry jobs are being created). The man, frustrated by his unemployment and by the fact that his partner is working longer hours, becomes aggressive and eventually violent toward her. She leaves him, and takes the children, and he is left contemplating the impact of his actions. A neighbour subsequently invites him to join a men's discussion group, where men of various ages talk about relationships,

domestic violence and health issues. This discussion group presented in the play is also a model of intervention we have started in the community in collaboration with another NGO, Instituto NOOS. A photonovela, with pictures from the community and using the young men's own language, is distributed at each presentation of the play. This photonovela is called 'Cool Your Head, Man', enjoining men to reflect before they act and to cool down when they are angry rather than use violence.

Conclusions

This intervention is still in its initial stages, having started at the beginning of 2000. Nonetheless, it has proved important in supporting the voices of young men and adult men in the two communities who already sought to be and were, to some extent at least, more gender-equitable. Indeed, while many studies of men and masculinities in Brazil and elsewhere portray their behaviour as static, or cast all men as *machista* or callous in their attitudes toward women, our research shows: (1) that some men are in fact seeking to be different from some prevailing norms; and (2) that men's behaviour is not static. Men's behaviour responds to changes in attitudes by partners, families, other men around them and community (and societal) norms in general. This suggests the need to engage various organizations in the community in seeking to change both the public imagination about domestic violence, and to change community values around domestic violence. If it is true that many men in various settings around the world are violent toward women and subjugate women in a variety of other ways, there are in many settings at least some exceptions. And it is these exceptions that can offer us insights on how to deconstruct negative aspects of masculinity and reconstruct or emphasize the positive aspects.

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