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Transforming Violent Masculinities

17-18 February 2016

The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy

Tufts University

OVERVIEW

From Rio de Janeiro to New Delhi, men perpetrate the majority of violent acts around the world. Yet the overwhelming majority of men are not violent, and even among those in high-risk contexts, many actively resist violent mobilization. Masculinity represents a critical and under-examined factor for understanding pathways to participation and non-participation in violent activity. How do norms related to masculinities shape men's involvement in violence? How do we build on drivers of non-violence and inclusion that already exist in individual men and broader communities? And what are the implications for policy and program development?

The heterogeneity of men as a social group makes it difficult to draw generalizable conclusion. However, cross-national data highlights a number of interesting commonalities among men that seem to hold true across different geographic, socioeconomic and racial contexts. For example, early childhood experiences of violence tend to correlate with violent behavior at later ages. Young men across the board are more likely to support gender equality than older men. And men who subscribe to gender equality report higher levels of happiness. Moreover, men's participation in caregiving of their children has been shown to motivate more caregiving across their social relationships.

We need a more nuanced understanding of the linkages between socially constructed norms of masculinity and violent and non-violent behavior. At the same time, it is essential to engage the whole community – men, women, girls and boys - when seeking transformational change in constructions of masculinity that foster violence. Only focusing on men and boys is not effective and may actually reinforce inequalities by losing sight of the overall goal of building equality between men and women, boys and girls. Transforming violent masculinities is not possible without focusing on deeper transformation of structural inequalities and the empowerment of women and girls.

Transitions to Manhood

The link between gender and violence, and between masculinity and violent more specifically, is often assumed rather than studied. How do we challenge these assumptions and decouple the linkages that do exist? Scientific evidence suggests that early childhood experiences of stress, neglect and trauma can have lasting effects on an individual’s behavior. There is a strong correlation between exposure to violence in early childhood and becoming oneself a perpetrator of violence. Even intensive nurturing may not be sufficient to counter the impact of earlier experiences in all cases. Malnutrition may also affect children’s cognitive development and has been linked to greater risk-taking behavior and other behavioral abnormalities. There is still a debate among scholars whether some of these effects are permanent or reversible. Some targeted interventions have proven effective at decoupling childhood trauma and key triggers from later violent behavior. Cultivated peer pressure that rewards non-violent, peaceful or peace-enhancing behavior can have a decisive impact, and sustained efforts at social reintegration often bear fruit.

Early childhood development is not the only context in which the propensity to violence has been studied. Incomplete maturational processes in adolescence also play a role, as male sexual hormones and underdeveloped cortical pathways may contribute to impulsive behavior. However, these processes are far from deterministic: there is no one-to-one correlation between male adolescence and risky behavior. Falsely equating the two only reinforces the pervasive idea that young males represent a threat to their own societies, which is often used as a justification for state repression.

For example, policy debates about a *youth bulge* in regions such as North Africa and the Middle East typically frame it as a potential threat: implicitly, “youth” seems to stand for “young men,” while young women – considered less likely to engage in violence – are erased from the discussion. Framing the debate in simplistic terms obscures the fact that most cities with a “youth bulge” do not in fact experience organized, armed violent conflict, and that the state is often the key protagonist in those episodes of violence that do occur.

In many societies, stable employment represents a man’s gateway to marriage and family formation, which in turn are often needed to receive family assets. Due to the lack of economic opportunities, many low-income men struggle to attain socially recognized ideals of “manhood,” which in turn fuels resentment toward the older generation as well as migration, depression, alcohol and substance abuse or other forms of risky or self-destructive behavior. Additionally, they often face a predatory state and police who are the key protagonists of violence. International responses must move beyond the program-level to target broader policies and practices that affect a significant part of the affected population.

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Gang Violence in the Americas

Why are so many young men in Central and Latin America joining gangs? What are the socioeconomic, political and cultural conditions that allow these organizations to flourish? Gang formation and participation cannot be ascribed to a single nor determinant factor. Some argue that exposure to domestic and community violence, delinquency and drugs plays a significant role. However, in settings of systematic social exclusion, gangs are also viewed as types of social movements and sites of opportunity that provide alternate systems of security and order. Some men join gangs out of desperation, but often gangs simply appear as a strategic first step for smart but poor young men seeking a better way of life. In countries such

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as Mexico and Colombia, glamourized gangster lifestyle stands out as a preferential pathway to manhood against the backdrop of socioeconomic exclusion.

While norms of masculinity alone do not explain gang participation, processes of male socialization within these groups are key to understanding their persistence. Once men are in a gang, there are strong incentives in place to become the “*mas malo*” – the most masculine – in order to gain the respect of other

members and contest societal processes of emasculation. This “strategic” identity squeezes out forms of alternative notions of masculinity, as well as homosexual and feminine identities. While being affiliated with a gang can come with benefits and social mobility for women, ‘gang-work’ related to money and violence remains ‘men’s work’, controlled by male gang members. Roles within gangs thus tend to be heavily gendered, with women often engaging in ‘administrative’ or ‘informant’ work.

As noted by Gary Barker and Adam Baird, the majority of young men in the poor *barrrios* of Medellin, Colombia and in other cities across Latin America do not actually join gangs – even though the stigma associated with gang membership typically extends to all young men and shapes their daily experience. A key question is why some men are able to resist the pull of gang membership. Research in violent neighborhoods in Central America shows that support structures at home, at church and in schools, competing narratives and conceptions of manhood, identities that do not fit the *macho*-stereotype and fear of violence may serve as factors of restraint. Violence is often framed as engendering more violence – but it may in some cases also prevent young men from joining. More research needs to focus on the majority of non-violent youth that do not participate in the gang lifestyle in order to elucidate alternative paths to “manhood” within marginalized and systematically disadvantaged communities.

Insights might be gained by comparing existing research on gang membership and participation in rebel organizations or paramilitary groups. In what ways do the reasons for joining an armed group compare to

or differ from the reasons that lead young men to join criminal gangs? What can demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) efforts in post-conflict and conflict-affected societies teach us about processes of de-radicalization and social re-integration (and vice-versa)? For example, a key challenge of applying DDR approaches in gang settings stems from the fact that returning members typically remain in the same locality in which the gang is embedded. The key may be a focus on prevention rather than a sole focus on reintegration. Attention to competing notions of masculinity should be integrated into violence prevention efforts.

Positive Deviance

If only a small percentage of men participate in violence, we may need to redefine the meaning of “positive deviance.” From work in the field, practitioners have learned that when men have a strong connection to their family, perceive violent action as too risky or costly, have knowledge of alternative pathways, or have time to reflect on their experience, they are less likely to participate in violent activity. Mapping resistance to violence across contexts as well as the voices of men who would like to partner and engage in gender equality is crucial.

Various institutions and programs can provide men with an exit strategy from gang involvement and violent activity – and they are not necessarily always the forums one would expect. For example, in Colombia, the Evangelical Church represents one of the most successful exit points. It offers an alternative narrative of prosperity and moral peace as well as social group in which members hold each other accountable and that have provides access to work. Good quality programming, while not the ultimate solution, can also make a positive difference and establish an evidence base for broader policy changes. However, it is important to ask whether and how programming may have unintended negative side-effects, for example when some men benefit from outside interventions and others do not.

A key area of future work is how to better integrate programs and policies centered on men and masculinities with the women’s movement and struggles for gender equality. There is a risk of working in silos rather than building effective alliances. In order to significantly transform gender relations we need to broaden the discussion to examine how gender norms impact women and men alike. Gender is too often equated with women – even though gender equality also benefits men. In other words, men are more than just partners or gatekeepers in the broader movement for gender equality: they are direct stakeholders.

Countering Violent Extremism

As one presenter noted, gender theory can provide crucial perspectives on issues of militancy and terrorism and sharpen our analysis of the processes of radicalization and de-radicalization within Muslim communities. In particular, gender-sensitive empirical research can uncover the lived experiences of Muslim men and potential factors that drive them towards or away from violence. Any discussion of violence among Muslim men is incomplete without a gender analysis of the factors that impact competing conceptions of masculinity in these communities. Muslim masculinities are shaped multiple competing and

overlapping factors. Cultural influences include traditional honor codes, Islamic texts and teachings, and media portrayals, which often paint warriors as the male archetype. Traditional religious narratives also assign men the role of women’s protectors. Historical factors that shaped the emergence of Muslim masculinity as a privileged identity and global political and economic contexts also play key roles.

The discord between the imperatives of traditional Muslim masculinity and the actual lived experiences of many Muslim men – marked by violence, displacement and dispossession – points to a crisis in Muslim masculinities. Globalization has reinforced the sense of alienation and marginalization experienced by many communities. Poverty in this context is not an absolute concept, but often experienced differently by men and women. As men are expected to provide and maintain financial stability for their families, poverty attacks the culturally defined core of masculinity in many Muslim cultures. Poverty in this sense is not only about scarcity, but about a general sense of disenfranchisement and powerlessness.

For men, notions of honor, self-respect and revenge tend to be interconnected: many experience social pressure to regain their worth after suffering from perceived humiliation. In a context of perceived economic and social humiliation, religious fundamentalism can provide men with symbolic and cultural capital, and offer the ‘occupation’ and sense of purpose that society expects men to have. In some cases, militant Islamism becomes a means to authenticate and enact culturally prescribed and idealized gender roles. A dynamic that is harnessed and exploited by terrorist networks, which aim to inspire by presenting youth with a dream; offer a concrete way to realize that dream; and empower youth to create their own initiatives.

For instance, research by Maleeha Aslam with Pakistani men between the ages of 18 and 40 years old revealed that men who considered bravery to be the most masculine attribute tended to also idealize notions of martyrdom. They articulated masculinity to be about thrill-seeking and adventure, and generally displayed a greater keenness for weapons. Additionally, the desire to seek revenge in order to regain honor may motivate tribesmen to commit suicide attacks or commit themselves to jihad. Both women and men feel this pressure, but women are generally more vulnerable and less likely to take risks. Men, on the other hand, are expected to fight back.

How do we transform these types of violent masculinities? First, governments must adopt a more preventative and less reactive stance. Long-term governance failures and administrative inefficiencies pave the way for aggressive military action as a “quick fix.” The focus should be on comprehensive responses that tackle patterns of marginalization in order to prevent the radicalization and re-radicalization of individuals. At the community level, the focus should be on organizing youth for peace, and sharing alternative conceptions of masculinity that exist within Islam. Young men and women need to be offered an alternative vision as well as the tools to realize their potential. Here, another question emerges: where does the obligation lie to do this type of work, to inspire, enable and empower?

Identity and Violence in the US

Identity and masculinity intersect with violence in the US, particularly in relation to African-American history and the black experience. Black masculinity in the US has been characterized both by the

systematic denial of manhood and its complete distortion. Sexualized violence is key to understanding these experiences. For example, lynching was used to punish black men and boys who were thought to have had sexual encounters with white women. Black bodies have been framed as transgressive in the US context – their mere presence inspires fear and mistrust. They lack the privilege of anonymity – the power to choose how and whether one wants to be seen. When you are unable to secure the safety of your own body, let alone the bodies of the ones you love, what are the implications for child-rearing and care-giving? Even now, young men of color often grow up feeling emasculated in the face of societal mistreatment and abuse. Mass incarceration and the increasing policing of young black men further reinforces these dynamics. Key questions include how do African-American men define their own experience, what meanings they give to those experiences, and how does this in turn shape their interactions with the world? These questions also force prompt examination of who is studied (by whom) and whose violence is made hyper-visible – noting, that the violence of the powerful is often invisible, while the violence of the powerless gets socially and politically magnified.

Black communities and men of color have developed a wide range of responses to experiences of oppression and the inability to achieve other markers of masculine status available to white men. For example, as presented in *The Cool Pose: Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* by Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Bilson (1992), black masculinity was constructed around black men’s ability to frighten white people as a means of self-protection and self-assurance. Improvisation and the performance of masculinity in humor, music and pop culture have also been mechanisms to address pain and suffering that cannot be confronted directly, and to create spaces for self-expression. These cultural experiences and forms of expression have in turn been appropriated by hegemonic white masculinity.

Conclusions

Any work or research focused on transforming violent masculinities needs to acknowledge patriarchy, riven with social, ethnic, racial and religious threads, as the overarching system that holds ideas of masculinity and femininity in place. Transforming violent masculinities often means addressing structural inequalities. At the same time, our understanding of masculinity as a contributing factor to violence separate from poverty and unemployment remains limited, and is often neglected in development circles.

Violence should never be assumed to be inherent to masculinity; in most contexts it is the anomaly not the norm for men. And addressing violent masculinities requires a focus on existing structures and patterns that encourage alternative visions of manhood. Who are the teenagers who are refusing to join gangs or participate in violence? They can tell us just as much about the societies in which they live as those who engage in violence. In addition, the seminar participants repeatedly highlighted the need to examine existing mechanisms for social re-integration, violence prevention and de-radicalization that are already working, from integrated services provided by churches in Latin America, or education programs in American prisons.

Many questions remain unanswered. How do we define and compare masculinity across widely different cultural, political and socioeconomic contexts? How do we move from theory to thoughtful practice,

particularly with respect to violence prevention? How do we engage communities of practitioners and analysts who remain skeptical about the value of gender analysis and gender-focused practice? And how do masculinities intersect with other forms of power and exclusion?

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