VOICE MALE

Spring 2021

Ubuntu
“"I Am Because You Are”"
Finding Ubuntu in the Work of Transforming Masculinities

Engaging Men in Inner Work • Memories of a Teen Father • The “Other” White Men
Before the pandemic, I had been eagerly anticipating traveling to Kigali, Rwanda in November 2020 for the third global MenEngage Alliance symposium. The guiding principle of the gathering is embodied in its name, Ubuntu, best described as an African philosophy that emphasizes self through others, or “I am because you are.”

Designed to bring together people from across regions, cultures, backgrounds, and languages, and “to help make men and masculinities work more effective and accountable for women’s rights, LGBTQI rights, racial justice, economic justice, climate justice, and other social justice issues”, the Alliance’s grand vision can only be approximated by such a description. (Our special symposium section begins on page 8.)

MenEngage global gatherings are where activists from around the world chart next steps in advancing gender equality and achieving a feminist-informed approach to working with men and boys. But they are more than that. They give shape to what a global community could look like if it were based on principles of peace and justice and love. Think that vision too lofty? For the better part of two decades MenEngage has been making its vision real through scores of concrete programs that its members—more than 900 organizations, NGOs and individuals spanning 76 countries across five continents—have created and implemented. (Go to menengage.org to learn more.)

From promoting sexual health and rights and girls’ and women’s empowerment, to raising healthy boys and promoting active fathering, MenEngage is a powerful, highly respected—if under -recognized—global expert articulating a sweeping vision of an egalitarian society. At a dangerous moment when those promoting hate, division and darkness have a foothold in too many parts of the world, MenEngage is too valuable an organization not to be more widely known.

I was a delegate at the first two symposia, Rio (2009) and Delhi (2014), and was keenly looking forward to reconnecting with old friends and colleagues, and making new connections, in Kigali. For all of us, the personal relationships that developed among delegates from dozens of countries—450 people attended in Brazil and nearly 1200 in India—are among our most cherished memories. As provocative and informative as the plenaries and workshops were at the Delhi symposium, it was the lunchtime conversations in the courtyard bathed in sunlight while dahl simmered and puri baked that stay with me. Crackling with the electricity of a shared vision—across cultures, age, and ethnicities—we intuitively knew we were delegates in a united nations of possibilities.

When the pandemic made it clear there would be no traveling to Africa, I felt the loss deeply. I would not, for example, be able to go out to dinner with my birthday twin Julio from Mozambique, or talk politics with Lena from Sweden, or share an information booth with Tyrone from Grenada. No gathering of which I’ve ever been a part, no community I’ve ever helped to create, has come close to evoking in me the sense that we were living—for those four or five days—in a just, equitable world. As the Joni Mitchell anthem, “Woodstock” attests, at a MenEngage global gathering, “we are stardust, we are golden.”

When the lockdown went into effect and it became clear the format for the symposium would need to be transformed, MenEngage zoomed into action. Working with in country hosts, the Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre, the Rwanda MenEngage Network, and MenEngage Africa, MEA’s global secretariat (the coordinating body for the organization, headquartered in Washington, DC), transformed the symposium into an online event. Or, I should say, an ongoing series of events. (A few, following strict safety protocols, were held in person in Rwanda.)

The symposium had been reinvented. Instead of a few days in Kigali attended by hundreds, now, and in the ensuing months, it will be joined online by thousands. And, it’s still happening; the symposium continues through the middle of June.

When it opened last November, 2,877 people from 159 countries had registered. As of March more than 650 additional registrations have been recorded. Organizers say the symposium is a space for “listening, critical reflection, and commitment to action to transform masculinities and engage men and boys for gender equality and social justice.” The nine stories in our special section reflect that description and will introduce you to the Ubuntu symposium themes: Feminisms, Accountability, Transformation, Intersectionality, and Power-with. For a deeper dive, and a chance to participate in the “I am because you are” Ubuntu world MenEngage has created, go to youtube.com/user/MenEngage/videos, to find recordings of sessions since November. (Registration information for upcoming events is on the MEA website.)

Recently, expressing alarm over changing gender roles in its vast country, China has proposed “teaching” conventional masculinity to boys. Its ministry of education as well as political advisors have gone so far as to describe China as experiencing a “masculinity crisis” brought on because “Chinese boys have been spoiled by housewives and female teachers.” If that development doesn’t make clear the urgent need for an organization like MenEngage—and the vision articulated at the Ubuntu symposium—I don’t know what does. China is suffering from a virus of ignorance and MenEngage has the vaccine. In the days ahead, let’s work to deliver enough doses there and elsewhere around the world.

Rob Okun can be reached at rob@voicemalemagazine.org.
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Mail Bonding

A 12-Step Program to Undo Racism?

Holly Karapetkova’s depiction of racism as an addiction that all white people have to varying degrees in “Racists Anonymous” (Fall 2020), struck a chord with me. If white people are to confront and challenge our collective racism, it is imperative that we embrace a model of recovery for addicts similar to the 12-step program in AA that requires alcoholics to be fully honest about the wrongs they have committed and make amends to those they have harmed. We teach our youth the importance of a sincere apology when we have done something wrong. We also teach them it is equally important to make things right. White Supremacy has never done either.

The George Floyd tragedy gives us a stunning reminder that we have skipped these important steps in the process. The path forward is right at our fingertips if we can follow the steps found in the same 12-step curriculum that has turned around the lives of countless alcoholics and other addicts. The 12-step creed explains how emotional honesty with the people that addicts have harmed is an integral part of the healing process. It is a fundamental and non-negotiable step. We haven’t done anything even remotely like this with Black folks—yet. If we are honest with ourselves, at our best we are still blaming our misdeeds on the Black community and at our worst we continue to terrorize them. We all can—and must—do better, and this includes me.

Phil Grant
Sacramento, Calif.

Crossing the Empathy Bridge

As a boy growing up near Berkeley, California in the ‘50s, I had one word for Confederate generals in the Civil War: Traitors. Imagine my shock when I moved to Virginia in the ’80s. Not a day has gone by without my seeing Lee this or Jackson that on streets, buildings, and schools. My Virginia contemporaries didn’t get me when I would object to these men of the Confederacy hailed as heroes, and I didn’t get them when they would argue about the importance of preserving history. Thanks to Sarah Trembath’s insightful essay “Crossing the Empathy Bridge” (special section “Voices Against the Hard Rain of Racism,” Fall 2020), maybe I’ll have a better chance of closing the gap by trying to understand their argument for honoring heritage while I seek their acknowledgement for the utter cruelty of generations of slavery.

As our country continues to struggle with racial unrest and the overwhelming loss from the pandemic, I hope Trembath’s urge for us all to be a “champion of connection” will lead to the building up of stronger, more compassionate communities.

John Milton Porter
Herrndon, Virginia

Resources

Voice Male maintains an extensive list of resources related to boys, men and masculinities, gender equality, and sexual and domestic violence prevention, among other topics. It can be found on our website at https://voicemalemagazine.org/resources. If you know of an organization to include, please email relevant information to info@voicemalemagazine.org.
Tubman, Lead Us Out of Darkness

The Republican Party must decide between Trump and chemo. The media needs to ignore "the private citizen."

Anyone who believes Trump should run for president also believes in Groundhog Day and wants a one-way ticket to the past. We probably won't recognize the world in 2024. Who could imagine 2020?

The future is unknown not known. We know actually what type of president Trump would be. No more waiting for him to "act" presidential. We now know the past; we just must not forget it.

What we are presently witnessing is a transformation—the Republican Party into the White Nationalist Party. No secret here. No secret there. If you thought a Muslim ban was unbelievable wait until you see the new signs that say "White Only" or "No Chinese allowed." Fascism should never become fashionable.

Beware of white fists in black gloves. Learn Japanese if you get shipped to an internment camp or Spanish if you can't climb a wall. For the rest of us—be afraid but find your spine and the courage to fight back.

Everyday build. Every election vote. If you race against racism—don't lose. Our nation is not simply "Biden" its time. We are struggling to keep breathing. We must take back the air—and America.

Work to keep the promise and find the paradise. Patriotism without Brotherhood and Sisterhood is not love. We either build community or embrace chaos. The Beloved community is just beyond the horizon. If we have faith and not fear we can reach it. Don't let anyone who wishes to be a Dictator stand in the way.

It is time to embrace the Whitman in our souls and sing the new spirituals. Yes, I hear this nation singing. Help me to believe. Oh Tubman, come lead me out of darkness.

—E. Ethelbert Miller

E. Ethelbert Miller is author of two memoirs, several collections of poetry, editor of Poet Lore magazine, and host of the weekly WPPW radio show On the Margin. He is also a member of Voice Male's national advisory board.
Men @ Work

Bhutan’s Female Bus Conductors Driving Out Abuse

In Bhutan, bus drivers and conductors may seem like unlikely changemakers. But when Bhutan’s queen, Gyaltsuen Jetsun Pema Wangchuck, voiced concern over the number of domestic violence cases reported during last summer’s COVID-19 lockdown, bus conductor Kelsang Tshomo was listening.

Ms. Tshomo, who had participated in a UN-sponsored training on preventing gender-based violence, says she previously was unaware that abuse against women is a human rights violation. She had grown up thinking gender-based violence was “normal.”

Now she and her coworkers are taking their advocacy to the streets. Conductors, mostly female, and drivers, all male, are briefed to identify issues like verbal abuse or inappropriate touching. Conductors confront passenger-perpetrators and give victims a helpline number to call. For serious cases, conductors contact protection services directly.

Harassment and abuse in public spaces is common in South Asia, data show, including public transport. To date, 25 bus drivers and conductors have been trained to interrupt gender-based harassment and education. They expect to add 20 more buses. Additionally, 47 taxi drivers have been taught to look for signs of abuse in passengers.

While response to her advocacy has largely been positive, older women with traditional notions of male superiority tell Ms. Tshomo to mind her own business. Those views don’t deter her. “Women supporting women is crucial to ensure a safe, equal and happy society....” she believes. Buses may travel the same route every day, but attitudes like hers can take a community in a new direction.

Men and Boys Clubs, Parent Groups Support Young Women in Ghana

Like many countries, Ghana has stigmatized young women whom men have impregnated. Thanks to Men and Boys Clubs and the Parent Advocacy Movement (PAM), these females are getting a second chance. Rather than having to drop out of school and marry, the groups are advocating for the young women to continue their education.

James Twene, Ghana’s acting regional director for the Department of Gender, said Men and Boys Clubs, and PAMs, have been invaluable for many females in communities in the Bawku West, Nabdam, Bongo, Talensi, Kassena Nankana West and Builsa-South districts. All have high incidences of teenage pregnancy, child marriage and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Since the introduction of the interventions—including family planning—some men now accompany their wives to the clinics to receive services, Mr. Twene noted.

The clubs’ membership stands at 720 men and boys; 500 have been trained in teenage pregnancy, child marriage, SGBV prevention, reproductive health issues, and parent-child communication, he said.

The clubs were formed, to introduce men and boys to these pressing issues, to discuss the impact of these problems on individuals, families and communities, and to develop plans to address them.

For more, go to www.gna.org.gh/1.19892564.

Revealing Men Podcast

A new podcast takes listeners behind the male curtain where men share insights into how many have been socialized to accept emotional and physical abuse and how that training teaches them to pass their abuse forward.

Revealing Men is hosted by Randy Flood, director of the Men’s Resource Center of

There are 720 members of Men and Boys Clubs working on issues ranging from teen pregnancy and child marriage to gender-based violence and reproductive health.
West Michigan. Launched in October of 2019, episodes are designed to “explain, explore, and better understand men, their behaviors, their relationships, and their lives,” Flood says.

A psychotherapist and cofounder of the men’s center in 2000, Flood has run men’s groups for more than three decades. He is coauthor (with Charlie Donaldson) of the books, Stop Hurting the Woman You Love and Masculopathy.

The men interviewed identify how they experienced abuse and how a new self-awareness allowed them to fashion a new vision of masculinity where the cycle of abuse is unacceptable.

Recent episodes explored how counseling has changed men’s lives (a client from 20 years ago shares his journey); and how the roles of bully, bystander, and victim are perpetuated in male culture (a seasoned boys program facilitator describes how changing their inner dialogue about manhood accelerates their growth).

“How men act doesn’t always reflect what’s going on in their hearts and minds,” Flood believes. To hear the podcast, go to menscenter.org/podcast.

### Disrupting Toxic Masculinities Series

A South African organization whose mission is to disrupt cycles of trauma is offering a seven-part series this spring, “Stories in the Struggle to Disrupt Toxic Masculinities.”

Facilitators from R-Cubed ( Restore, Reconnect, Rebuild), AKA “trauma disruptors,” will address toxic masculinity from a variety of angles and through multiple lenses, said writer-activist Steve Wineman, a guest facilitator from Massachusetts. Wineman, author of Power-Under: Trauma and Nonviolent Social Change, and the novel The Therapy Journal, says he was invited to cofacilitate because of his work on trauma and masculinity, and on interconnections among different oppressions.

### Halting 45’s Bias Against LGBTQ Community

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has agreed to a court order to stay the effective date of a discriminatory Trump-era rule that if it went into effect would have eliminated essential protections service providers need in order to prevent discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and religion.

“We are thrilled to see the Biden-Harris administration taking immediate steps to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of the communities that HHS is charged with protecting,” said Currey Cook, Lambda Legal senior counsel and youth in out-of-home care project director. “If this Trump administration rule were ever to become law, our plaintiffs—youth and alumni in foster care and advocacy organizations dedicated to safety and equity for LGBTQ children and families, LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, and LGBTQ seniors—would be harmed, along with other youth and families who would face potential denial of services and discrimination.”

The Biden administration agreed to postpone the rule’s effective date, acknowledging that the Trump-era policy “is under review” and agreed to advise the court on its progress. The court order postpones the effective date of the rule until August 2021.
The Third MenEngage Global Symposium (November 2020 - June 2021) is named Ubuntu (“I am because you are”). But what does Ubuntu mean in the context of working with men and boys for gender justice, women’s rights, and social justice more broadly? Elsie Odero, of the MenEngage Global Secretariat, spoke to several MenEngage Alliance members and regional network coordinators to unpack the concept of Ubuntu in the context of the symposium and in the work to transform masculinities.

"What does Ubuntu mean to you and your work for gender equality?" That was the question put to members of MenEngage Alliance before the opening of the third global symposium in November 2020. Responding with video messages, members and partners in the MenEngage network shared inspiring interpretations of Ubuntu from all corners of the globe and in a multitude of languages, including Kinyarwanda, Luganda, Yoruba, Arabic, French, Swedish, Spanish, and Portuguese.

The question was an invitation to members to explore how the concept of Ubuntu relates to masculinities and gender justice. With responses flooding in during the run-up to the opening event, the tone was set for this seven-month mobilization for what the organizing committees had dubbed the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium.

Perspectives on What Ubuntu Means

"Ubuntu means the power of our humanity; what empowers me, empowers you; what diminishes me, diminishes you," says Allister Collins, the MenEngage Alliance member from Grenada and the Caribbean Men’s Action Network (CariMAN) who first suggested Ubuntu as the symposium name. For Ransi Karunarathne from Sri Lanka, Ubuntu means love, empathy, and collective responsibility. The response that met the video campaign was a glimpse into what was being brought into the symposium: a multiplicity of insights and understandings of the concept of Ubuntu, and how it relates to the five overlapping symposium themes of Feminism, Intersectionality, Accountability, Transformation, and Power-With.

One common interpretation of Ubuntu is “I am because we are” or “I am because you are,” which was the phrase chosen as the symposium’s main tagline. While “I am because we are” is a translation of the Xhosa saying, “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”—“persons are persons through other persons”—the concept of Ubuntu has historically found expression in multiple African languages and cultural practices. It continues to be used that way, even as its meanings have evolved over time and across post-colonial, neoliberal contexts.

Reflecting on this, Josephine Mukwendi, of MenEngage Africa, says, “As much as our contexts are continually changing, the concept of Ubuntu is still used in ways that hold its core values. Ubuntu is still grounded in ideas such as belonging and leaving no one behind.” Her observation offers a helpful prompt to ask how Ubuntu connects to principles of intersectional feminist thinking and action towards social and structural transformation. To this end, how can these insights inspire and motivate us to work to transform patriarchal masculinities as part of the movement for broader social and systemic change?

Understanding Interconnectedness and Solidarity Through Ubuntu

Among the responses to the question: “What does Ubuntu mean to you and your work for gender equality?”, were those that highlighted Ubuntu as being, at its core, about interconnectedness and solidarity. Speaking at the Youth Leadership plenary at the in-person symposium Opening Event in Kigali, Rwanda, in November 2020, Marie Ange Uwase, of Citizen Voice and Actions (CVA), emphasized interconnectedness as a central idea within the concept of Ubuntu. “At the heart of each definition of Ubuntu is the connectedness that exists or should exist between people,” she said.
When reflecting on the kinds of conversations that the concept of Ubuntu can create space for, Kevin Liverpool of CariMAN and Seamus Franklin of the Men's Development Network Ireland, also bring up interconnectedness. For Liverpool, “I am because we are” calls us to practice both “self-reflection and communal reflection” by asking us to critically consider who the “I” and the “We” are. This self-reflection, tied as it is to communal reflection within the concept of Ubuntu, has the potential to expand conversations that can be had on interconnectedness within our communities.

How do different social and political contexts that create our identities influence how we experience the world and relate to each other? In the context of global masculinities, in what ways are factors that continue to shape masculinities in the context of different regions, histories, sexual orientations, gender expressions (among other concepts), related to each other and to gender justice work? Ubuntu points towards “stepping outside of our experiences to listen to others,” Franklin says. Rus Funk of North American MenEngage Network (NAMEN), adds, “As a white man in the U.S, where we are in the middle of the Black Lives Matter movement, and globally working as men in the work for gender justice: the idea of interconnectedness among them—has the potential to inform not only how we relate to each other, but also the approaches that can strengthen solidarity for transforming these power dynamics, with the lens of Ubuntu, is crystalized through practicing care, accountability, mutual support, and cooperation.

One of the risks of mobilizing around the concept of Ubuntu is its potential for being misinterpreted as an idea that romanticizes community. “I am because we are” can misinterpret Ubuntu as a pursuit of “harmony,” shortcutting the difficult but necessary interrogations of how power differences and injustices weave through our histories and everyday lives. Ubuntu is a call to action to work towards a world where saying “I am because we are” means opening up space for often difficult, necessary conversations in order to better understand each other and the systems we live in and that influence our lives. It asks us to consider how we can be accountable to each other in the process of working towards social and systemic change.

The symposium, which is holding weekly online sessions until June 2021, is inspiring conversations on interconnectedness and solidarity in various ways including sessions exploring the links between systems of oppression and everyday ideas about being a man, between challenging militarism and tackling climate change, between transforming masculinities and collaborating across social justice movements, between the history of the masculinities field and its evolution. Ways in which Ubuntu brings forth interconnectedness between people, planet and issues/problems, emphasize the importance of strengthening and supporting all social justice movements. It shows that the future is collective.
The Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre (rwamrec.org/) and Rwanda MenEngage Network, along with MenEngage Alliance, are hosts of Ubuntu. Ubuntu attendees from around the world gathered virtually—with a small in-person contingent in Rwanda. A large number of youth have been intimately involved in the symposium, addressing topics including human rights, women’s rights, gender-based violence, LGBTQIA+, sexual reproductive health and rights, and related gender and social justice topics impacting women’s and girl’s empowerment. Aisha Uwase reports on the growing role of youth in the gender justice movement.

In our role as the Ubuntu symposium’s host country, among other responsibilities, Rwanda conducted mobilization campaigns for young people—called “Ubuntu: Youth Power in Equality.” Constituencies included university students, actors, and entrepreneurs. Among the topics they exchanged ideas about were sexual/reproductive health and rights. David Mberingabo, a university student, said the symposium helped him to understand his rights in the community as well as his role in contributing to building a nonviolent society. “It is time for an Ubuntu ‘giveback,’” he said, “because we all should know that our existence and our development is based on each other.”

Under the interconnected themes of “Power With, Transformation, Accountability, Intersectionality, and Feminisms,” the symposium was a crucial moment for young people to reflect on the role of men and boys in advancing gender equality, women’s rights and human rights, and provided space for young people to discuss both their potential and the challenges they face in promoting gender and rights issues.

Olivier Sindambiwe, a gender equality researcher and university lecturer, shared how the symposium provided him with ways to incorporate the concept of “power with” into his lectures and to engage male students to advocate for transformative approaches to how power is exercised. He promotes methods and strategies to subvert stereotypical male gender roles and hegemonic expressions of manhood. In addition, he supports advancing nonviolent, equitable and inclusive notions of manhood by changing social norms that shape boys’ and men’s behavior within Rwandan society. For Sindambiwe, the concept of “power with” has the potential to eradicate existing gender inequalities.

Youth leadership is underrepresented in Africa in promoting gender equality because, it is believed, youth see gender equity not only as the older generations’ “issue” but also because African society doesn’t support young people having safe spaces to express themselves. Abel Koka, a young participant from Tanzania, believes African culture offers a clue to why there is not much active youth participation. “It all starts from the family level, where our traditions could not allow young people to actively contribute in family decisions, to the community level, where we are often excluded due to alleged lack of experience, leading to a lack of trust in young people exercising their leadership talents….”

Marie Yvette Nyiransabimana, who works with Citizen Voice and Action, a Rwandan grassroots organization, portrayed youth leadership as possible and achievable when those efforts offer volunteer services that are recognized and their councils strengthened. Youth should be seen as important contributors to progress rather than as only passive beneficiaries of services. “Being young in age doesn’t always mean you can’t think big,” Marie Yvette said. “Age shouldn’t limit someone to be part of decision-making.”

The MenEngage Ubuntu symposium has opened the eyes of young people who recognize that they also belong in decision-making positions even if generational gaps still present a challenge. No one will raise young people’s voices except youth themselves. It has awakened the commitment to continue reminding each other of the principle, “Nothing about us without us.”

Gender inequality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, climate change, female genital mutilation, child marriage, indig-
enous rights, and faith-based approaches—all of these issues are affecting the world today. Young people believe that the time is now to both make sustainable change and challenge traditional norms. The Ubuntu symposium has been a powerful example and a safe space for young people to find and raise their voices. Together the world will know that we are ready. We can set the tone for our peers that it is our right and responsibility to contribute to the community’s wellbeing from the planning level all the way to the decision-making table.

Aisha Uwase is a Rwandan feminist who is passionate about youth raising their voices to promote gender equality. An Ubuntu symposium communication associate through both the Rwanda Men’s Resource Centre and the Rwanda MenEngage Network, she is completing her studies in public relations at the Catholic Institute de Kabgayi.
Transforming masculinities to end violence against women touches deeply on ingrained gendered social norms and requires a holistic approach to be successful. Traditionally, the approach to advance gender equality has involved empowering women through education, legal remedies, advocacy, and institutional engagement. While empowering women undoubtedly increases their awareness of their rights and their ability to confront discrimination and violence, engaging with men can make the process collaborative and addresses men’s accountability in achieving a gender just society.

Health Development Initiative–Rwanda (HDI) works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women, girls, and individuals of all gender identities. Their interventions have drawn attention to the need for and mechanisms through which men can be involved both in supporting actions to achieve gender equality and in advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SHHR).

HDI focuses on changing traditional ideas of masculinity in order to decrease gender-based violence and encourage more gender-equitable attitudes. Through its programs, boys and men are engaged as allies to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights and prevent violence. It also addresses challenging aspects of masculinity that can lead to adverse outcomes, such as men delaying seeking health services, even for HIV and STIs.

In the last year, HDI conducted a series of trainings and meetings with fathers of teen mothers, a powerful entry point to transform gender relations and norms as a way to curb the rising number of teen pregnancies, and to prevent the stigma and rights violations that often follow. More than 160 teen mothers and their fathers gathered for an intensive two-day capacity building workshop in Kigali.

In the dialogue between teen mothers and their parents, participants agreed that teen pregnancy often leads to a number of devastating consequences including second pregnancies. Those consequences were attributed to poor parenting, including the teen women being abandoned. Some end up in forced, early marriages; others turn to prostitution, often after being kicked out of their homes, where they run the risk of contracting HIV and other STIs.

Teen mothers face multiple forms of stigma and discrimination perpetrated by both their families and the wider community. They experience depression, trauma, low self-esteem, a diminished sense of confidence, and little hope for the future. Their children often experience stigma and discrimination. One teen mother confessed that her father despises her child, discriminating against his own grandchild!

Aaron Clevis Mbembe, associate director of the Policy Advocacy Institute at HDI, explained that the purpose of such trainings is to involve male parents in understanding and helping to curb teen pregnancy.

Teen mothers face multiple forms of stigma and discrimination perpetrated by both their families and the wider community.
pregnancy and empowering teen mothers to advocate for themselves. “This is the first event of its kind that brings together male parents and teen mothers. It was a pilot phase and it has been successful. We explained to them the legal provisions around child rights and early pregnancy,” he said.

Beyond fathers, the program also works with male students and male teachers to end gender-based violence. HDI believes that teachers must play a central role in delivering comprehensive sexuality education. The information they offer guides adolescents, enabling them to make responsible decisions about their current and future actions in addressing their sexual and reproductive health. At the national level, this collective voice advocates that men and boys engage in gender equality, and both build on and improve efforts to achieve gender justice.

Additionally, HDI trained 46 subject teachers from 23 schools to teach comprehensive sexual education. This is in addition to offering a gender responsive pedagogy to build their capacity to teach sex ed in a friendly and gender responsive manner. To ensure that accurate, rights-based and quality comprehensive sex ed is taught requires an active network of trained and empowered teachers with the ability to pass their knowledge to other educators.

Fathers, and male teachers’ participation in addressing gender inequality is crucial. Their dialogues with women and girls are essential to build skills around positive communication and shared decision-making within families. For these ideas to penetrate into communities, media and journalists need to be involved.

HDI engaged male journalists and media professionals in the fight against gender-based violence. They play a significant role in shaping public perceptions about women and men. It is important that reporting avoids gender stereotyping, which often limits and trivializes females and males and presents an inaccurate view of the world.

Journalism is a male-dominated profession in Rwanda, which means training and engaging journalists primarily means working with men. More than two dozen male journalists actively participated in an HDI training to equip them with tools to become more gender sensitive in their reporting and interviewing. With continual training, HDI intends to ensure that these journalists maintain an unbiased approach in their reporting and that they likewise encourage their colleagues.

All these approaches are used by HDI to educate and raise awareness about gender and sexual rights. As key preventive public health practitioners and activists, HDI considers how it can actively shift harmful gender norms during the current period of major social change. Men have a responsibility to play a key role, including reflecting on their own attitudes and behaviors, modeling equitable and healthy relationships, and speaking up against violence towards women.

HDI’s work employs a gender-transformative framework to generate lasting change. It features MenEngage Alliance programs in a range of gender equality arenas—advancing sexual and reproductive rights, eliminating gender-based violence, addressing men’s responsibility in families, and supporting women’s leadership in governance—all are crucial components in order to achieve gender justice and equity.

Fathers, and male teachers’ participation in addressing gender inequality is crucial.

The Initiative conducts trainings with Rwandan fathers of teen mothers, a powerful entry point to transform gender relations and to curb rising numbers of teen pregnancies.

Hon. Theobald Mpofanyi, a parent, learned that HDI trained 46 subject teachers from 23 schools to teach comprehensive sexual education.

Ange Iliza is a multimedia journalist based in Kigali, Rwanda, who aspires to be an international reporter. She has worked for major newspapers in Rwanda and throughout the region.

Juliette Karitanyi, director of communications at Health Development Initiative (HDI), is a health communications specialist, women’s rights activist, and advocate for gender equality.

As the gender mainstreaming officer at HDI, Honneste Isimbi is a gender justice activist working in community engagement, sexual and reproductive health, advocacy, and social inclusion programming. She is chairwoman of the Rwanda MenEngage Network (RWAMNET).
This is a piece in motion. Nothing finished. It has not arrived at its final destination; it is a journey, an exploration of what “inner work” can mean for an organization such as the global MenEngage Alliance, for people affiliated with it, and for the greater movement for gender equality and social justice.

What is “inner work”? Broadly defined, it is intentional practices of self-reflection to increase self-awareness to facilitate healing, personal growth and transformation.

“Our mission at MenEngage Alliance is all about transformation. We want to transform unequal power relations, patriarchal systems. We want to transform masculinities and we work with men and boys for their transformation.” So said MenEngage Alliance codirector Joni van de Sand, in her welcome last September to participants preparing for the global MenEngage Ubuntu symposium. Under the guidance of Mallika Dutt, a leader in inner work efforts to support social change leaders, the symposium planners at that initial training began participating in a series of workshops and conversations about the meaning of inner work for our individual lives and for the social change we aspire to create together.

“Transformation is required at all levels and they all are interconnected—from the personal to the interpersonal, to the institutional, to systems,” Joni said. “However, as activists and as organizations, we often put very little attention on our personal healing and growth because we are too busy transforming the outer world around us. This is not a sustainable or healthy strategy. Transformation has to start with us, and we need to practice the change that we want to see in the world.”

Speaking about the immediacy of the organization’s global symposium (its third, originally scheduled for Kigali, Rwanda,
but virtual because of the pandemic), she went on to say, “We want to invite everybody to infuse our symposium, plenaries and conversations with this vision that the personal is political and that we need to include the whole of us, our bodies, our emotions, our wounds, our shadows, our strengths in the work to transform patriarchal systems. We need to do that in order to build the world that we want to see where everybody is equal.”

Mallika, a longtime feminist leader working for women’s rights in India, shared with the workshop participants some of her personal journey, emphasizing how and why inner work became central for her continued commitment to social change. What emerged was exciting, juicy, promising. Participants did not only talk about inner work but engaged in practicing inner work. Through Mallika’s example, we also witnessed how to talk about our lives, have the courage to be vulnerable, and let others know about our life struggles. We engaged in mindfulness exercises and somatically explored our “5F” default responses to fear: fight, flight, freeze, fawn (appease) and fog (disassociate), making the connection to our leadership roles in the world, which we explored in small group discussions.

Through these sessions, MenEngage members articulated the importance of inner work for social change in poignant and powerful ways. What follows are some examples:

“We are all working in the context of violence and trauma while often experiencing both micro and macro aggressions ourselves, from each other and from the broader world. We are also perpetrating micro and macro aggressions while doing this work. We need to acknowledge and attend to that complexity and understand that we bring our own histories of trauma. We know what that does to the brain. We know what that does to our souls. We need a space in the symposium—and elsewhere—where we can attend to all of that, be accountable to all of that, keep doing our inner work, keep doing our self and collective care.”

“Inner work is essential for peace, forgiveness and accountability. And to understand and shift how masculinities play out in culture.”

“We work outside the norm and that requires extra care of yourself. As the world changes, we need to stay well and not play into the old parts of what we are trying to change as MenEngage.”

“The work we do is so heavy and painful that it’s important to do inner work. And, we need to ask what inner work and self-care mean for boys and for men.”

“In order to transform masculinities. We have missed many opportunities for change because of our lack of attention to inner transformation.”

“In order to integrate and make peace with my pain and experience. Body awareness and holistic awareness are important for the evolution in our activism.”

“We cannot allow inner work to only focus on wounds. We need to make sure we also understand the benefits and privileges of these structures and therefore, our role in dismantling them. Becoming aware of privilege can be hurtful and painful—that can be a good and important step.”

Such reflections make a strong case for embracing inner work as a foundation for social justice work to transform power structures. These insights are an invitation to look within ourselves in order to grow, heal and transform emotionally, socially, intellectually and politically. The very theme of the MenEngage Symposium—“Ubuntu: I am because you are”—points to this deeper approach to the interconnection between the personal/interpersonal and the collective.

Of the remaining questions, how to achieve this aim looms large. Is MenEngage, with its networks and communities of practices, a suitable space to promote inner work? Aren’t we “too busy” already, planning and implementing our programs, campaigns, advocacy initiatives, rallies, workshops with men and boys, to add another layer? At the same time, can we afford not to do so knowing—as we now do—that an unexamined activist’s life undermines the greater good we might be able to achieve? Is it even possible for us to work with men and boys in accountable ways and support their transformation without doing the difficult, essential work within ourselves?

These and other critical questions must be explored by everyone engaged in gender equality work and social justice issues more broadly. At this point there are more questions than answers.

Inner work is an umbrella term; beneath it lies many rich traditions, disciplines and contemplative practices. It allows us ample room for choice and growth. Meditation, prayer, journaling, shadow work, communing with nature, trauma healing, psycho- or social therapy, yoga, visualization, contemplative arts. Vigils, council circles, storytelling, deep listening, retreats, devotion to our planet and to a higher power, ceremonies and rituals, are just a fraction of the vastness of what is possible to explore and practice.

Within MenEngage are many members willing to share their personal inner work practices and insights. Among our allies in related social justice efforts are many more. The fruits of inner work can bring not only a sense of peace and inner satisfaction, but also a more conscious way to show up in the world to build, together, a more just and loving society—men and boys included. What are we waiting for?

Oswaldo Montoya has been associated with MenEngage Alliance for 10 years. Trained as a psychologist, he was one of the founders of Men’s Group Against Violence in his native Nicaragua, the first such group of its kind in Central America. This article was made possible thanks to the work of Mallika Dutt and the participants of her inner work sessions. Thanks also to Tom Hornbrook, MenEngage Alliance communications coordinator, for valuable input.
In Chile, coronavirus cases have been growing daily, and since mid-March of last year schools and daycare centers have been closed in Santiago and across the country. The government has ordered diverse communities to quarantine, limiting residents' mobility, and everyone has been compelled to practice social distancing. Families are isolated, most lacking the services of either domestic workers or grandmothers who could help with childcare and/or household chores (accentuated by COVID-19 cleaning protocols to prevent contamination). In most families it has fallen to parents to take over caring for their sons and daughters. However, the division of domestic chores and childcare is not egalitarian. As Norma E. Silva Sá reveals in the report below, it is women who are bearing the brunt of the work, a clear reflection of gender inequality in Chile.

A poll conducted in 14 Latin American countries found that only 3.2 percent of men were out of the workforce specifically because they had to take on domestic chores or caretaking, while 50 percent of all women old enough to be in the workforce declared the same. Even though the number of women in the job market has been expanding in Chile, it has not necessarily led to changes in the unequal distribution of non-remunerated work. The conventional male and female roles remain divided, profoundly ingrained in Chilean culture. The coronavirus pandemic brought into focus the importance of household responsibilities, making obvious the unequal division of those responsibilities between men and women.

While different surveys report that men are increasingly “interested” in becoming involved in the care of their children when they become fathers, many men see their role as participating in their children’s games, outings, and supporting them with their schoolwork—in other words, not as the main caretaker. That is the conclusion of research reported in the International Men and Gender Equality Services or IMAGES. In another recent study, State of the World’s Fathers, 85 percent of dads said that they would be willing to do whatever it takes to be involved in the care of their newborn or adopted child during the first few weeks or months. Even though survey results appear optimistic, there are structural and social barriers that inhibit men from being primary caregivers of their sons and daughters. Traditional stereotypes remain entrenched. The result? Men remain primary providers and women run the home. Both are caught not just in the vise of rigid gender norms, but also in unequal parental leave policies. Simply put, the division of labor is dictated according to gender.

Such a gendered division of labor is rooted in relationships being seen as “natural” between authority figures and subordinates, suggesting they were biologically determined. They emphasize gender roles that assign responsibilities and activities differently for men and women. This division of labor according to sex is the basis upon which gender inequalities are sustained. They do not affect all women equally, particularly since class, ethnicity, race, age, and nationality are categories designed to measure gender productivity.

Living during pandemic times has brought into sharp relief the notion of the “cared for” and the perception of who is filling the essential jobs that sustain life, from those working in health care, supermarkets, and pharmacies, and continuing through those in child care, as in daycare, nannies, aunts and grandmothers.

Staying home during a health crisis could have pushed men to become involved both in the education of their sons and daughters and in the division of domestic labor. Given that the crisis has forced changes in daily routines and attitudes, there is the possibility of overcoming preexisting gendered barriers, including, for example, the stigma attached to men for staying home.

The pandemic has also presented an opportunity for personal change. Being isolated at home with young children presents fathers with the opportunity to become more involved as caretakers. The article, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality” published by the National Bureau of Economic Research noted that a considerable number of men would be at home during the crisis, whether because they are unemployed, teleworking, or because their workplace was closed temporarily or otherwise. These conditions...
could be an opportunity for fathers to familiarize themselves with their children’s household routines. In this scenario if women are employed outside of the home, these fathers become the principal caretakers. A silver lining in the pandemic is the resulting necessary readjustment of gender roles where rigid role models and the division of work in the home have been turned on their head.

Pandemic-mandated home care, covered in newspaper articles and on television news, has stimulated much dialogue in public spaces. With jobs moving from offices and markets to the home, telework emerged without a plan—or previous agreement—as a response. These changes in work routines—mainly telework—have affected the lives of millions of families, and the consequences have not gone unnoticed by Santiago couples, especially the experiences of new parents. These couples have had to simultaneously care for their young in the midst of a pandemic and navigate a new, remote form of working.

While interviewing upper middle class heterosexual couples—professionals with graduate degrees and stable employment—researchers found that men’s paid jobs were perceived as more important than women’s unpaid work caring for children. Mothers continue to assume most of the responsibilities at home, and if they were working for pay it was either at night or during the day when young children were napping. By contrast, fathers maintained fixed hours for their telework. Some couples reported that males were being paid at a higher rate than females, even when both were upper middle class socioeconomic professionals. In no instances did they refer to the nonremunerated work that women take on daily.

While the women who participated in the study emphasized the stress involved in combining telework with childcare, men described telework as presenting them with an opportunity to be closer to their children and spend time at home with their family. The interviews further revealed that men perceived, with a degree of surprise, what happens when the domestic routine and the presence of children during telework hours collide—the stories, the laughs, tears and toys in the middle of the workday.

Recent studies about fatherhood have revealed that men are increasingly willing to participate in the care and education of their children. Still, the road to equity between women and men in sharing home labor has been much bumpier than the one women have traveled to reach the paid labor market. And men’s journey to sharing domestic work and childcare continues to be on a meandering single-lane road, not the superhighway women hope for. The fact that male participants in the study were surprised by the results demonstrates how far men are from both understanding domestic routines and taking charge of caretaking.

When it comes to dividing responsibilities in the midst of a pandemic, telework has exposed a new dimension in gender inequalities. There is a long road to travel before we get closer to a more egalitarian distribution of childcare. Let’s hope that one of the bright spots of home confinement leads to a recognition that caring for their children is also the responsibility of fathers.

Norma E. Silva Sá is a Brazilian psychologist in a master’s program in gender studies and psychosocial intervention at Central University of Chile in Santiago. Her thesis explores health and masculinities through a project at Alberto Hurtado University in Santiago. Translated from the Spanish by Bert Fernández, boricua and retired pediatrician.
Norms around masculinity impose certain expectations for how men think and behave, particularly in the South Asian context. Masculinity, unlike manhood, is not biological but the product of socially constructed, well-defined roles which govern men’s understanding of themselves vis-à-vis their society. On the one hand, masculine expectations accord men superior status; on the other, that status pressures men to fulfill a range of expectations.

With the rapid increase in information technology, digital media has penetrated into some of the most remote areas of India where young men and boys are among its most consistent consumers. This phenomenon has opened up a wide range of aspirations for men and broadened their outlook on how they envision their lives, research in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar has revealed.

According to India’s fourth National Family Health Survey, only 46 percent of the population uses modern contraceptive methods—and female sterilization accounts for 36 percent! Male-controlled methods such as condoms (for spacing) and male sterilization (for limiting) remain at 3.9 and 0.3 percent, respectively. Further, three in eight men believe that contraception is “women’s business” and that men should not have to worry about it.

Masculinity is embodied through four key roles: provider, protector, procreator, and pleasure giver. All spheres of men’s lives, including the dynamic they share with their partners, are guided by these roles. They shape spousal communication as well as decision-making on matters related to health, reproduction, contraception, and sex.

To unpack these roles, within the intimate space men are driven by their need to fulfill their role as “pleasure givers.” They perceive sex as a performance where they must provide pleasure to their partners. In addition, men feel the need to show their ability to control during sex and gain their partner’s trust by way of using traditional methods such as withdrawal or Standard Days Method, a fertility awareness-based family planning method that identifies a woman’s fertility window. Failure of these “traditional” contraceptive methods often occurs and leads to unintended pregnancies and abortions.

“I withdraw and ejaculate outside but once I had to give her a pill because she conceived, and I didn’t know what to do.” – A man with one child in Purnea, Bihar

Among some younger men, such risky expressions of masculinity may be offset by the desire to be a responsible procreator, potentially providing key opportunities to encourage men to challenge the status quo and reframe their notions of masculinity.

“My husband wanted to give a gap of two years minimum because I am quite young (20 years). Also he thought that I am physically weak and we decided we will not do it.” – A couple with no children in Purnea, Bihar

This level of communication has the potential to facilitate more gender-equitable relationships. Through short video clips inserted as advertisements promoting positive messages about sex, contraception and consent, men can be nudged to see the “ideal man” as one who practices safe, consensual sex.

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Reproductive health lessons with young men. Three in eight men believe contraception is “women’s business.”

Young men aged 15 to 18 from the Mahadalit community attending a training in their village about sexual and reproductive health and rights.
marriages, men often feel “burdened” by the provider role with little or no ability to pursue their own ambitions. Achieving social mobility, financial prosperity or spending more time with one’s partner are among the key motivations couples cite in delaying starting a family. These aspirations are amplified with increased access to technology providing men with avenues to seek better jobs, pursue education, in addition to spending more time at home.

“I want to pursue my business and open my own dairy farm. I have also spoken to my father about it already.” – A man with three children in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh

Financial planning is key to couples achieving their goals, particularly as it can help couples to visualize the financial implications of an unintended pregnancy or the health risks of not practicing family planning. Considering the implications of their financial future encourages men and couples to use modern contraception to efficaciously space their families.

The acute economic pressures and uncertainties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the challenges men face in an economic and health crisis. When India announced a nationwide lockdown, a large proportion of men lost their jobs and had to return to their villages, especially in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which have large, migrant male populations. The pressures to provide for the family triggered considerable psychological distress among men and affected couples’ dynamics. Reports of a rise in domestic violence and an increase in men’s alcohol consumption were widespread, as were accounts of women being coerced into non-consensual sex and experiencing emotional, verbal and physical abuse. Some men absurdly claimed that the increased pressures they felt to protect and provide for the family were released through sex, an act where they could assert their manhood.

As a result of the pandemic-induced financial crisis, many men described themselves as “responsible procreators”—using modern contraception to plan and space their families.

Transforming the values attached to each of these masculine roles is an important step toward creating an equitable environment where both men and women can lead healthier lives. It may provide men with the safe spaces they need to experience some relief from the pressures they feel, and to collaborate with their spouses in family planning. It also facilitates transforming longstanding inequitable power dynamics between men and women into equitable ones by helping men become family planning advocates, and supportive and equal partners on a couple’s contraceptive journey.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for men to see masculinity without the pressure to provide for their families and to prove their sexual prowess. Rather, it points to the need to encourage behaviors where men view themselves as well-informed, responsible users of family planning. It also nudges men, especially younger men, to fulfill their aspirations and to collaboratively embark on a healthy marital life with their partners.

Aishwarya Sahay is a research and program associate at the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW Asia) working on public health issues, particularly family planning and sexual and reproductive health. She previously worked on adolescent empowerment efforts at ICRW and domestic violence at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai.

Kuhika Seth is a technical specialist at ICRW Asia, also working on family planning and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Both work on “Couple Engage,” a human-centered design project to engage men in family planning in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Prior to joining ICRW, Kuhika worked with Sambodhi Research and Communications Pvt. Ltd., Population Council, and George Mason University in Virginia.

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International Center for Research on Women

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is a global research institute, with regional hubs in Washington, D.C.; New Delhi, India; Kampala, Uganda; and Nairobi, Kenya. Established in 1976, ICRW conducts research to identify practical, actionable solutions to advance the economic and social status of women and girls around the world. Its projects focus on better access to education and livelihoods, adolescent empowerment, gender-based violence, masculinities and gender inequitable attitudes, HIV, and violence against women and girls (icrw.org).
Founded in San Francisco in 2008, the Men’s Story Project (MSP) is an innovative movement-building project promoting healthy masculinities and intersectional gender justice. Rooted in interdisciplinary research, the project helps campus and nonprofit groups to create and film live productions where diverse men publicly share personal stories examining ideas about masculinity to promote health and equality for people of all genders. The Men’s Story Project is rooted in a feminist, anti-racist, intersectional framework.

As gender justice practitioners, we know that social ideas about masculinity a) are socially constructed and changeable, and b) foster many preventable health and social justice problems for people of all genders. It’s notable that despite these facts, critical public dialogue on masculinities is still in nascent stages in many contexts. People often don’t realize that when it comes to how boys and men are socialized to be “men,” there’s much to discuss and much that can be changed.

I founded the Men’s Story Project to address this need. In each MSP production, diverse men and folks who identify with masculinity share candid, personal stories with a live audience (online or in person) about their experiences with a range of issues: family and romantic relationships, gender-based violence (e.g., witnessing, perpetrating, intervening, and surviving), HIV/AIDS, bullying, LGBTQ+ issues, mental health, journeys of personal change, and intersections with race and other aspects of identity.

They share their stories in prose, poetry, music, dance and visual art, followed by facilitated audience dialogue. The events are filmed to create locally relevant films, social media and discussion guides. The MSP presenters vary in age (from 12 to 74 so far!), identities and backgrounds, and have included students, artists, athletes, coaches, fathers, veterans, and celebrities, among others. More than 30 MSP productions have been presented to date in the U.S., Canada, Chile, Gaza and the West Bank, in collaboration with universities and organizations including UN Women, Texas Association Against Sexual Assault, University of Oregon and MenHealing.

To prepare for these unusual moments of public truth-sharing, the presenters go through six to eight weekly workshops where they learn together via group activities, exchange feedback on their draft pieces, challenge each other (the MSP places great value on “productive discomfort”), and build community. The workshops are supplemented both by individual story coaching and a buddy system. Over the years, the presenters’ stories have featured the core themes of celebrating, challenging, and resisting. Celebrating is about giving thanks for sources of love and beauty in their lives, such as their relationships with their partners and children. Challenging is about confronting harmful notions of masculinity by discussing the costs of these norms in their own lives and sharing their stories of personal change (such as how they finally sought help for depression or porn addiction, or received support to end their perpetration of intimate partner violence). Resisting is about working to end intersecting oppressive ideologies/systems that they’ve either espoused or been subjected to, by sharing their stories of unlearning or self-assertion, respectively.

Examples of resistance include stories of how they came to a place of pride in their GBTQ+ identity even in, say, rural Texas, or while living as a Catholic monk in Chile. Or by asserting that they, as Black men in Oakland or Providence, are “loving and compassionate men”—in contrast to the racist stereotypes often

“...This group gave me a safe space to share, encouraging me in ways that enriched my spirit... I sat with uncomfortable emotions around the toxicity I had contributed to the world...”
Accountability is a central tenet of the Men’s Story Project. It offers presenters an opportunity to publicly take responsibility for their past harmful beliefs and behaviors.

We’ve found that for audience members and presenters, the Men’s Story Project fosters diverse impacts including a reevaluation of personal prejudices, and an expanded worldview and sense of life possibility. They have credited this widened field of vision to the uncommon opportunity the MSP gave them to directly hear the deeply personal stories of (and for presenters, to also build deep relationships with) diverse men, often of backgrounds very different from their own. Excerpts of audience feedback include: “I laughed, cried and rethought my own prejudices... It was life-altering”; and “I gained a new perspective of masculinity from hearing these stories—specifically a desire to change some of the aspects of my own behavior”; and “Opened my eyes to the healing process and allowed me to see the steps others have taken towards healing.”

Accountability is central to the MSP. It offers presenters an opportunity to publicly take responsibility for their past harmful beliefs and behaviors; describe how they pursued journeys of change; discuss benefits they’re experiencing from the changes they made; and share their goals and commitments for the future. For example, an Emory University student told a live audience of 280 about how he had cheated on his prior girlfriends, and declared: “I want to learn how to love better.” In an MSP ensemble piece entitled “I Remember, I Commit,” a St. Louis University graduate told an audience of 350 bearing witness: “I remember hearing and telling sexist jokes at work. I commit to interrupting sexism and creating a work environment where everyone feels safe.” And a 69-year-old former Black Panther told an audience in San Francisco about how he unlearned homophobia and was now “willing to fight for all people’s rights,” declaring, “All power to all the people!”

Building an intentional space for presenters through group agreements that facilitate safety, bravery and creativity is key to fostering a growth-supporting workshop experience. For example, Texas presenter Rocky Lane posted on Facebook: “The people I met in this process displayed so much vulnerability that I was instantly at ease to share the details about my life that I sometimes would rather forget. This group gave me a safe space to share. They encouraged me in ways that enriched my spirit. I sat with uncomfortable emotions around the toxicity I have contributed to the world. I cried tears of relief to hear words of encouragement from wonderful humans. The story I tell [in] these performances is a scary one to share, but I am so proud of what they helped me create.”

We are also learning that men’s public expressions of accountability can have long-term reverberations in their lives. Ten years after his participation in San Francisco, a presenter who shared his journey of change after perpetrating intimate partner violence wrote: “The sense of community I felt with the other men was very nurturing, and I no longer felt socially isolated... I was able to publicly hold myself accountable for things I had done... Essentially, telling my story of violence publicly was a turning point in my life, because I was inviting the community to hold me accountable for breaking the cycle of abuse in my life and to also see the hope I had for my own healing.”

Based on program feedback and ongoing learning, the Men’s Story Project’s training resources evolve each year; they include a 70-page, step-by-step training guide, webinars, and coaching sessions, among other resources. MSP storytelling must be trauma-informed, guided by trained facilitators, and importantly, include structured attention to prevent harm, including perpetuating oppressive ideas on public stages, or publicly identifying victims of violence without their consent, or other unintended harms. It is also key for the work to have an explicit intersectional social justice frame. We have also found that after the live events, the filmed stories are powerful teaching tools unto themselves.

To help advance gender equality, health and social justice around the world, I believe we need critical masses of men—everywhere, and of all walks of life—to step forward and share their own, personal stories that counter harmful masculinity narratives and intersecting oppressive ideologies. I believe this kind of public storytelling work should become mainstream, widely implemented and always be accompanied by rigorous evaluation. Whether stand-alone or integrated with other gender-transformative programs, the Men’s Story Project framework is adaptable for local contexts and purposes. Above all, I find it deeply compelling that men’s true, transformative stories are often just beneath the surface—waiting to be told.

Jocelyn Lehrer, Sc.D., is founder and director of the Men’s Story Project.

To learn more, visit www.mensstoryproject.org.
**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**, a procedure that partially or totally removes a female's external genitalia for non-medical reasons, causes irreparable and irreversible harm, as well as life-long health and psychological complications. The United Nations estimates that about 200 million girls and women alive today have been subjected to FGM. Led by MenEngage Africa, a member of the global MenEngage Alliance, men's organizations have joined in a call to end FGM. Under the banner, “No Time for Global Inaction: Unite, Fund, and Act to End Female Genital Mutilation,” a coalition spoke out on February 5, International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation.

“This practice is a global problem because it is a violation of the human rights of girls and women and an extreme form of gender discrimination,” said Hassan Sekajoolo, chair of MenEngage Africa. Sekajoolo believes that “if political leaders don’t take decisive action to ensure its demise, on the continent alone 50 million girls are at risk of FGM.” Worldwide, of all the countries that practice FGM, the African continent is home to 29, and MenEngage Africa has members in 11 of those countries.

On a continent where FGM is endemic, although across Africa 26 countries have laws prohibiting it, most are not just inadequate but seldom enforced. Prosecutions are rare, and penalties are often too lenient to act as a deterrent.

Sonke Gender Justice, based in South Africa, coordinates MenEngage Africa, a 22-country network spread across East, West, Central and Southern Africa. Members work collectively to advance gender justice, human rights and social justice in key thematic areas including sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV) and HIV prevention, child rights and positive parenting and in promoting peace on the continent.

In order to circumvent existing laws, the practice of FGM in some African countries has changed. According to the World Health Organization, the average age at which the practice is carried out is falling in some countries, while in others, there is a tendency to move females from a country where the practice is illegal to another country where it is allowed.

“We need urgent action to prevent this continued brutalization of more girls and women through this practice that is steeped in archaic cultural and religious beliefs,” said MenEngage Africa’s Sekajoolo. “As an alliance that believes men and boys are crucial in efforts to make gender equality a reality, there must be an increased mobilization of men and boys to speak out against this practice,” he added. MenEngage Africa is aligned with the AU Saleema initiative—launched by the National Council of Child Welfare and UNICEF Sudan to support the protection of girls from genital cutting—to galvanize political action to ensure strong legislation, increase allocation of financial resources and strengthen partnerships to end FGM.

**What Can Men Do to Help End FGM?**

By Khopotso Bodibe
Proponents of FGM say women and girls are mutilated ostensibly for their benefit. Bizarrely, there is a belief that FGM will increase a female’s chances of getting married. Another belief suggests that women who have had FGM are better at pleasing men sexually. Shortly after undergoing FGM, young women are married off, often before the legal age of marriage, 18. As a consequence, FGM is closely linked to early marriage. “This constitutes rape,” Sekajoolo said, “since they are forced into sex with often much older men.”

Another negative consequence impacts girls’ education and ability to advance themselves. Once they become wives, girls are forced to leave school to look after households, serve their husbands and bear children.

Fulfilled, educated women benefit men as well as the women themselves. “It is important that all efforts aimed at rooting out FGM must involve men and boys, the primary intended beneficiaries of the practice,” Sekajoolo said, adding, “We need more advocacy efforts by men as well as collaboration between men and women’s rights organizations to advance the campaign.

Ending FGM will require a multipronged approach bringing together law enforcement, child protection professionals, educators, physicians, traditional and religious leaders, government agencies, activists and survivors. The scale and the impact of FGM in Africa is well documented. Ending FGM now is a developmental imperative and a life-saving intervention.

MenEngage Africa believes that governments have a crucial role to play in rooting out FGM. They have made commitments to eliminate FGM under Africa’s Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The MenEngage Africa Alliance calls on African governments to take their commitments seriously and follow through on their intent to make FGM a thing of the past by:

- Passing laws and policies banning FGM and designing strategies to effectively enforce these laws within all countries
- Introducing harsher penalties for those who disobey anti-FGM laws
- Allocating sufficient human and financial resources to reduce and, ultimately, end FGM in our nations
- Strengthening implementation of regional coordination in the areas of policy and legislation, communication and advocacy, evidence, research and data through regional economic communities to end cross-border female genital mutilation
- Supporting efforts by civil society organizations that campaign for the end to FGM
- Developing programs to address emerging forms and trends of FGM practice such as medicalization, reducing the age of cutting, different types of FGM, and religious and traditional justifications for FGM.

MenEngage Africa calls on the global community and countries still practicing FGM to reimagine a world that enables girls and women to have voice, choice, and control over their own lives.
The North American MenEngage Network (NAMEN) is at a critical moment in its evolution, a time of reflection and commitment to examining its efforts through the twin lenses of intersectionality and decolonization. Those dual truths were central to a two-day Ubuntu symposium it offered last November 30 and December 2.

Ubuntu is often translated as “humanity towards others” or “I am because you are,” explained NAMEN board member Carlos Idibouo, a symposium planner. “It is a Nguni Bantu term from Southern Africa and speaks to the universal connection between every person,” Carlos said, “a shared sense of compassion, responsibility, and humanity for all. It is a concept grounded in African thought and identity, and has an important and positive message for the whole world.”

At the start of each of the two days of the symposium, Greg Grey Cloud led indigenous ceremonies. To say that Grey Cloud, a member of the Crow Creek Sioux tribe, is gifted with horses barely suggests his mastery with steeds. Symposium attendees were enthralled witnessing him lovingly circling his horse in a corral at his ranch in South Dakota, tenderly testifying to the mystical communication between human and animal. His compassionate and obvious spiritual bond with his horse set a tone of nurturing connection for the some 100 attendees.

International talk show host Karen Carrington, a mental health advocate and award-winning broadcaster, moderated the symposium. Appreciated for her series on empowering men, her warm presence, professionalism, and skill at deep listening, provided a sensitive container for the gathering.

On day one, thought leader Tonya Lovelace, a member of the NAMEN board of directors and former CEO of Women of Color Network (which she founded), challenged the attendees. Now president and CEO of Lovelace Consulting Services, she encouraged participants to remember “who we are and where we came from,” and to address oppressive systems and histories that enable us to occupy the land we do. “It is critical that we—from across North America—take the essential steps to center intersectionality and decolonization in all aspects of gender justice work. We must leave behind single-
issue approaches,” Tonya emphasized.

“Breathing is political,” Tonya told symposium participants, inviting them to remember the importance of being intentional in their work. To do so, she added, requires remaining accountable at all times.

The first day of the symposium also featured riveting, dramatic vignettes by members of the Massachusetts-based Performance Project’s First Generation Theater where young activist-actors—even in a video broadcast over Zoom—communicated a message of empowerment in a production that masterfully integrated art and social justice.

The Performance Project sees itself as an arts community. Its members feature a range of ages and ancestries, and through the arts engage young people in intensive artistic training, intergenerational mentoring, leadership development, and community building. Its casts are entirely made up of young people, incorporating into their performances a blend of drama, spoken word and music.

Symposium participants were captivated by the group’s vision of a world in which all people strive for personal and social liberation, where all individuals and cultures are honored, all embrace interconnectedness, and all are free to achieve their full potential.

The symposium continued its exploration of intersectionality and decolonization on its second day with a powerful presentation by Unoma Azuah, the Nigerian writer-activist whose personal journey is the basis of her far-reaching narrative on racism and how it impacts us all. Unoma’s research and activism—and her international award-winning books—focus on issues relating to queer Nigerians.

“The search for authenticity is a laborious and often solitary experience,” Unoma said. “Occasions like this symposium, which brings together a community of humans united by their shared desire for truth, lessens the burden of uncertainty associated with self-discovery,” she said. “It confers on our quest a strong legitimacy that engenders in us a firm confidence in our rights as human beings.”

The day wrapped up with a robust discussion of a recent “state of the field” report compiled by longtime “NAMENite” Rus Funk. Close to a dozen community-based practitioners, activists, professionals and academics from Canada and the US provided important feedback and key input on efforts to mobilize men and boys to prevent gender-based violence across North America. The rich, deep discussion reminded participants that there is much work still to be done, especially continuing to coordinate and connect with and among people on the front lines. The report recognized the tension between viewing the work as a “field” vs. as a “movement”—a field being seen as inhabiting a professional (or professionalized) arena that focuses on offering programs to a target population. A movement, on the other hand, is seen as a mobilizing effort to advance social change. NAMEN remains committed to the conclusions in the report and will share more of its findings later this year.

“As a network of organizations, individuals, activists, and academics from Canada and the US, NAMEN works to transform masculinity and to dismantle patriarchy and other forms of oppression,” the board of directors said in a statement. “NAMEN both recognizes and promotes accountability and intersectionality in all its work. We are committed to building our work atop these two pillars.”

In the coming months NAMEN will further the work of the symposium by engaging with three organizational partners to provide online workshops: the Performance Project’s First Generation theater troupe; the US Native American Indigenous peoples’ group, “Wica Agli”; and the Canadian-based NextGenMen, which engages and educates boys and men to become advocates promoting gender equality.

For details and to learn more about where NAMEN is headed, visit namen.menengage.org.

“A clinical social worker, therapist and consultant, Shane Joseph is a member of the board of directors of the global MenEngage Alliance and cochair of North American MenEngage (NAMEN).
State-Sponsored Strangulation Is Still Strangulation

By Greg Loughlin

In 2014, the state of Georgia made it plain: strangling is against the law. Backed by a broad coalition including domestic violence prevention advocates, prosecutors, and police chiefs, State Representative Mandi Ballinger introduced HB 911 to make strangulation a felony offense.

Throughout the legislative process, I only remember one area of questioning about HB 911: should the legislature carve out an exception to allow law enforcement to use strangulation outside of life-or-death situations?

As then-executive director of the Georgia Commission on Family Violence, I was in the room when a Georgia legislative committee considered that question. Representatives crowded the far side of a black crescent-shaped table, bracketed by filing cabinets, a House seal on the wall behind them.

After Rep. Ballinger presented the bill, Lt. Janet Brady, an Atlanta police commander representing Chief George Turner, addressed the hearing. “As police officers we no longer use the carotid artery restraint to subdue suspects.” The reason, Lt. Brady testified, “is that it’s lethal.”

“Okay, just so I’m clear,” Rep. Christian Coomer asked, “if a law enforcement officer uses this restraint they are going to be put to the task of explaining that they were acting in defense of their life and subject themselves to potential criminal prosecution under this statute?” Lt. Brady simply responded, “Yes.” The committee was satisfied, the Georgia legislature unanimously passed the bill, and the governor signed it into law.

Can’t get much clearer than that: Don’t strangle anyone. Don’t touch someone else’s neck without their consent. Don’t interfere with someone’s breathing, or the blood or oxygen flow to their brain. Case closed. Except that it isn’t.

Since 2014, I have watched the news and strangulation—often minimized as “choking,” which is what happens when you get food caught in your throat—keeps happening, too often state-sponsored strangulation, carried out by police.

In fact, the power dynamics and absence of accountability that permit men to strangle women are the same dynamics that enable cops to strangle suspects. In 2014, New York police officer Daniel Pantaleo strangled Eric Garner to death. In 2016, Atlanta officer Matthew Johns kicked 15-year-old Antraveious Payne in the head and knelt on his neck. In 2017, Henry County, Georgia, officer David Rose strangled former NFL player Desmond Marrow as he was handcuffed on the ground. Last Memorial Day, Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin used his knee to strangle George Floyd to death. These are just a few examples in a long list.

After George Floyd was murdered, the Training Institute on Strangulation Prevention issued a press release, “It is Time for All Law Enforcement Agencies in America to Limit Pressure to the Neck to Deadly Force Situations.” Nevertheless, despite public outcry, police have continued to return “time and time again to the neck restraint,” according to a report earlier this year on NPR.

I don’t believe the officers above intended to kill these men. Rather, as in domestic violence cases, they were using strangulation to send a message to the men on the ground and their communities: Do what I say, because I can kill you at any time. I have the right to control your body to the point of controlling your very breath. Especially chilling is the fact that all the officers in the incidents above are white and the men they strangled are Black. The message, steeped in a history of systemic racism and lynching, is clear: I own you.

We have videos and public awareness, so what happens next? What does accountability look like for men who strangle—police or civilian—and for communities that empower them? It’s progress that all the officers in the cases cited were fired. In Georgia, district attorneys and law enforcement seem to be taking strangulation cases more seriously since passage of HB 911.

Law enforcement must be part of community response to end strangulation. As a domestic violence prevention instructor at Men Stopping Violence, I’ve worked with too many men who have strangled women. Often, I ask men: did anyone in the community ever tell you to stop abusing your partner before law enforcement got involved? Almost always the answer is no. That’s a community failure. And a societal one.

Community norms must make strangulation unimaginable. And, because strangulation is a crime, police must be part of changing these norms. We cannot have law enforcement strangling people, and prosecutors minimizing their behavior. State-sponsored strangulation is still strangulation.

Georgia law said unequivocally seven years ago that strangulation is illegal. We need to make the law keep its promise. It must be enforced—no more strangulation. Because when society decides that strangulation is unthinkable, everyone will be able to breathe.
The “Other” White Men
By Rob Okun

Y ears ago, the pork industry ran a campaign touting its product as the “other white meat.” It was angling to ally itself with the “chicken-is-healthier-than-red-meat” crowd. People saw it for what it was: a cynical ploy. Today, when it comes to white men, the sound and fury is all coming from the red meat crowd—riot-endorsing Josh Hawley, flyin’ Ted Cruz, and the “former guy,” to name just a few. (Before Tucker Carlson goes on a tirade, no, this is not an assault on hamburgers.)

So where are the “other” white men? You know, the guys who wear masks, who believe in gender equality, who care for their children rather than “babysit” them? Call them working men who volunteer in their communities, or soccer dads, their numbers are not insignificant, even if they are below the media’s radar. (Of course, among the population of changing men are plenty in BIPOC communities.)

If you recognize that men are changing—or if you know men who are—then do not remain silent about the dangers posed by men who dominate the news. Especially in light of the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, we need to hear from the “other” white men and their allies. Now.

Which representation of manhood we endorse will determine what kind of country we’ll be: Proud Boys nation or a land promoting compassionate men; a Handmaid’s Tale world of subjugation, or one advancing empowered women—and open-hearted men.

Since the new year, the Trumpublican party hasn’t gone away, nor have the aforementioned Proud Boys, Three Percenters, Boogaloo Boys, Oath Keepers, or Aryan Brotherhood. Notice anything they have in common? Proud Boys; Boogaloo Boys; Aryan Brotherhood. And, let’s not forget their recruits-in-waiting: the misfits who shoot up schools, nightclubs, houses of worship, and movie theaters—even threaten violence on sitting governors (see Watchmen, Wolverine). How is it possible that once again—just as in scores of mass shootings—few commentators are willing to state the obvious: virtually all the white supremacists in the spotlight are men, ultraright foot soldiers pledging allegiance to the United States of White America?

It’s hard to ignore a flashing caution light, especially when it turned blood red on January 6. Until or unless we acknowledge the connection between those groups’ violent expression of manhood and their white-collar counterparts—establishment agents like Kevin McCarthy, Mitch McConnell, and Lindsay Graham—it will be harder for the “other” white men to take the field in President Biden’s battle for the soul of America. Without men of peace intervening, the insurrection supporters in state legislatures passing new laws to suppress the vote will continue to feel emboldened to seek fresh recruits.

Joe Biden is an unlikely poster boy for a kinder, gentler manhood. Nevertheless he is a good choice, providing a lot of cover for white men—and BIPOC allies—to stand behind a platform promoting a new masculinity.

It may be imprecise cultural shorthand to describe the “former guy” and President Biden as examples of old and new expressions of masculinity, especially since, at 78, Biden is an unlikely poster boy for a kinder, gentler manhood. Nevertheless he is a good choice, providing a lot of cover for white men—and BIPOC allies—to stand behind a platform promoting a new masculinity.

In the political world, insurrection supporters Sens. Hawley and Cruz are jockeying for pole position in the 2024 presidential race, allying themselves with the former guy’s base and its expression of manhood: aggression, physical strength, violence. In this reality, the “other” white men and their allies have an opportunity to expose how extreme that posture is. To remain silent would be morally inexcusable, especially now. With the pandemic finally being responsibly managed, there is space for another kind of healing, one focusing on youth, particularly boys and young men.

There may not yet be a vaccine rollout for youth, but by embodying compassion and empathy, men can inoculate themselves against the Trumpublican diet of callousness, abuse, and violence. It’s on us to mentor youth, focusing on transforming masculinity. To do so, we’ll have to demand that parents, educators, coaches, and faith leaders develop programs that nurture young men’s emotional growth.

I’ve advocated for years that the CDC pilot a program at Head Start for preschool teachers to cultivate boys’ emotional intelligence. Perhaps now, with the contrast between the brands of masculinity so stark, Congress will draft such legislation. Imagine bipartisan support for a Healthy Boys Initiative; it isn’t hard to do.

None of this will be easy. Nevertheless, there are bright spots. Even within the narrow world of electoral politics, the number of women winning elective office is a powerful antidote to patriarchy’s poison. And strong women serve as a corrective to four years of misogynous rants, still audible from Trumpublicans, even those with smaller bullhorns.

Unfortunately, empowered womanhood is suspect, branded as feminist. Adherents of traditional masculinity have long denigrated feminism as a virulent virus. Despite its simply denoting “a belief in the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes,” over the last four years the former guy and his minions sought to destroy it at every turn.

With Kamala Harris as vice president, and early trials of Joe Biden’s masculinity vaccine showing promise as a treatment against white male supremacy, conditions are ripe for men to begin receiving feminism antibodies. If they do, we’ll all be healthier for it.

Rob Okun is editor of Voice Male. He can reached at rob@voicemale-magazine.org
Men Saying No to “Tradition” of Gender Violence in Cambodia
By Matt Blomberg

Dinner is late. The laundry isn’t done. The pickles aren’t sour enough. When it comes to reasons for a man to beat his wife, Rem Ran has heard it all.

For most of his 40 years, the construction worker saw domestic violence as “a normal part of life” in a nation where, until 2007, girls were taught in school not to challenge husbands through a traditional code of conduct that is still found in some textbooks.

Now he steps in when domestic disputes erupt in his rural community and is part of a nationwide drive to enlist men as advocates for women’s rights, as Cambodia recently also launched a national plan to combat violence against women.

“I’ve seen so much rape and senseless violence against women,” Ran told the Thomson Reuters Foundation during a workshop in Phnom Penh, where about a dozen men from the countryside were learning about gender equality.

“Usually, authorities overlook it; they say it’s a private matter that should be left to the couple at all costs. We make it a collective issue and we advocate to authorities that it must stop.”

Ran is among 30 men coached by the NGO Gender and Development for Cambodia to identify and root out violence against women. They intervene in disputes, holding workshops and acting as a go-to for victims and authorities in communities.

Gender-based violence “comes from a mindset, an idea that is so deeply ingrained that it is almost impossible to retrain,” Ran said.

Activists and campaigners have noted improvements in gender equality in Cambodia, which ranked 89th on the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index in 2020 compared to 112th in 2016. But a series of events in the Southeast Asian nation in 2020 drew condemnation from advocates around the world.

In February 2020, a 39-year-old online vendor was jailed on pornography charges, two days after Prime Minister Hun Sen said that women were encouraging sexual assault by wearing provocative outfits while selling clothes via livestream. Five months later, a new law drafted to criminalize outfits deemed to be immodest was leaked to the media. The draft legislation is still awaiting approval by various ministries.

Victim Shaming

In September, a police chief was spared prosecution despite an investigation finding he had sexually abused four junior female officers and silenced them with threats to block their careers. Although the victims were praised for their bravery in coming forward in the groundbreaking case—and despite demands from activists—the Women’s Affairs Ministry did not take a stand after the government backed off prosecution to “protect the dignity” of the women.
“Dignity starts with justice,” said Mu Sochua, who led the ministry from 1998 to 2004 and ushered in groundbreaking laws and policies on domestic violence and human trafficking. “Where was the minister? ... This was a great opportunity for the minister to take a stand and say ‘No! Take this case to court.’” The ministry did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

As campaigners decried a backslide in women’s rights, authorities reasoned in each case that they were out to protect Cambodian culture and the dignity of women. “Policing women’s bodies is not about culture or dignity,” said Ros Sopheap, director of Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC). “Look at who makes all these decisions: men. It’s about protecting the status quo and the patriarchy.”

In a 2019 United Nations review of Cambodia, the UN called for an end to “social norms that justify gender-based violence,” including the abolition of “Chbap Srey,” a poem that is a “root cause of the disadvantaged position of women.”

The Chbap Srey, or women’s code, has been passed down through the generations since the 14th century and, until 2007, was part of the school curriculum with girls expected to memorize all 16 verses. “In terms of rhythm, it is in excellent form, very elegantly written,” said So Phina, an author, poet and program manager at Cambodian Living Arts, an organization that preserves traditional art forms. “But the meaning is extremely harmful ... It has a huge effect on society, invisible, unconscious effects, many that you can’t see.”

The poem teaches women to serve, obey and fear their husbands. “You should serve well; don’t make him disappointed. Forgive him in the name of woman; don’t speak in a way that you consider him as equal,” the Chbap Srey women’s code dictates. “Keep silent in order to have peace,” reads another line.

“When we were young, we just learned it and we were very grateful that people would teach us how to behave, how to be a good woman,” Phina said. “Only when we grow, with reading and with other education, do we learn that we need to question why this code is imposed on women ... but it’s hard to reverse that,” she said.

The code was banned from schools in 2007 but excerpts can still be found in textbooks for girls aged in their early teens in grades seven through nine. But Sun Bunna, director of curriculum development at the education ministry, said he was unaware of the ban and believes the Chbap Srey is a way to teach girls to be brave and stand on equal footing in society. “It’s good; it’s not bad at all,” he said.

He added that criticism can be attributed to poor interpretations of the code, while deflecting questions about whether it contributed to violence against women.

“Now we have a very open global society. [Women] can read news from every corner of the world and sometimes she adapts that information and sometimes she can create violence,” he said.

While Cambodia recently launched a nationwide plan to combat violence against women, campaigners remained skeptical about its ability to root out “social norms entrenched in every layer of society. Victim-blaming rhetoric, which the Cambodian government has continued to espouse ... only further entrenches gender inequality and sustains an enabling environment for violence and impunity,” said Naly Pilorge, director of the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO). “Without a genuine commitment to gender equality from all levels of government, the [plan] will have little impact on the lives of women in Cambodia.”

Meanwhile, Seup Sokha, 36, a rice farmer who used to abuse his wife in what he called a “dictatorial relationship,” has become the person that neighbors and authorities rely on to mediate domestic disputes in his community. “There’s no education around this, for authorities or normal people, just a mindset and tradition that oppresses women into thinking they must stay silent no matter what,” he said.

“I have a daughter. I had to change my mindset and spread what I have learned because I don’t think she’d be safe in the current environment.”

Matt Blomberg is a correspondent for the Thomson Reuters Foundation in Cambodia. matt.blomberg@thomsonreuters.com. The foundation, where this article first appeared, works to advance media freedom, foster more inclusive economies and promote human rights. (news.trust.org)
“What’s a Man?”
Masculinity in India and Beyond
An interview with Anand Giridharadas

What’s a Man? is the name of a 10-episode podcast series which aims to engage “public and compassionate conversations about what it means to be a man in India today.” Based on 200 in-depth interviews with middle- and upper-class boys and men, including those across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, the series explores men’s experiences at home, in school, at the office and exercising power and expressing love. The series was created and is hosted by Deepa Narayan, the eminent social scientist, former World Bank researcher, and author of a small library of books, including Voices of the Poor and Chup: Breaking The Silence About India’s Women.

What’s a Man? recognizes its limitations, noting that its “interviews focus on educated middle class educated men mostly from Delhi and Mumbai...” Narayan sees the podcast as an “ongoing research process that involves deep listening.” Like many in the gender equality movement, she recognizes the competing visions of masculinity at play today—the stubborn, authoritarian, seemingly invulnerable “strong man” versus the more sensitive, compassionate and introspective emerging new man. In the podcast excerpt below, she interviews the journalist and writer Anand Giridharadas, a former New York Times columnist and author of Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World and India Calling: An Intimate Portrait of a Nation’s Remaking, who is also her son-in-law.

DEEPA: There seems to be right now at least two competing visions of masculinity: one of the strong man or the alpha man, what used to be called the patriarch, and then there’s something else that’s emerging.

ANAND: This very confining alpha male definition to which so many men were subjected and what’s actually emerging are part of a multiplicity of ways of being a man, or just different ways of being a person. The rise of the LGBTQ community is the most visible expression of a bunch of people saying, “Hey, this definition you’ve got over here does not apply to me. The story you are telling is not my story...”

DEEPA: How is the total power and authority of a strong, tough man different from the new emerging forms of masculinity and power that you were talking about?

ANAND: The old model was based on a few things. There’s an aspect of this desire to dominate and compete and win. That is a very narrow understanding, but there’s a sense of the naturalness of this power distribution. That God wanted it this way. That men were made this way for a reason. It’s our job to lead or our job to be the providers. There’s also this notion of stewardship that that is a false notion, but a powerful one. Which is that others don’t need voice, and women don’t need voice, because we men are stewards of all. We’re not just taking care of ourselves. There’s this kind of false selflessness that you also see in philanthropy, where the power is upheld by this notion that the powerful are better caretakers of the powerless than the powerless would be for themselves.

DEEPA: One of the things you’ve written about recently is that to be a man is not to be a woman. Can you expand?

ANAND: It’s interesting how, when men steeped in this toxic model want to insult other men, some of the most common terms of abuse are simply to call other men a woman, or something feminine, or the body part of a woman. As though it is something so awful to be anything belonging to the feminine side...

You had Robert O’Neill, a Navy SEAL who claims he’s the guy who shot Osama bin Laden in May 2011. And on the domi-
nant, alpha male model that prevails in American life, certainly among people like the Navy SEALs, you’d think that shooting bin Laden in the face would be satisfying to a man like that. But it turns out Robert O’Neill—like so many men steeped in this alpha tradition—is a gaping hole of perceived weakness and fear. Robert O’Neill is so afraid of his own lack of vigor that he felt a need not only to get on a Delta flight a few months ago and refuse to wear a mask, but to take a selfie of himself not wearing a mask. In the selfie, there was another guy wearing a United States Marine Corps hat behind him, who was wearing a mask, an older man.

And O’Neill wrote, “I am not a pussy” in the tweet. It was just profoundly revealing. I almost felt for Robert O’Neill, for what a gaping hole he has in his body. Even after performing the ultimate alpha male act, in that somewhat cursed model of manhood that we’ve been talking about nothing’s ever enough, and you have to claim to the world that I am breaking a law. I’m breaking common sense. And I am not a woman. I am not a woman. I am not a woman. You have to keep repeating that to yourself and to the world simply to feel whole.

DEEPA: So it’s hiding a lot of insecurity and fear under the persona of being strong in this narrow sense of being an alpha macho male.

ANAND: Having met a lot of men in my life, I would say that they broadly fall into those two categories. I know a lot of Robert O’Neill men who basically cannot survive if they’re not reminding you that they’re not a woman every five minutes and who are basically paralyzed by fear. And then there are a lot of other men who are just out here living our lives.

DEEPA: What you’re describing is shared power, where men are not afraid to embrace a whole range of traits that are beyond what was allowed in an alpha male.

ANAND: The new model includes the old model as one of the possible ways of being. If you’re a president of a country, it’s totally fine to have a leadership drive. It’s totally fine to be a certain kind of alpha, but not the abusive kind of alpha, in certain contexts. What’s exciting about the new way is that it’s open to all the different ways of being a man. What was limiting about the old way was that it was only accepting of one way of being a man in a way that actually didn’t work for most men.

DEEPA: Do you think there’s a crisis in masculinity? Not just in the U.S. but in many parts of the world?

ANAND: Yes, but I think the crisis is not a crisis of a lack of change. It’s a crisis born out of change that is happening. It’s really important because when we think we’re in a crisis that grows out of things not changing enough, it’s very depressing and discouraging.

What’s actually happening is there is so much change in places like the United States and Europe, but there’s also change in India. A lot of the pushback you see and the thirst for a strong kind of a dictator daddy—strongmen rulers—is people who essentially see that broader change coming and don’t want to live in it. Backlash, you see, is just that—it’s backlash. It’s different from a failure to have progress. It is actually a measure of the fact that so much has changed. This is where there is a measure of failure for those of us who do want to live in the new world. I think we haven’t shown enough of those men that they will be okay in the next world. We have not taught enough of them how to be their new selves.

To learn more about the What’s a Man? podcast visit www.whatsaman.com.
The day things fell apart for us is a scar on my mind. Kathy and I were both quiet in my cousin’s car on the ride down to the Greyhound station. I sat in the back so I could be closer to our daughter. Her one-year-old face was shined with Vaseline and baby lotion and she giggled every time I said peekaboo. When we finally arrived at the station, Kathy lifted Krystasia out of the car seat while I grabbed my bags out of my cousin’s trunk. She was still in Kathy’s arms when the loading doors to the bus were closing and the driver said it was time to board.

“Say bye to your daddy, munchkin.”

We still weren’t sure when we would see each other again. I had accepted a basketball scholarship to a university in western New York called Saint Bonaventure. As a Canadian, not only would it take me away, to another country, but it would take me away from my family. Even at 19 years old, that word meant something to me. Family.

Krystasia jumped into my arms one last time. I held her as long as I could until I heard the Greyhound engine growl through the station. By the time I stepped on the bus, I had to hustle to my window seat to catch a glimpse of Kathy and Krystasia waving goodbye. I waved until the bus made its first turn out of the station and fought not to let tears slip down my cheeks. If I could’ve read the stories in those tears, I wouldn’t have fought them back at all. I would’ve let them flow freely because that was the moment—as the Greyhound headed toward the highway—that tore my relationship with Kathy apart.

We didn’t know it at the time, though. How could we? Just a couple of weeks earlier, we had celebrated Krystasia’s first birthday. We had a barbecue at the park and bought her a cake with her face on it. Actually, it wasn’t just her face; it was her whole body. The picture was taken when Krystasia was only six months old, dressed in a blue and white striped, armless shirt. All of our friends came to her party, dressed in basketball jerseys and jean shorts. We drank and smoked and bumped; our music way too loud. We had the best time.

Sitting on that bus, though, I realized that my tears were selfish. I worried about Krystasia forgetting me. I worried about not feeling like a father. What I didn’t consider was what my leaving did to Kathy. She lived with a freedom and confidence that made me fall in love and I didn’t think for a minute, not one minute, that me leaving would be a problem for her.

I ignored the reality that Kathy was only 18. Her brashness made me forget that she was a foot shorter than me and was now alone in the city with no mother and a rocky relationship with her father who years ago had thrown her out of his house.

It wasn’t until recently that I reflected on how she must have felt. Years later, I finally considered all the thoughts that must’ve been swirling through her mind as she smiled and waved goodbye to...
that bus. Sometimes I wonder—what was the first thing Kathy did when she left the station? Did she shed any tears? Hop back in my cousin’s car and have him drive her straight home? Did she think about her future? About our future?

Krystasia was probably fussy on the way back. Kathy probably sat with her in the backseat and gave her a bottle because she hadn’t eaten much that morning. While that bus was carrying me away to follow my dreams, Kathy’s fate was already written. There was no time for her to close her eyes and imagine what her life could be. She was a teenage mother. A mother without a partner physically present to give her the space she needed to let her mind wander, to dream her own dreams. Our daughter needed her.

I get it now. After all these years, I finally get it. I abandoned her. And I can reason that it was for a good cause—that I wanted to give my daughter a better life. That I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to play Division 1 college basketball and travel across America doing what I loved to do. I graduated with a degree in the field that’s now my career so all of it made sense, and it all worked out as planned. But it was my plan. My life. My dreams. Not hers.

It didn’t take long for things to fall apart.

In my absence, Kathy and I unraveled as quickly as we’d become infatuated. Krystasia was our only connection and even she couldn’t save us. We were together by title only. Any real affection we had for each other had evaporated, replaced with the weight of a crushing reality: we were just kids. We were also two different people trying to make a relationship work through conditions that would have strained even the most committed of mature couples. The odds were against us from the first time I touched Kathy’s stomach with Krystasia inside. It just took me leaving for us to finally concede.

I didn’t understand any of this back then. I couldn’t see past my growing resentment towards Kathy. She made me feel small and insignificant in my daughter’s life. As I write those words, I realize I felt all those emotions without her ever actually berating me. There were days in that dorm room I wish I told Kathy no. No, I don’t want you to have that baby. No, I won’t stay with you through all of this. No, I’m not ready to be a father.

I’d lay on my back and let my mind wander thinking about what my life could’ve been if I didn’t have a child. If I was a “normal” student with “normal” responsibilities, just enjoying being a teenager.

As much as I regret those thoughts today, they were real. Kathy hates me now and that’s okay. Sometimes I hate her, too. But I know that her initial sacrifice helped shape my life just like my sacrifice helped define hers. And now we’re here.

It’s years later and we’re separated by something far greater than distance. I’m not sure how Kathy actually feels about me. Sometimes I think she’s never gotten over me getting on that Greyhound, and that resentment has grown so wide it’s engulfed our daughter.

I was supposed to be Kathy’s rock. It was supposed to be my job to stay with her through everything we knew we’d go through once we agreed to not abort our child. All those promises, broken the moment I stepped on that bus. Kathy may not have been able to articulate it then but I know she felt abandoned. How could she have not?

But all I can do is assume. We haven’t exchanged words since that day at my daughter’s schoolyard five years ago. Haven’t exchanged glances since we sat in court and she agreed to give me full custody. We’ll probably never speak again.

And I’m okay with that, but what does it do to a child to lose her mother? And lose is a kind word. My daughter had been abandoned by her mother. It’s been her mother’s choice not to call, not to set up any time to visit, not to be part of her daughter’s life after helping to raise her for 13 years. And I don’t know why Kathy chose that moment to walk away. Why she chose to turn her back just as our daughter was beginning her transition into becoming a young woman. Maybe the universe has a tragic sense of humor.

For weeks after her abandonment, I watched how my daughter behaved. I tried to analyze her moods, gauge her actions, process every word that came out of her mouth to figure out how she was coping. Weeks turned to months, then months turned into years. I still checked in every so often to let my daughter know it was okay not to be okay. That being abandoned by her mother was a traumatic experience even though it may not feel like it in the moment.

But Krystasia is okay. Another assumption but it’s what I believe. It’s what she tells herself and has also made herself believe. In my heart, I think the day will come when she will acknowledge her emotions and face them head-on. I’ll be there that day, though it won’t be my battle.

My fight has been long—as long as those trips on the Greyhound. But there are many more miles to go. So many more…

Kern Carter is an author living in Toronto. Excerpted with permission from the short story series, My Failures as a Father. To read other stories, sign up to receive the writer’s Love and Literature newsletter at kerncarter.substack.com.
Daddyng

Crying: A Father’s Untapped Super Power

By Allan Shedlin

During one of our phone conversations from his college dorm room, my oldest grandson asked me how I managed to remain upbeat during these covidious times. I responded, “I laugh and cry almost every day.”

With some surprise, he asked, “You cry, Gramps?!”

I reminded him, as I had years earlier when he first heard me cry, that sometimes, when a moment of selfless generosity or sadness and pride collide, my emotions are triggered. And then tears flow, just as they had when he shaved his head in solidarity with his closest friend, who while undergoing chemo for brain cancer had lost his hair.

For me, crying is a sign of strength.

Of course, I realize this is in opposition to the generally accepted view of “manliness”—against the stereotype we perpetuate when our culture tells our sons, “Boys don’t cry.” I also realize that I would have responded with similar consternation if my grandfather had responded that way when I was a college student, a time when the armor males wear is approaching its thickest.

Although I see many signs that gender expectations, roles, and behaviors are in flux, and have been since the dawn of the women’s movement, we’ve still got a long way to go for boys and men not to feel that crying is a sign of weakness. I believe the “manly” gender armor we tend to saddle our boys with from their earliest days, shields them from the opportunity to develop more compassion.

As a student of child development, an educator, a dad, and for many years a granddad, I have observed that girls and boys come into this world with their emotional suitcases filled with a similar array of emotional clothes to dress themselves in. But long-established social mores tell both genders to unpack different emotional clothes, so they’ll look “right” and conform to prevailing expectations. Boys are more apt to be encouraged to unpack those items that cover up what are considered “softer” feelings.

Although not steady or dramatic, there are signs that a shift has been occurring in men’s willingness to shed some of their emotional armor. We have seen male sports stars shed tears during both sad and happy times. And we now have a president who has cried publicly on a variety of occasions.

Quantitative/clinical research on the biology of fatherhood, and my own qualitative research interviews with dads and granddads from 20 countries over the last quarter century, have taught me that the instant of the birth of one’s first child often provides the chink that breaks through the masculine armor that has formed throughout a boy’s life right up to the moment he becomes a father. Once that emotional armor is pierced, it tends to fall away. For some men, it shatters and comes crashing down, with accompanying tears that carry such unexpected force that they can feel disoriented. For others it is subtler but the emotion is always present.

Some men embrace emotional emancipation, and some are so surprised that they just don’t know how to handle it. Regardless of how it manifests, with their armor down, there is room for vulnerability, empathy, and compassion to enter, freeing up a direct route to a more open heart—a place where tears may flow unencumbered.

During 192 individual, in-depth interviews with fathers and grandfathers 16 to 104 years old, 100 percent of the men shared that becoming a dad enriched their lives—some sharing that with fatherhood came a kind of love they had never before experienced. For all the men, a tenderness was revealed that had a humanizing impact that—unbeknownst to most—had been there from the very beginning. If only they had been encouraged to unpack it from the emotional suitcase they had arrived with as infants.

Allan Shedlin has alternated between classroom service, policy development, and advising. After eight years as an elementary school principal, he founded and led the National Elementary School Center. In the 1980s, he began writing about education and parenting for major news outlets and education trade publications. In 2017, he founded the DADVocacy Consulting Group and in 2018 launched the DADDY Wishes Fund and Daddy Appleseed Fund. In 2019 he co-created and began co-facilitating the Armor Down/Daddy Up! and Mommy Up! programs. He is father of three, grandfather of five, and “bonus” father/grandfather to many.


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