Building a “Big Tent” Approach to Ending Men’s Violence
By Jackson Katz

Introduction
It is time we tried something new. Men’s violence against women, children, and other men has persisted at pandemic rates for far too long. This violence, in particular domestic and sexual violence, has destroyed too many families, torn away at the fabric of our communities, and absorbed a tremendous amount of precious resources. The time has come for people of all socioeconomic, ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds, as well as religious and political beliefs, to gather in solidarity to put an end to it.

Men’s violence takes many forms: coercion, threats, and physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. It includes domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, stalking, sex trafficking, and child sexual abuse. It also includes gay-bashing and other forms of violence not typically thought of as gender violence, such as same-sex bullying. The primary focus of this paper is men’s violence against women and children. But it should be noted that regardless of the sex of their victims, men commit the vast majority of acts of interpersonal violence. In addition, men and boys constitute the majority of victims of other men’s violence, especially in the categories of murder, attempted murder, assault, and aggravated assault.

Violence is not inherently part of being a man; men and boys are taught to use violence. In the 21st century, violence is still too often accepted, both implicitly and explicitly, as a means of resolving conflict, or establishing and maintaining control in interpersonal relationships. Despite the alarmingly high rates of men’s violence, however, we know that most men are not violent. But until now, the vast majority of men have remained silent about this violence. The time has come for us to reach that silent majority and to engage more men in efforts to end gender violence, not only because it is mostly men who are perpetrators, but also because most people in leadership positions are men.

This is a substantial task. Now more than ever, though, there is reason for optimism. In communities across the country and the world, ever larger numbers of men are developing initiatives to shift the social norms that jeopardize the health and safety of women and girls, as well as of boys and men.

Where we stand today
The multicultural battered women’s and rape crisis movements and their allies have accomplished a great deal over the past 30 years. In the United States, there is now an infrastructure of shelters and other support services for battered women and their children. Legal reforms have been enacted that increasingly prioritize victim safety. Thousands of law enforcement and court personnel are now receiving training on gender violence issues. Many school districts around the country include youth outreach and education on these issues. Public service campaigns in the broadcast and print media have helped raise public awareness about domestic violence.
However, despite these accomplishments, there has not been much discernible change in the rate of perpetration of gender violence. Each year in the United States, between one million and three million women are physically abused or raped by their intimate partners. And the problem is surfacing in younger and younger populations. One recent study found that one in five teen dating relationships contains some form of physical or sexual abuse, with males as perpetrators in the vast majority of cases.

There has been a significant amount of gender violence prevention work undertaken in the past two decades. However, most of it has focused on girls and women. They receive information on how to recognize warning signs of abusive relationships, to be aware of their surroundings at all times, and to be especially careful in situations where alcohol is present. This risk reduction approach is valuable because it educates girls and women about avoiding victimization. But it is not truly preventive because it does not address the root causes of the violence. In order for this to happen, the focus must shift to creating a social climate -- in male peer culture at every level -- in which the abuse of women is seen as completely unacceptable. Since violence is learned behavior, prevention strategies must teach boys and men how to be men in ways that do not involve physically, sexually, or emotionally abusing girls and women. This sounds straightforward enough, but rape and battering prevention programs that incorporate a focus on redefining masculine norms are still far from the educational mainstream.

Violence against women as a men’s issue
Currently, too many men view gender violence as primarily a women’s issue. For prevention approaches to succeed, gender violence must also be seen as a men’s issue. How do we promote this? One way is to make clear that in spite of the fact that a relatively small number of men have played a significant role in gender violence prevention efforts; men do have a very real stake in ending violence against women and girls.

After all, it is not as though men are not affected by men’s violence, and the gender roles that contribute to it. Many men have suffered directly as a result of violence done to them or to their female loved ones. Consider boys whose mothers have been murdered, or fathers whose daughters have been raped, or male partners of women who have been sexually harassed in the workplace. If only a small percentage of the many men who have been damaged by such violence become active in prevention work, social norms around gender violence would be radically changed.

Millions of women currently live with abuse, and many more live with the effects of past abuse. But virtually all women live daily with the threat of men’s violence. Women’s consciousness about the possibility of assault is so pervasive that many women take a series of precautions every day, often without even thinking about it. If men care deeply about women, and this threat of violence is a major concern to women, then it follows that men should do something to reduce this threat of violence.

The gender roles that condone men’s violence against women also encourage men to assert their masculinity in self-destructive ways. Young men, for example, often feel
pressure to prove their manhood by having multiple sexual partners or by abusing drugs and alcohol, while at the same time they are encouraged to view health-seeking behaviors as a sign of weakness.

**A big tent approach to ending men’s violence**

So what exactly can be done to increase the number of men doing gender violence prevention work? What specific strategies could motivate significantly greater numbers of men to join a growing “big tent” movement?

A big tent approach in spirit and practice involves expanding dramatically the numbers of individuals and groups who are working actively to eliminate gender violence. Of course for this approach to be sustainable, it must allow for many different voices to be heard. It requires the collective knowledge, desire, and skills of many groups and constituencies. It does not require one-size-fits-all thinking. For example, communities of color may have culturally specific needs and concerns that differ somewhat from those of the dominant culture. While the larger goal of ending men’s violence is shared by all under the big tent, strategies for achieving this will of necessity sometimes vary.

A big tent approach includes reaching out to organizations that have not yet addressed gender violence directly, but have worked in related fields. For example, there are many organizations fighting child abuse or youth violence, advocating for healthy families and communities, or supporting vulnerable women and men. These organizations have never been part of any comprehensive gender violence prevention effort. A big tent approach to gender violence prevention would include such organizations, because the issues they address are so closely connected to gender violence. Two case studies included in the longer version of this paper (available at [www.endabuse.org/bpi](http://www.endabuse.org/bpi)) give examples of organizations linking their related work to gender violence prevention. Prevention Institute uses research to show the multiple forms of violence in families and to argue for state policies and funding streams that reflect that reality. The Men as Partners case study shows how one program in South Africa links work to end men’s violence with efforts to prevent HIV/AIDS and promote sexual and reproductive health.

The big tent approach would also include a wide array of national and local organizations that value violence-free communities, but have not traditionally worked on issues closely connected to gender violence. This includes organizations representing schools, labor, business, the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender community, and a variety of political or religious affiliations. The labor case study in the longer paper illustrates the role men in the labor movement and corporate management can play in ending men’s violence. The case study on the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence provides strategies for educating leaders of faith-based institutions about sexual and domestic violence issues.

It is important in a big tent approach to engage men at different levels, through their personal commitments, organizational ties, and their roles in the broader political process. This requires better collaboration across government and community agencies, with service providers and civic leaders working together, for example, on common policy
goals to end men’s violence. At the individual level, men can work in their families to make it clear that abusive behavior is not welcome there. They can also use their interactions with boys and young men in other settings, such as schools, athletic teams, apprenticeships in the trades, and the military, to model respect for women and girls and challenge attitudes that contribute to violence.

Much of the work to create the big tent will happen at the organizational level. This work builds the capacity of institutions to more effectively deal with men’s violence and to ensure that men play a role in speaking out against violence. Work at this level helps establish gender violence as a public issue. The White Ribbon Campaign, described in a case study in the longer paper, uses schools, workplaces, and other organizations as venues for public education about the need for men to take a stand against gender violence. The case study on the Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities shows men successfully convincing business establishments and advertisers to remove violent images from local newspapers and billboards.

Organizations can also have a strong influence on the creation and enforcement of better policies to prevent gender violence. Policy work under the big tent includes advocating for better legislation to address men’s violence and ensuring that laws reflect the roles and responsibilities of men. Because men’s violence is not a stand-alone issue, policy efforts in related fields such as health, education, and labor can also be part of a national violence prevention effort.

**Challenges of a big tent approach**

It seems clear that for a big tent approach to succeed, we need to adopt a flexible and creative approach to increasing men’s participation, one that takes into account what will motivate men to act. Because most men are not violent, it is not useful to engage men in ending men’s violence by treating them as perpetrators or potential perpetrators. Instead, it makes sense to enlist men as bystanders who can do something to stop violence. Bystanders in this context are family members, friends, teammates, classmates, or colleagues. They are men who are imbedded in peer cultures with other men. As empowered bystanders, men can interrupt attitudes in other men that may lead to violence. They can respond to incidents of violence or harassment before, during, or after the fact. They can model healthy relationships and peaceful conflict resolution. This shift in focus from men as potential perpetrators to men as bystanders allows men who are not abusive to see a way that they can be part of the solution. It is more effective to appeal to men’s goodness, values, and self-interests than to use a language of blame.

Engaging more and more men through the big tent approach raises the question of how men and women can work together to end men’s violence. Men and women enter into these partnerships with different perspectives, each carrying the legacies that come from different experiences of power, privilege, vulnerability, and exclusion. Until recently, only a small number of men have been part of the struggle to end violence against women. And when men have been involved, it has not necessarily been for the same reasons as women. It is important to be aware that trust among men and women is not a given, nor is there inherently a shared understanding of the goals of the work. Yet, it is
critical that as men engage in this work, they respect women’s leadership in this area, and work with women to create complementary prevention and intervention strategies.

With such a wide array of groups engaged in this work at different levels under the big tent, there are bound to be differences of opinion on many issues, including the causes of gender violence. Problems may arise from the fact that individuals from different organizations or backgrounds may use very different language to talk about men’s violence and its causes. These are real challenges, but our differences are also part of the strength of the big tent approach. Men’s violence is a multi-faceted problem. Prevention of men’s violence requires a variety of perspectives and strategies. In order to fit diversity of opinion under the same tent, we must center the work where there is common ground. Coalition building involves finding overlapping interests, not creating alliances between fully compatible partners. Instead of focusing on the areas of potential conflict, the emphasis is on the points of agreement and shared objectives. If individuals and groups of men and women can agree that ending men’s violence is a necessary and urgent objective, then many other differences can be tabled – at least for the moment.

Conclusion
This paper lays out several arguments for why and how men must get involved in ending violence against women. Yet, in every approach there are tensions and possible contradictions. New participants in the big tent will bring new ideas and therefore new areas of potential conflict. These tensions are what keep the big tent approach vibrant and evolving.

Despite these challenges, organizations with differing views can and must find common ground on which to work together. If we really do want to reduce men’s violence, and the suffering it causes women, children, and men, then we have no other choice.

Below are a few questions for further discussion:

- How can men provide leadership in this area without usurping women’s leadership?
- How can we expand the number of men who, while not public leaders, can nonetheless see themselves as empowered bystanders who can confront abusive peers?
- How else can we bring into the big tent new and diverse constituencies of men and women, including men’s organizations not known for their advocacy around the issues of men’s violence?
- What are the costs and benefits of engaging new partners who might or might not have the depth of experience or the ideological affinities of the majority of women and men currently in the movement?
- What are some of the compromises necessary in order to broaden the coalition of stakeholders?

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