

***Gender Equitable Boys in a Gender Inequitable World:
Reflections from Qualitative Research and
Program Development with Young Men in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil***

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Introduction

In the last 20 years, important initiatives have sought to empower women and redress gender inequities. But many women's rights advocates have learned that improving the health and well-being of women generally requires engaging men (Green, Cohen & Belhadj-el Ghouayel, 1995; Helzner, 1996; AVSC International, 1997; Shepard, 1996). In many settings, women are asking for greater participation by men in reproductive, maternal and child health and in child care and other domestic tasks. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (ICPD) and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing provided a foundation for including men in efforts to improve the status of women. The ICPD Programme of Action seeks to "promote gender equality in all spheres of life, including family and community life, and to encourage and enable men to take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behavior and their social and family roles."

At the same time, there has been increased recognition of the cost to men of certain traditional aspects of masculinity -- their general lack of involvement in their children's lives, their higher rates of death by traffic accidents, suicide and violence than women, and their higher rates of alcohol and substance use than women (WHO, 1998; NSW Health, 1998; World Bank, 1993; Keijzer, 1995; Yunes & Rajs, 1994; Keys Young, 1997; Frydenberg, 1997; Manstead, 1998). There is a significant body of research showing that the way many men are socialized can have harmful consequences for their health (Barker, 2000). A national survey of adolescent males ages 15-19 in the U.S. found that beliefs about manhood emerged as the strongest predictor of risk-taking behaviors; young men who adhered to traditional views of manhood were more likely to report substance use, violence and delinquency and unsafe sexual practices (Courtenay, 1998).

How can some of the harmful aspects of certain traditional versions of masculinity be changed? How can we promote more gender equitable attitudes among young men? How can young men be encouraged to assume greater responsibility for reproductive and sexual health issues, to be more involved with children they father and to show greater respect in their relationships with women?

These are vital questions for improving the health and well-being of women and men. To offer one example, looking specifically at AIDS, there is increasing consensus that the behavior of some men -- particularly their lack of concern for their own and their partners' sexual health -- is largely driving the AIDS epidemic. While HIV infection among women is spreading more

rapidly than among men in some parts of the world, the number of HIV-infected men worldwide is greater. Young men are at particular risk: About one in four persons infected with HIV/AIDS worldwide is a young man under 25 (UNAIDS, 2000). Women are vulnerable to HIV infection from men because in many settings, men have a predominant role in deciding when and how to have sex and whether to use condoms (Rivers & Aggleton, 1999). For these reasons, UNAIDS has devoted the 2000-2001 World AIDS Campaign to men and boys.

In this context, the purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to offer insights from a qualitative study with a group of more “gender equitable” heterosexual young men in a low income setting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and (2) to consider the implications of this research for working with boys to promote gender equity, including increased attention to sexual and reproductive health.

It is important to study the socialization of boys in terms of their intimate relationships in part because there is compelling reason to believe that styles of interaction in intimate relationships are “rehearsed” during adolescence, providing a strong empirical and theoretical basis for working with young men in reproductive health issues, relationship needs and gender equity (Archer, 1984; Kindler, 1995; Erikson, 1968; Ross, 1994). Research with adolescent boys in various parts of the world suggests that viewing women as sexual objects, use of coercion to obtain sex and viewing sex from a performance-oriented perspective often begin in adolescence and may continue into adulthood (Jejeebhoy, 1996; Bledsoe & Cohen, 1993).

Finally, it is important to state from the beginning that promoting gender equity is not only about improving well-being of women and girls. While this is a central goal for promoting gender equity, being more gender equitable is also good for men. Being respectful and caring in one’s relationships with women or men, being involved in the lives of one’s children and not using violence toward a partner are all arguably positive influences in men’s lives. Thus, if it is good for women when men are more gender equitable, it is also good for men themselves when they interact with respect in their intimate relationships.²

Reflections on Existing Research on Adolescent Boys and Heterosexual Relationships

Most research on the sexual behavior of adolescent boys suggests that their behaviors are often not gender equitable, and that they generally do not pay adequate attention to sexual and reproductive health issues. There is a tremendous body of research on boys’ sexuality and intimate relationships which finds that boys frequently view sexual initiation and sexual activity as a competency or achievement rather than an opportunity for intimacy (Marsiglio, 1988). Some studies suggest that boys often present their sexual “conquests” to the male peer group and that the presentation of the conquest may be as important as the sexual relationship itself (Gorgen, Yansane, Marx & Millimounou, 1998). Studies from Latin America, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and North America suggest that alcohol and substance use are often part of the early and ongoing sexual activity of young men, and are sometimes associated with unsafe sexual practices and sexual coercion or violence (Im-em, 1998; WHO, 1997). Other studies have found that boys often categorize and objectify women, and may have little concern for the sexual desires of their female partners (Barker & Loewenstein, 1997). A number of researchers have concluded that the sexual behavior of boys is often genitally-focused and that other forms of sexual activity that do not include penetration may be seen as infantile, or may not be seen as sex

(Rivers & Aggleton, 1999). Some researchers have found that boys often possess little sense or knowledge of their own bodies, while they may pretend to know a lot about sex (Lundgren, 1999). Some studies also find that boys frequently delegate reproductive health concerns to women and view women as procreative, while not seeing themselves as procreative (Marsiglio, Hutchinson & Cohan, 1999). Boys often have limited self-care practices related to sexual and reproductive health, and often delegate reproductive health concerns to women (Ariha, 1998; Bang, Bang & Phirke, 1997). Other studies find that boys may use coercion or even violence to control relationships and obtain sex (Archer, 1994).

However, if both researchers and health and youth-serving professionals generally find examples of young men who act like this at least part of the time, these central tendencies do not speak for all boys. Much of the research and perspectives on adolescent boys have emerged from a deficit perspective. Research with boys has often focused on specific aspects of their behaviors and development -- particularly violence, delinquency, callous attitudes toward young women and unsafe sex practices -- criticizing and, in the case of delinquency, criminalizing their behavior without adequately understanding its context and roots. Adolescent sexual and reproductive health initiatives have, with reason, often worked to empower young women, offering them information and services that provide greater control over their sexuality and reproductive decisions. But these initiatives have not always adequately included adolescent men in promoting gender equity nor in providing adequately for the sexual health needs of boys themselves.

It is important to consider that not all boys act in the ways described above in their sexual relations with young women. While it may be the case that most boys are socialized to behave in callous or sexist ways with young women, some -- perhaps more than we think -- do not act in these ways, or do not act in these ways all the time. Research from Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Scotland, and other settings, has identified a minority of young men who show some degree of gender equity in their intimate and sexual interactions with young women (Necchi & Schufer, 1998; Barker & Loewenstein, 1997; Yon, Jimenez & Valverde, 1998; Wight, 1996). Most of these studies have only identified and described these gender-equitable young men. There is less research on how the socialization of these more gender equitable young men is different, and what insights their lives might offer us for encouraging gender equitable attitudes among young men.

Identifying and Interviewing More Gender-Equitable Boys: Purpose, Methods and Subjects

The two questions that oriented this study are: (1) How are these more gender-equitable young men different than their less gender-equitable peers?; and (2) What can we learn from their lives that might offer insights on how to encourage gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors among other young men? This study builds on a previous study in Rio de Janeiro (1994-1995) in which we interviewed 58 adolescent and young adult men ages 15-30 in focus group discussions. In each focus group, there were one or two young men who questioned the prevailing views that sex for men is seen as an uncontrollable urge, that violence against women was justifiable in cases of infidelity and the general lack of male involvement in reproductive health issues (Barker & Loewenstein, 1997). We subsequently carried out 8 individual interviews with these more gender equitable young men, nearly all of whom reported and

described in detail relationships or interactions with a relative or friend who modeled or supported non-traditional gender roles.

Building on this first study, in 1999, we started a one-year qualitative research project with a group of young men acting in ways that are more gender equitable than the prevailing norms in the community. A previous study in a low income setting in Chicago, USA, served to pilot-test the methodology and refine the concepts (Barker, 1998). The young men in Rio de Janeiro live in a low income, urban setting where the prevailing versions of masculinity are associated with limited male involvement in reproductive health, limited involvement by men in child care, a sense of male entitlement to sex from women and a fairly widespread tolerance of violence against women. In sum, these young men were largely socialized into and accept the hegemonic masculinity in Brazil that is characterized by the “activity” of men and the “passivity” of women, and the predominance of the sexual agency of men over the sexual agency of women (see Parker, 1991 & 1998).

Both in identifying and describing the young men interviewed in this study, we use the term “gender equitable” to refer to young men who:

- (1) Are respectful in their relationships with young women and currently seek relationships based on equality and intimacy rather than sexual conquest and believe that men and women have equal rights, and that women have as much sexual desire and “right” to sexual agency as do men.
- (2) Seek to be involved fathers, for those who are already fathers, meaning that they believe that they should take financial and at least some caregiving responsibility for their children. They have shown this involvement by providing at least some child care, showing concern for providing financially for the child, and/or take an active role in caring for their child’s health.
- (3) Assume some responsibility for reproductive health issues. This includes taking the initiative to discuss reproductive health concerns with their partner, using condoms or assisting their partner in acquiring or using a contraceptive method.
- (4) Do not use violence against women in their intimate relationships, and are opposed to violence against women. This may include young men who report having been violent toward a female partner in the past, but who currently believe that violence against women is not acceptable behavior, and who do not condone this behavior by other men.³

Few if any of the young men interviewed achieved all four of these characteristics all the time, if ever. But this research did identify an important minority of young men who at least part of the time demonstrated a higher degree of gender equitable behavior and attitudes in their interactions with young women than did most of their peers and adult men in the same setting. For most of the young men, it is more appropriate to consider them to be in transition in terms of gender roles rather than truly “gender equitable.” Furthermore, being more gender equitable is probably not a state or quality that young men achieve and then possess for the rest of their lives. The behavior of individuals is complex and contextual, changing over time and during different relationships. However, in the course of interactions with these young men over the course of a year, there was at least some consistency to their behavior and attitudes. Finally, while some of the young men interviewed reported having had sexual relationships with other men, all of the

young men interviewed identified themselves as heterosexual, and the research focused on their intimate relationships with women.

Research methods included observation and interaction with 25 young men ages 15-21 two days a week for one year; three formal focus group discussions and approximately 15 informal group discussions with young men, young women and adults in the community; a three-part life history interview with 9 boys; interviews with four family members who were willing to be interviewed; and approximately 15 key informant interviews in the community. Life history case studies were developed for nine of the young men. Because the definitions of gender equitable were being developed as the research progressed (and because we were also developing interventions for work with young men while study was going on), the research is an iterative, ethnographically-oriented qualitative study. As we will discuss further, emerging results are being used to develop and fine-tune programs for young men in two low income communities in Rio de Janeiro. While limited to only one year of observation and interaction, the research took a developmental, life-span perspective, accompanying the young men during the formation and dissolution of relationships, pregnancies (some terminated, some carried to term), entering the military or acquiring employment, and numerous individual crises and triumphs.

The 25 young men who form the larger group from which nine were chosen for individual interviews represent a self-selected group of young men in the community who were participating in a young men's discussion group on health and sexuality. From this group of 25, who are already slightly different in terms of gender norms by participating in the discussion group, we asked the group leaders to identify a number of young men who: (1) showed at least one or two of the criteria for being more "gender equitable" as described above; and/or (2) had a fairly significant history of relationships with young women (i.e. they had a relationship history to talk about in an interview setting). Nearly all of the young men in the larger group of 25 met these two criteria. Final selection of the nine young men within this group of 25 thus was partly convenience sampling, with a bias toward the young men who were slightly older (17 and up) because they had more life history to relate.

Mapping Masculinities in a *Favela* in Rio de Janeiro

The setting for this research is a *favela* (a low income urban setting) in Rio de Janeiro with a total population of about 160,000 persons, ranging from working class families with more adequate housing, to lower income areas with more precarious housing. The area is located near Rio's international airport and close to the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Because of its visibility and high degree of violence, this *favela* has been the site of various governmental initiatives in public housing, education and recreation. It is also the site of tremendous *comando* (armed, drug trafficking gangs that control specific territory) activity, with fighting between rival gangs causing an ongoing source of stress.

As in any setting, we observed and mapped a range of masculinities or categories of male identity, first exploring what categories the young men themselves used, which are as follows:

- *Bandidos or Gangsters*: Those involved in the drug trafficking *comandos* (rough equivalents to armed gangs in the U.S. setting) are commonly called *bandidos* (thieves or gangsters), and may

comprise up to a fifth of young men in the community (generally ages 15 and up). Involvement in the *comandos* can range from gun-carrying “soldiers” and “look-outs” to messengers, or “sales agents,” all of which imply different degrees of risk and use of violence.

- *Estudantes, or School Boys*: This refers to young men who are connected and engaged in the school system and find a positive and meaningful identity in the formal school setting. This *favela* has some young men who succeed educationally (complete secondary school) and are enrolled in various forms of secondary or tertiary education. These are probably less than a third of young men in the community.

- *Trabalhadores, or Hard Workers*. There are many young men who work full-time, or enrolled in vocational training programs of some kind and thus are seldom seen in the streets during the day, unless close to their place of employment. A sub-category of *trabalhadores* are called *biscateiros*, referring to young men who have irregular, short-term assignments and work.

- *Palhaços or Malandros (clown, goof off, con artist)*. This category refers to young men who “get by” by having a good sense of humor, by making others laugh, or by using their street smarts. They may also work part of the time, or also be students, but their identities are less defined by working or studying than they are by their personalities.

-- *Crentes, Evangelicos or “Religious Believers”*: These are young men involved in one of the evangelical religious groups in the community. Involvement in a religious group represents a way for previously gang-involved young men to get out of gangs (as it is one of the few “acceptable” reasons for leaving a gang). For other young men, in addition to its religious content and meaning, being part of these evangelical groups offers contacts to a network of individuals who informally assist in finding employment.

Young men in the *comandos* were described as being the extreme version of a traditional, callous and violent version of masculinity. Participating in a *comando* generally implies a version of masculinity characterized by: (1) using violence to achieve one’s goals, and a willingness to kill if necessary; (2) callous attitudes toward women, including the use of violence against women; and (3) an exaggerated conception of “male honor” that includes a propensity to use violence in minor altercations and insults. Young women who are romantically involved with young men who participate in *comandos* must be absolutely faithful, and even after breaking up with a *bandido* are not allowed to date anyone else in the *favela*. Transgressing these rules can result in forced expulsion from the community or in death. Some authors suggest that the version of masculinity reinforced by the *comandos* represents an extreme or exaggerated version of a prevailing hegemonic masculinity found in low and lower middle income settings in Brazil (Zaluar, 1994; Linhales Barker, 1994).

However, while there was a clearly defined category for at least some men who treat women in violent, sexist ways, there was not a clearly identified category for men who are more gender equitable. Some young women referred to more gender equitable young men simply as “good men.” Many of the more gender equitable young men described uncles, fathers or men they knew who they described as dedicated to their families, and sometimes called “good fathers”, but there was no clearly defined category of more gender equitable men as there were for the other categories.

Even among men who are not part of the *comandos*, key informants reported that there is a prevailing view among men in the community that reproductive health is a woman’s

responsibility, that men are allowed and expected to have occasional sexual partners while women must be faithful, that men's involvement in domestic tasks including child care was limited, and that many adult and young men tolerated and used violence against women, although not to the extent, they said, of men in the *comandos*. Men in the *comandos* were described as "beating their women like dolls", while many other men in the community were said to use violence "when the woman had done something to deserve it."

If these are the prevailing views of manhood, however, there are exceptions -- and these exceptions were the focus of our research. A few men in the community, including some of the young men interviewed, can be seen in public spaces taking care of young children. Young men interviewed reported fathers or uncles who went to great lengths to support their families and children, and to maintain ties with children even if they were not living the children's mother. A group of 10-15 men from the community have formed a men's discussion group that carries out community service activities. However, the majority of men in the community, based on interviews and limited observation, generally act in traditional, non-gender-equitable ways as previously described.

The 25 young men who had been participating in a young men's discussion group represent a group of young men who are not involved in the *comandos* (although many have brothers or other family members who are), not succeeding in school and generally not working full-time -- young men who seem in some ways to lack a place to fit. Some of the young men stand out in the community for the fact that they are vocal and visible -- composing rap that promotes peace instead of violence. The young men, while not involved with *comandos*, report that they have good relationships with the *comando*; it is dangerous to speak out openly against the *comando*.

The young men interviewed were almost all classmates, neighbors or friends. Nearly all characterize themselves as black or "Afro", referring to "Afro-brasileiro." Nearly all of these young men were studying at the primary level (up until 8th grade), and thus are generally several years behind their age-grade level; most have less than five years of formal education.

What Might Explain How Some Boys Become More Gender-Equitable?

In presenting our research results, it is important to recognize the limitations the study. Because there was no true comparison group, the more gender equitable young men are being compared to what we heard from key informants and young people interviewed about the common behaviors of men in this setting. Furthermore, the number of young men observed and interviewed are small for the purposes of generalization. The young men were deliberately chosen because they represent in some ways a small group of outliers ("positive deviants" some might call them) in the community. Their stories interested us precisely because they were different, but this fact limits our ability to generalize from their lives.

Analysis of transcribed interviews and group discussions focused on identifying factors at three levels -- the individual level, the family level and the wider social contextual setting -- that seem to have enabled these young men to acquire a more gender equitable male identity than the prevailing norms. Before reporting these findings, however, it is important to highlight some of the realities of the lives of these young men:

- **Low educational attainment:** For most of the young men, school lacks immediate relevance and most lack encouragement and role models for school completion in their home setting. Out of approximately 25 young men, 15 are still enrolled in school, and all have had at least one year of school repetition (failed at least one grade). There seems to be a normative pattern of school difficulties leading to at least one year of repetition during the 11-13 age range, when many of the young men began hanging out with their actual peer group. As a group, the young men are not strongly connected to school, but neither are they antagonistic toward school.

- **Family violence:** While families for these young men represent tremendous sources of strength and nurturing, they also present a combination of protection and exposure to gang-related violence, and are the settings for considerable interpersonal violence. The majority of young men reported incidents of men being violent toward women in their homes, some cases of women's retaliatory (but less physically threatening) violence toward men, and a few cases of having been victims of violence by a parent. For many of the incidents, the extended family intervened to offer some continuity of caregiving for the young men.

- **Community violence and the comandos:** Nearly all of the young men have extensive knowledge and interaction with *comandos*, and the violence carried out by the *comandos* is a constant factor in community life. During the course of one year, fighting between rival *comandos* broke out, leading to numerous deaths and police "occupation" of the community for short times; during one of the incidents, about half of the 25 young men went to stay with relatives in other communities. None of the young men are involved in the *comandos* (although at least three previously were) but all have friends, cousins, brothers and other family members who are. In terms of their interactions with the *comandos*, the young men describe the *comandos* as helpful, accessible, friendly and respectful toward those who respect them. Several of the young men describe moments of calling on members of the *comando* to resolve conflicts, particularly those involving domestic violence.

Because the *comandos* represent in some ways the most extreme or visible examples of a sexist, traditional view of masculinity, not being involved in the *comando* is in some way related or correlated to being more gender-equitable. Thus, part of the data analysis has focused on what factors seem to have enabled these young men to stay out of the *comandos* (and to be more gender-equitable). The young men interviewed -- reflecting their general high degree of self-reflection -- perceive the issue of subjective meaning given to one's life as a factor separating those in the *comandos* and those not in the *comandos*. Several of the young men said they had all the risk factors for becoming a member of the *comandos* -- for example, came from low income families and had brothers and other families members involved -- but were not involved. Being a younger sibling in a family where older members are involved in *comandos* seems to be one protective factor against *comando* involvement. After "losing" one son to the *comandos*, families sometimes worked harder to prevent another son from joining. Perceiving that one has other ways of coping -- mainly by being willing to call on others for help during a time of personal crisis -- seems to be another. Having a space to "think out loud" about why not to join a *comando*, as well as being able to express fear of the violence enacted by the *comandos*, also seem to be important. The ability of a young man's family to provide personal support to him during crises and to monitor his movements and his peer group were also crucial.

Many of the non-*comando*-involved young men also complained that boys in the *comandos* were able to “get” more girls, largely because they were seen as powerful and had access to money:

GB: Why do women like guys in the comando?

João⁴ (age 19, teen father): Because they have the best clothes. (A girl says): ‘Huh, I’m gonna go out with a guy without money? He doesn’t give me anything.’ But a gangster can give a motorcycle or whatever she wants because a gangster never goes without money But if a girl goes out with a hard worker, you know how it is, he’ll have a hard time finding a job and getting money. So girls prefer to go out with the gangster because it’s rare to find a girl (around here) who’s a hard worker. It’s hard to find that.

- **Employment:** For most of the young men interviewed, their definitions of manhood were related to working and being able to support a family and themselves. Only two or three of the approximately 25 young men were working full-time. Others previously had full- or part-time jobs but had been fired or laid off. Those who had not turned 18 and not presented themselves for military service cited that as one impediment to acquiring full-time employment.

Most of the young men were being supported by their families (extended or nuclear) and perceived themselves as having a limited adolescent moratorium before they had to start working full-time. Some young men felt intense pressure from their families to work. Other young men put pressure on themselves saying they wanted to work, but could not find anything. A few young men have as their occupational goal to become professional soccer players and spend much of their time practicing and playing on training clubs that are part of professional soccer teams in Brazil. Several of the young men are looking forward to military as a way to have stable employment.

- **Gender equity and views toward women.** The young men interviewed generally support or accept the hegemonic masculinity that male sexuality is “naturally” uncontrollable, that men are allowed and even expected to have sexual relationships outside their stable union or relationship (including formal unions, marriage and boyfriend-girlfriend relationships), and that men are allowed such sexual freedom while women are generally not. However, at least a few of the young men interviewed say they see mutual fidelity as “fair”, and said that they are currently trying to build intimate relationships based on mutual trust. (None seemed to support the possibility that both they and their female partner could have occasional partners.) These more gender equitable young men also questioned the lack of male involvement in reproductive health and child care, and generally did not support violence against women. Several of the young men are involved young fathers. One young man compared himself this way to other teen fathers in the community:

João (teen father, 19): there’s this guy who’s a friend of mine and he had a girlfriend and she got pregnant and he abandoned her when she was pregnant, and he never liked to work, and he doesn’t do anything, just takes from his mother. So his girlfriend had the baby and he doesn’t work at all. He doesn’t give anything to the baby, nothing for the girl, doesn’t want to work. My point of view is different. I think in working because I want to have a family, a really good

family. I want to be there when they need me, accepting my responsibilities. Even if I were to separate from the mother of my daughter and have another wife, I'm not gonna forget about my daughter. She'll always be first. But lots of young guys, they don't think about working, just think about stealing, using drugs, smoking. Here that's normal. But me, not me. I stay away from that, drugs and smoking and stuff. They can think I'm square, so I'll be square then.

After mapping the versions of masculinity present in the setting, we analyzed the discourses of nine young men who were interviewed three times individually in an attempt to identify factors at three levels that may explain how they acquired more gender equitable attitudes relative to their peers. From each of these factors, we developed or fine-tuned program interventions, as described in the final section.

a.) *Personal Variables/Individual Characteristics*

Boys with a greater ability to reflect about their past, to connect past and present, and to identify the costs of the prevailing version of masculinity seem more likely to be more gender equitable. In addition, to have been a victim of, witnessed, or even to have enacted male violence, and to have been able to reflect about the costs of that violence, and to express pain or remorse, was associated with achieving a more gender-equitable version of manhood. Some of the young men related stories of seeing men end up alone, or had themselves ended up alone, because of the double standard of men's occasional sexual partners:

Gustavo:...a lot of guys will have a have a girlfriend, then they'll go and cheat on her. So then later when they want to find a girlfriend, it'll be difficult. Because then the girls will think: 'Does this guy want to be with me and then he'll go with someone else?' So then girls don't want to go out with him. So then the guy will start to think and he'll go slow. He'll start going out with just one girl.

Similarly, another young men related:

GB: How is for men to be with just one woman?

Fernando: It's not easy.

GB: Like how?

Fernando: Like you'll have your girl, you know, who's your girlfriend, and then some girl will come up, like she's out to break you up, and I'll go out with her (the other girl) and my girl will find out. And she'll leave me, and then the other girl will leave you, too, so you end up all alone in space, just alone. Then you've screwed up. But men are f---- anyway. When that other girl gets your attention, you're gone and you know how it's gonna end.

GB: Has that happened to you before?

Fernando: Lots of times.

Another boy said:

GB: What do you look for in a girlfriend?

Murilo: Man, she has to be sincere with me and I'm going to be with her, if not, I won't be sincere with her.

GB: Are girls sincere?

Murilo: I don't think so, really if you think about it, it's our (men's) fault, it's our mistake because our girlfriend is there with us at a dance, and then we see then another girls shows up and then it's hard for us to turn (the other girl) her down and then we end up going with the other girl. And then, like she (our steady girlfriend) ends up facing that. So (when girls are not sincere) they're just giving us the other side of the same coin.

More gender equitable boys seem to have constructed a fairly coherent life narrative of themselves as different from most men around them. For most of the males interviewed in this study, this ability to reflect about life struggles, setbacks and tragedies, to give those struggles meaning, and to reflect about the kind of manhood presented to them emerged as an important factor in constructing a version of self as more gender equitable.

Said João: *"My father is one of those guys that you say okay, if you use drugs it's because of your parents. For me it's not your parents. It's the young person's own head. A teenager thinks for himself. They know what's good and what's bad. I make my own conclusions. Just because my father did this my father (used drugs), my brothers and sisters did. My mother did. My uncle too did it. If it were because of that, I'd be the biggest gangster in the neighborhood. And I'm not. All I want to do is work ... just have work.".....*

Many of the young men define themselves as wanting to be the opposite of their own fathers:

*"GB: Is there somebody in your family or somebody you know who you would say is a 'grand' (Miguel's word for men he respected) man, since you say it wasn't your father?
Miguel: ... It's from what I've been through, what I suffered with my father. (The father beat the mother and later abandoned the family.) I didn't value what he (my father) gave me. To be a grand man, that will be my son. In my house (he'll have) the best and good things. When I was little I didn't have good things or the best things, just the worst things. I went hungry. My mother drank. I was being shamed. Everybody made fun of me because of her (because she drank). That really hurt. Then I think of my father who wasn't a grand man. If he had stayed with my mother (instead of abandoning the family), she wouldn't have just given her life away. ... She felt like rejected (when my father left and I went to live on the streets), and she just hurt and kept drinking, until she was really bad off (and died shortly thereafter)...."*

Some of the young men were able to identify aspects of their personality -- for example, a volatile temper or lack of honesty in their intimate relationships -- that previously got them in trouble and were working to "reconstruct" themselves in different ways. Murilo, for example was able to reflect about his "former self" who he describes as "hot-headed", especially toward women authority figures:

Murilo: I've been expelled from three schools. And private schools on top of that. For that, I still regret it. If I hadn't been expelled from at least one of those, I'd be better off today. I'm not gonna do that anymore because I know I'll regret it afterwards, I know it will just make things worse for me. I've already had to regret things three times. It's okay to screw up three times, but the fourth time is just stupidity.

Finding a coherent identity by having a skill, competency or meaningful connection to a mainstream social institution also seems to be related to being more gender equitable. Boys who were strongly connected to school, excelled in some cultural competency such as dance or music, or were star soccer players, seem to have a greater freedom to explore gender equitable ideas. These other realms of competency seem to act to counter the social pressure to adhere to a traditional and callous version of masculinity.

b.) Family-Related Variables

Families that offered access to involved and nurturing male role models, or alternative gender role models, male or female, emerged as an important factor that may be related to achieving a more gender-equitable identity. One young man described himself as having been close to an uncle who was gay, apparently leading him to question some of his own prejudices toward gay men and to question his views about what was “acceptable” behavior for men in general:

Murilo: When my uncle was alive ... (I used to hang out with him a lot). He was gay, but that didn't bother me. I used to be in carnaval because of him. He was like the star of our samba school. And the last time I was in the carnaval (the year after the uncle was killed), I looked around and I didn't see my uncle and I started to cry right there in the middle of the parade. So then my friends made fun of me. Well, my real friends, they supported me. It was one or two guys who were ... making fun of me saying: 'Look at that, Leo is crying.' But I didn't worry about it.

Other more gender equitable young men described fathers, stepfathers, uncles, or men in their extended social setting who served as role models for a more gender equitable version of manhood. Having a family that reacted to male violence directly and openly, by expelling a violent father or stepfather, also seems to be a factor contributing to more gender equitable attitudes among young men. By intervening or acting to stop male violence against women, families apparently send important messages that such behavior by men is not acceptable. Mothers and grandmothers emerged as extremely important in intervening in male violence against women. Many of the young men pointed to their father's or stepfather's violence against their mother -- and the family's reaction to that violence -- as a reason they did not believe that violence against women was acceptable.

c.) Social Environmental Factors

The more gender-equitable young men come from the same social setting as the less gender equitable young men, and all of the young men accept to some degree the version of gender inequality presented and reinforced by the media, in public policy in Brazil and in their homes and communities. What apparently varies is how they as individuals and their families mediate this social setting, or sub-groups that they found or created within the broader setting, and the “bridges” or “buffers” that families are able to provide to the prevailing, traditional, machista and sometimes violent version of masculinity found in this setting. Belonging to or finding an alternative peer group (in this case supported by a social institution) that reinforced a more gender equitable version of masculinity seemed to be an important factor in assisting the boys in affirming their more gender equitable ideas. While the young men seem to have come to

the organized discussion group with some gender equitable tendencies, having this alternative peer group, and having a gender equitable male facilitator -- seem to provide an important space for some of the boys to affirm their more gender equitable attitudes without or with less ridicule and criticism from peers. Nonetheless, gender inequities at the macro level -- the level of public policies and the wider social setting -- must become the focus of attention if more young men are to become truly gender equitable in their behaviors and attitudes.

Finally, the research suggests that no single variable enabled any individual young man to achieve a more gender equitable identity. Instead, a combination of interacting variables over time, plus an individual's subjective meaning given to life experiences and setting, creates a pathway to a more gender equitable masculine identity. It is also important to note that none of the boys seemed to truly meet all four criteria for gender equitable as presented previously. None of the young men interviewed, for example, seemed to believe that women had all the same rights as men, particularly with regard to sexual agency. Nonetheless, the young men, while still having a way to go, seem to be moving closer to gender equitable attitudes in important ways.

Implications for Program Development, Educators and Counselors

As previously stated, these results must be interpreted as exploratory given the research methodology and the limited number of subjects. Nonetheless, the following are preliminary implications for programs that we are beginning to test with these and other young men:

1.) The need to promote the existence of more gender equitable men in the community. Even in settings where masculinity is associated with traditional, patriarchal attitudes toward women, there are role models present in such settings -- female and male -- who promote and create pathways to more gender equitable versions of masculinity for some young men. More gender equitable young men can themselves serve as role models for promoting gender equity among other young men.

2.) The need to encourage gender equity among young men in multiple sites and settings. This research confirms that families, girlfriends, community organizations, schools and adults in the community are all involved directly or indirectly in modeling or reinforcing ideas about gender and masculinities. For example, in one discussion group, the more gender equitable young men complained that young women preferred young men involved in *comandos* over "nice" guys or hard workers, thus indirectly reinforcing some of the machista views in the community. We subsequently engaged young women in a discussion with young men about gender roles and expectations. When possible, we have also tried to engage parents or other family members in discussions about their sons and about our work with them.

3.) The need to overcome institutional barriers to working with young men on issues related to sexuality, reproductive health and gender. In numerous interactions in the community we have encountered institutional resistance to working with young men, and preconceived notions of young men as disruptive or aggressive. In interactions in a public school in the community, we observed teachers' inclinations to expel boys who they perceived as potentially violent. We observed a nurse at a community public health clinic turn away a young man because he brought his dog to the clinic, rather than trying to negotiate with the young man. A community-based

NGO that initially collaborated with our work asked us to relocate our discussion groups three times because they believed that the young men were too disruptive and noisy. All of these examples confirm the need to work with social institutions to overcome their stereotypes about young men, and to understand the realities and needs of young men.

4.) *The need for group and individual activities that promote reflections about life histories and help young men perceive the costs of some traditional versions of masculinity.* The research confirmed that the majority of the young men had witnessed men's violence against women, and generally had interacted with non-gender equitable men. Many of the young men were interested in discussing life stresses they had faced -- many of them related to violence inflicted by males in the home or the public setting. Given that a high degree of self-reflection and an awareness of the costs of some masculinities emerged as an important factor that apparently contributed to gender equitable attitudes by some young men, we have tried to promote this self-reflection in group activities. One activity involves using a tape recorder and asking the young men to interview each other about difficult life events, and about the costs of masculinity that they may have perceived.

5.) *Offering young men opportunities to be mentored.* In group discussions, we have encouraged the young men to talk about men and women in their lives who they see as role models or mentors for them, and discussed the importance of such persons. We are starting a mentoring component in which adult men will act as mentors for some of the young men. We are also seeking to engage men from other communities and backgrounds, particularly men who can offer the young men access to settings to which they otherwise would not have access.

6.) *The need to provide connections to spaces where young men can learn new cultural and vocational skills.* In this low income setting, many young men gravitate to *comandos*, and/or to traditional versions of manhood in part because both of these provide clear and achievable identities. Many of the young men have had limited access to other skills, vocational and cultural, that allow them to acquire alternative identities. Helping the young men acquire vocational skills is important for their and their families' well-being but is also important in terms of helping the young men find meaningful, prosocial identities. Thus, we have offered skills training to the young men -- in one project consisting of a course in Afro-Brazilian dance and music, and in another in basic computer and graphic design skills.

Table 1 provides a summary of our initial efforts to apply and test these research implications to on an ongoing training course and group activities.

What can therapists, counselors and educators do to promote more gender-equitable attitudes by young men? First, this research confirms the importance of therapists, counselors and educators in viewing boys as having potential, rather than being seen as "walking deficits". It is interesting to note that the therapeutic process generally involves reflection about one's life history. Our work confirms the importance of this kind of reflection and including within it reflections about the "cost" of certain aspects of traditional masculinities. Counselors and educators can also be and help connect boys to more gender equitable role models and mentors, or help young men identify and value those gender equitable role models who they may already have.

First and foremost, though, educators and counselors can listen to boys, and encourage them to talk about issues that for many young men remain unspoken.⁵ Prevailing versions of manhood are often taken as a given. This research suggests that unless all of us involved in the socialization of boys believe that they can turn out otherwise, most young men will repeat these self-reinforcing models of manhood. Finally, the existence of these gender-equitable young men serves to overcome widely held myths that men are callous and predatory by nature, and can help convince mothers and fathers, health personnel, teachers and community leaders that young men are capable of being gender equitable when we encourage and support them in being so.

Table 1: Applying Research Findings to Program Development with Boys

Factors Associated with More Gender-Equitable Attitudes	Program Element Developed or Refined
1. Self-reflective abilities; seeing cost of traditional masculinities	1. Group discussions about life histories; helping boys see “costs” of traditional masculinities
2. Vocational and cultural competencies that buffer traditional masculinities	2. Afro-Brazilian dance course; computer training course; training course in health promotion for 40 boys
3. Availability of adult members offering alternative gender roles	3. Mentorship program; recruiting gender-equitable men from the community to support project
4. Family intervention or rejection of men’s domestic violence	4. Community awareness-raising about domestic violence targeting men and women
5. Alternative, more gender-equitable male peer group	5. Creating and encouraging group formation

AT THE MACRO/POLICY LEVEL: Promoting seminars and public awareness and forming alliances with like-minded organizations to promote gender equity in Brazil.

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ENDNOTES

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² For an interesting example of the “gains” to men when they adopt more gender equitable attitudes in their relationship, a video from a Mexican NGO called CORIAC, entitled “Que ganamos en cambiar?” (“What do we gain by changing?”) presents some interesting testimonials of men who have seen the benefit in their lives of being more respectful and gender equitable in their intimate and family relationships.

³These four criteria for “gender equitable” should be considered exploratory. They are based in part on what have been the stated goals of male involvement in reproductive health projects, and in part on what women say they “want” from men. Using these four criteria, a more detailed, exploratory rating scale was devised to rank the young men as high, medium or low on “gender equity.” The young men were then ranked using field notes and interview transcripts. The ranking scales focus on behaviors and attitudes with more weight given to the young men’s reported behavior. Interviews with family members, staff who work with the young men and personal observation were also used to assess the young men’s degree of “gender equitability”. A second reader is currently reading through the interview transcripts of some of the young men to provide an independent ranking of the young men.

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

⁵ Another way counselors and educators can assist young men is being attuned to issues that may get overlooked among boys, or issues that boys may have difficulty expressing. One boy interviewed in Chicago and one boy interviewed in Rio de Janeiro reported being sexually abused by a woman. In both cases, the perpetrator was a friend of the mother and in both cases, the young men had difficulty finding an adult (family member or professional) who viewed this as abuse, and indeed, who believed that a boy could be sexually abused by a woman.