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Future perspectives on the promotion of gender equality:
through the eyes of young women and men

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Boys, Young Men and Gender Equality

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Boys and young men are unavoidably involved in gender issues. While the term 'gender' is used often as code for women and girls, gender relations shape boys' and men's lives just as much as those of girls and women. The lives of boys and young men are structured by intersecting constructions of gender and other forms of social differentiation such as class, race and sexuality.

Certain forms of gender and sexuality are dominant (culturally celebrated and socially sanctioned) in any context, while other forms are stigmatized, silenced or punished. Boys and young men may live up to dominant forms of masculinity and heterosexuality or may resist and reject them, and they do either in the shadow of collectively structured gender relations (in peer interactions, school cultures and other social institutions) and discourses of gender (in media and popular culture). Constructions of gender vary among boys and young men in different cultures and countries. At the same time, there are themes that appear again and again in the lives of boys in diverse contexts.

For boys and young men, one of the most significant influences on their social and sexual interactions is male-male competition, surveillance and discipline. Many boys experience the pressure to prove themselves amongst other boys (and to a lesser extent with girls). Boys can gain status among male peers by demonstrating their prowess in stereotypically masculine traits and pursuits, such as toughness and interpersonal dominance, sporting ability and physical skill, heterosexual sexual achievement and popularity, and humour and banter. Boys' need to prove themselves as male is shaped in part by the discrepancy between the traits associated with being young (dependent, weak and frightened) and those associated with being male (independent, strong and brave) (Lloyd 1997, p. 37).

Boys' lives at school involve a constant watching of themselves and others, an intense gendered and sexual surveillance. Boys who are perceived as 'sissies', 'wimps' or 'girlish' are punished and ridiculed. Male peer groups involve both pleasures and perils, and this same compulsory and competitive proving of one's masculinity can make them a lonely and unsupportive place (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Sharpe 1994, p. 14).

Research among young men finds "a picture of complex inner-dramas of individual insecurity and low self-esteem" (Mac an Ghaill 1994, p. 102). Many feel shy, inadequate and unable to cope with demands of initiating and maintaining a relationship, and feel under enormous pressure from their peers (Wight 1994, p. 717). A central dichotomy in many young men's lives is between their projection of a public confident masculinity and their experience of private anxieties and insecurities (Mac an Ghaill 1994, p. 99).

When it comes to issues of sexuality and relationships, boys often distance themselves through boasting, sexual insults, silence or most commonly, jokes (Wight 1994, p. 718). Boys are less likely than girls to rely on parents and teachers for information about sex and relationships, and more likely to rely on friends and television. Pornography is an important influence on boys' and young men's understandings of sexuality, and the rapid growth of the internet is

likely to increase its presence (Flood and Hamilton 2003). Boys' cultures often involve an ambivalence towards girls. On the one hand, boys show contempt for femaleness and the stereotypical qualities of femininity, and conflate feminine behaviour with homosexuality (Mac an Ghaill 1994, p. 164). On the other hand, girls are objects of sexual desire, fascination and even obsession.

Boys and young men experience pressure to gain sexual experience, as a marker of masculine status. There is pressure to have sex, from male friends, older brothers, occasionally fathers' banter, and the mass media. There is a sexual double standard, in which boys who are sexually active are judged in positive ways while girls seen to be sexually active are subject to negative labels and sanctions.

Boys learn to be stoic and inexpressive, becoming both emotionally incompetent and emotionally constipated (Doyle 1989, p. 158). As a result, in heterosexual relationships men often rely on women's emotional work (Strazdins & Broom 2004) and are more dependent than women on their intimate partners for their emotional support. However, there is evidence of a convergence in teenage boys' and girls' understandings of and reasons for having sex.

Typical constructions of masculinity and sexuality, as well as gendered power relations, also feed into some young men's practice of sexual violence. Men who identify with traditional images of masculinity, have hostile and negative sexual attitudes towards women, see violence as manly and desirable, and believe in rape stereotypes are more likely to be sexually aggressive, sexually harassing and physically violent to women (Heise 1998, pp. 277-278; O'Neil and Harway 1997, p. 192).

Homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality, exerts a fundamental influence on boys' lives and especially on male-male relations. Growing up, males are faced with the continual threat of being seen as gay and the continuous challenge of proving that they are not gay. Homophobia leads males to limit their close friendships with other males, to behave in hypermasculine and aggressive ways and to close up emotionally (Flood 1997). Homosexuality is perceived as gender betrayal, while deviation from dominant masculinity is perceived to be homosexual.

While I have identified a series of gendered and sexual patterns in boys' and young men's lives, it is critical to note also the fact of diversities among boys. In schools and other contexts, typically there are multiple and contradictory masculinities and different male peer groups with different masculine subjectivities and practices. Other forms of social differentiation such as class, race and ethnicity also structure boys' and young men's gender and sexual relations.

Towards gender equality

Intervening early

In building gender equality, there are three reasons to intervene early in the lives of boys and men: (1) Boys are already learning gender and participating in gender relations; (2) Boys develop patterns of behaviour during adolescence – whether positive or negative – that persist in adulthood; and (3) Boys have their own gender-related needs that deserve support.

First, boys and young men participate in gender relations throughout their lives. Whether boys behave and think in gender-equitable or inequitable ways, their everyday behaviours and understandings have an impact on girls and other boys. Second, we must 'teach early and teach often' in order to build gender equality. In relation to violence for example, early intervention is important because adolescence is a crucial period of development for men's (and women's) formation of healthy, non-violent relationships later in life. In relation to safer sex, the evidence is that if boys can learn to practice safer sex they often carry this behaviour through into adulthood (Sonenstein *et al.* 1997). Styles of interaction in intimate relationships are 'rehearsed' during adolescence (Barker 2000, pp. 264-265) and influencing this at this stage has long-lasting impacts. Third, boys' own needs must be addressed. Among males, often it is boys and young men who are most at risk of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and of being subjected to violence (Barker 2003, pp. 1-2).

Young men and feminism

Young men in general are less supportive of gender equality than young women. For example, 37 per cent of Australian young men aged 12 to 20 agree that "Men should take control in relationships and be head of the household", compared to 12 per cent of young women (NCP 2001, p. 74). Research across a range of countries among students in their final year of high school or first year of university/college finds a consistent gender gap in attitudes towards sharing housework, a pregnant woman's right to choose an abortion, the acceptability of pornography and the relevance of feminism (Bulbeck 2004). The following chart shows agreement with the statement, "Feminism is relevant to me personally"
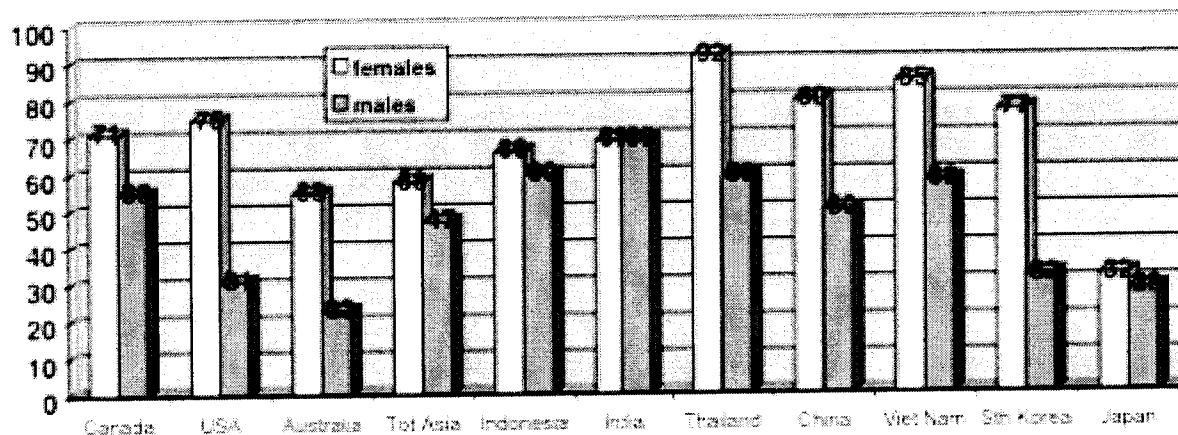
Not surprisingly, young women find feminism more relevant than young men do. At the same time, there is significant variation both in this gender gap and in young men's overall levels of support for feminism.

Most young women agree with statements or claims which express typical feminist beliefs, at least from studies in Australia. They have confident expectations of gender equality. At the same time, many reject the identity or label "feminist". (Trioli 1996, pp. 49-50). Some have been persuaded by media stereotypes of feminism as anti-male or as about being a victim (Trioli 1996, p. 50; Hogeland 1994, p. 18). Fear of feminism is fuelled by homophobia and the false equation of feminism and lesbianism, a rejection of and disinterest in the political and reluctance to take on a public political stance, fear of complexity and thinking, and

reluctance to explore one's own position in multiple and overlapping systems of domination (Hogeland 1994, p. 21; Trioli 1996, pp. 58-59). In addition, young women may have experienced relatively little overt or firsthand discrimination (Hogeland 1994, p. 20).

Like young women, many young men support basic ideals of gender equality and yet reject the labels 'feminist' or 'profeminist'. Men's discomfort about or hostility towards feminism is fuelled by many of the same factors as women's, but also above all by feminism's challenge to sexism and male power and the unease and defensiveness this can generate.

Better attitudes

Boys and young men have better attitudes to gender equality than older generations of men. American survey data shows that both women's and men's attitudes towards gender equality have improved over the past 30 years, although men's have changed more slowly and as a result the gap between women's and men's attitudes has widened (Ciabattari 2001, pp. 574-575). Improvement in men's attitudes reflects two processes. First, as individual males' attitudes improve, the attitudes of cohorts of men improve over time. Second, younger generations of men have less conservative attitudes than older generations. American men have become less conservative about women's roles since 1970s, both because younger generations are less conservative and because all cohorts have become less conservative over time. For example, in the 1970s 34 per cent of pre-baby boom men (born 1925 to 1944) agreed that "Women should run their homes and leave running the country to men", but by the 1990s this had declined to 20 per cent, and only 12 per cent of post-baby boom men (born 1965 to 1980) agreed (Ciabattari 2001, p. 583). Boys and young men have more progressive attitudes to gender because they are growing up in the wake and presence of feminism and other social changes.

There are further signs of progress in men's attitudes towards specific gender-related issues such as fathering. Men are paying increased attention to the quality of their fathering. Australian surveys conducted in 1983 and 1999 show that fathers in the later survey placed less emphasis on their role as breadwinners and more emphasis on their role as providers of emotional support to their children (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 32-33). However, the culture of fatherhood has changed much faster than the conduct in Australia. There has been virtually no change in the gender division of child care in couple households over 1986 to 1997 (Baxter 2002, pp. 409-410), and many young men continue to expect that child care will be primarily their partners' responsibility (NCP 2001, p. 74; White 2003).

We should not assume that boys and young men always have more progressive attitudes than older men. On violence for example, a national survey in 1995 showed few differences between men aged 18 to 34 and older men in their agreement with myths about domestic violence or perceptions about its seriousness (Office of the Status of Women 1995). A recent Australian survey of 5,000 youth aged 12 to 20 found that younger boys aged 12 to 14 showed *higher* support for violence-supportive attitudes than older boys (NCP 2001, pp. 75-95). One in seven young males agreed with the statements that "It's okay for a boy to make a girl have sex with him if she has flirted with him or led him on" and "It is okay to put pressure on a girl to have sex but not to physically force her" (NCP 2001, pp. 64-70).

Significant pockets of resistance remain among boys and young men to gender equality, just as they do among older men (Ciabattari 2001, p. 576). There has been more progress on

some issues such as women's participation in paid work than on others such as interpersonal violence or domestic inequalities.

Boys' relationships to gender equality are shaped in powerful ways by the *collective* dimensions of their lives and particularly the influence of male peer groups. British and Australian research has documented diverse sub-cultures and identities among boys in schools (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003). Scottish research found that young men in male-only peer groups espoused norms of a predatory male sexuality and sexual double standard, while in mixed-sex groups these were largely absent and the men expressed ideals of companionate relationships (Wight 1996). Mac an Ghaill (2000, p. 205) documents that while some young men cultivate females' attraction through their consumption of fashionable clothes, hairstyles and music and display their competence at forming heterosexual relationships, other young men celebrate a sexual prowess based instead on "extreme perversity, violent misogyny, and a racialized sexuality". At the interpersonal level, an important predictor of violence against women by young men is attachment to male peers who encourage and legitimate woman abuse (Heise 1998, pp. 271-277). Whatever kinds of interventions are adopted among boys and young men, they must engage with the diverse gendered cultures in which boys live.

Young male advocates for gender equality

Across the world, small numbers of young men have become public advocates for gender equality. Young men have joined men's groups focused on stopping violence against women (Flood 2001, 2005) while others advocate for gender equity in their schools and communities. How do they come to such commitments? Some Brazilian young men questioned prevailing gender injustices because of relationships with a relative, family friend or other person who modeled non-traditional gender roles, membership of an alternative peer group with more gender-equitable norms, and their own self-reflection (Barker 2001, p. 96). Canadian young men who joined in gender equity work had been inspired by intellectual engagement with feminist ideas and teachers, a sense that gender equity is 'right' or 'fair', and seeing or learning of the effects of violence or abuse on female family members (Coulter 2003, pp. 137-140).

Engaging boys and young men

After three decades of gender-aware work with boys and young men, we know something of what works and what does not. I focus my remarks here on work regarding violence and regarding sexual and reproductive health.

We know for example that well-designed education programs can produce lasting change in the attitudes, values and behaviours associated with violence against women (Flood 2004c). Effective violence prevention programs have four key features. Effective prevention programs are *comprehensive*, in that they address and involve all relevant community members and systems (Berkowitz 2001, p. 78). Effective programs are *intensive*, in that they offer learning opportunities that are interactive, involve active participation, are sustained over time and have multiple points of contact with reinforcing messages (Berkowitz 2004b, p. 1). Effective programs are *relevant to the audience*. They are tailored to the characteristics of the participants and acknowledge the special needs and concerns of particular communities. They focus on peer-related variables, use peers in leadership roles and

emphasize the relationship of sexual assault to other issues (Berkowitz 2001, p. 82). Finally, effective programs offer *positive messages* which build on boys' and men's values and predisposition to act in a positive manner. They document and reinforce healthy behaviors and norms and encourage individuals to focus on what they can do, not on what they should not do (Berkowitz 2001, pp. 82-83).

We know that comprehensive school-based programs are most effective when they are grounded in partnerships between schools, parents, youth and community organisations (Berkowitz *et al.* 2003). We know too that a range of other strategies are useful. Community outreach strategies aim to reach young men in the places where they congregate. Other efforts are targeted at the workplaces in which young men are the majority, or work through youth centres, Boy Scout Associations and sports associations. Social marketing strategies are necessary to shift cultural norms. For example, campaigns focused on condom use have been used at the sporting and entertainment events which attract young men. Peer education programs train young men to reach their peers with information and referral (UNFPA 2000, pp. 139-162).

There are five key challenges in the project of involving boys and young men in work towards gender equality. The overarching challenge is to both engage with and reconstruct boys and men and masculine cultures. Efforts to reach males must negotiate a tension between two necessary elements: between speaking to men in ways which engage with the realities of their lives on the one hand, and transforming the patriarchal power relations and gendered discourses which are the fabric of those same lives on the other. For example, Australian community education campaigns have drawn on masculine sports in trying to educate men about violence against women, negotiating this balancing act between complicity and challenge (Flood 2002-2003).

Second, we must articulate a vision for boys' and men's involvement in gender equality without buying into or being thwarted by simplistic notions of male disadvantage. In the context of an increasingly vocal backlash to feminism centred on claims of male victimisation (Flood 2004d), giving public attention to boys or men and gender risks fuelling this movement.

Related to this, we must work to minimize boys' and men's reactions of defensiveness and hostility. Many already feel defensive and blamed about gender issues, and defensive reactions are common among men attending gender workshops. Useful strategies include approaching males as partners in solving the problem rather than as perpetrators of the problem (Berkowitz 2004a, p. 3), addressing boys as bystanders to other boys' sexism or violence, creating safe and non-judgmental environments for open discussion and dialogue, using male facilitators, and acknowledging boys' and men's own victimisation (Flood 2002-2003, p. 30).

Fourth, work with boys and young men must undermine powerful constructions of masculinity and sexuality which support violence against women and increase the risks to females' and males' reproductive health. These include the notion of an uncontrollable male 'sex drive', victim-blaming, women as the guardians of sexual safety, the idea that women 'ask to' or 'deserve' to be raped or beaten, the normalization of forced sex, and the sexual double standard. And we must replace these with norms of gender equality and sexual respect.

Fifth, we must intervene in the male peer groups, gangs and sub-cultures that foster sexism and violence against women (Flood 2002-2003, pp. 29-30). One of the most promising strategies here is peer education. For example, in an action-research project in low-income settings in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, young men who questioned prevailing violence-supportive views were trained as peer educators to foster gender-equitable relations in their communities (Barker 2001).

While addressing such challenges in work with boys and young men is important, what is required most is the expansion of this work. The rationale for involving boys and men in work towards gender equality has been well articulated (Expert Group 2003; Flood 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). And key educational and organizational strategies are increasingly well documented (Family Violence Prevention Fund 2003, 2004; Instituto Promundo 2002). But what is needed above all is the widespread adoption of this work, and this requires funding, institutionalization, and policy and professional development.

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