

Activating boys to reflect on masculinity norms: the Dutch campaign *Beat the Macho*

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Traditional norms of masculinity can lead to many problems in society for both men and women. In his book *Real Boys* (1998) psychologist William Pollack argues

that masculinity norms emphasizing stoicism have harmful consequences for boys growing up, such as depression, anger and aggression, and the risk of suicide. Other studies reveal that masculinity norms negatively effect the development, health and wellbeing of boys (Barker, 2000; Connell, 1995; Jackson, 2002; Smith, 2003) and the quality of friendships and romantic relationships (Connell, 1995; Kroeper, Sanchez & Himmelstein, 2013; Pollack, 1998). Moreover, men with hostile, suspicious and dominating attitudes towards women are more prone to commit physical and sexual violence against women (e.g. Hines, 2007; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995; Ward & Beech, 2006). Reason enough for the Dutch Ministry of Emancipation to finance a pilot project aimed at changing traditional norms of masculinity amongst boys, the campaign *Beat the Macho*.

Methods

Development of the Campaign Beat the Macho

The campaign *Beat the Macho* was built upon four key elements of successful programmes aimed at transforming inequitable gender norms (Pulerwitz, Michaelis, Verma, & Weiss, 2010). Pulerwitz et al.

concluded in their review that engaging men to think critically about gender inequality is the first key element, for instance by using group education sessions and social marketing campaigns to prompt men to reflect on how gender inequality plays out in their own lives. Secondly, a focus on younger men is most effective. Adolescence is a time when gender role differentials start to widen, creating advantages and vulnerabilities for young men. Interventions that reach young men can provide a counterbalance to peer pressure. Thirdly, a combination of interactive, small-group, male-only education sessions and community-based activities (e.g. a social marketing campaign) appears to be the most effective strategy. Fourthly, media can play a big role in social change, for instance addressing gender inequity in soap operas and radio shows.

The campaign *Beat the Macho* contained three phases:

1. In seven towns workshops were held with adolescent boys between 14 and 20 years old. Mostly male trainers worked with seventy boys on the issue of masculinities using gender transformative methods. The trainers received a training manual and a two-day course. After exploring their concepts of masculinities, boys were asked to recount situations in which they felt pressured to conform to specific male gender norms. Together the group of boys concluded on a collective storyline that represented the experiences of many of them. This led to seven storyboards that formed the starting point for the next phase.

2. The storyboards were transformed into comics and posted online. Popular online YouTube artists ('vloggers') asked boys to visit the internet page and comment on the comics, and to make suggestions

how to solve the situation in the comic appropriately. Almost 7000 boys commented on the comics. They also voted which comic was most relevant to their lives.

3. The content of these online discussions formed the basis for a hip-hop song, made by two popular Dutch artists. The song 'Luister naar jezelf' (Listen to yourself) was posted online and boys were asked to submit a short clip of themselves singing part of the song, to be included in the final video. The final song and video were also posted online and received media coverage via popular radio shows. Some groups of boys were so enthusiastic that they made a song of their own and performed it at a local festival.

Research design

The research had two aims. Firstly we wanted to gain insight into the lived realities of boys when it comes to masculinity norms: how do they experience masculinities, what are their experiences with social pressure and how do boys cope with this pressure? Secondly we wanted to look at the process of gender transformative work: do boys open up to

it, under what circumstances does it work for them, what can we achieve with it? Five different research methods were used: (1) participatory observation during the workshops, (2) semi structured interviews with the trainers, (3) content analysis of the storyboards, (4) thematic analysis of the comments online on the storyboards and (5) retrospective interviews with boys who participated in the campaign.

Results

Boys and masculinity norms

The aforementioned research methods allowed us to identify key overarching experiences of boys with masculinity norms. In most groups the boys recognized the theme 'social norms to behave like a real man' immediately. The workshops contained different methods to explore the concept of masculinity. For example boys were asked to make a sequence of photographs of different men, lining them up from very masculine to not so masculine. The explanations about their choices clarified their

Table 1

Key elements of masculinity for the participating boys with negative and positive forms of expression

Negative (for self or others)	Aspect of masculinity	Positive (for self or others)
Bragging, bluffing, lying, not coping with losing	Wanting to win	Winner's mentality, perseverance, guts, wanting to excel
Mobbing, wanting too much attention, vanity	Seeking attention	Being funny, an entertainer
Peer pressure, rearing, being bossy	Dare to be yourself	Being sincere, having the guts to be different
Being a player, chasing women, having to have a big car	Acquire social position	Looking after your girlfriend and your family
Indifference towards school, nonchalance	Performance	Respect for craftsmanship, men who are successful in what they do
Negative self-image because you have a migrant background or are discriminated against	Perseverance	Respect for men who overcome setbacks, like successful football players who grew up in slums
Anti-social behaviour, aggression, intimidating others	Autonomy	Enjoying life and making others enjoy it too; don't bother, just do your own thing
Fighting against somebody or something	Fighting spirit	Fighting for an ideal, a dream

concepts of masculinity. In some subgroups the photograph of a man carrying his child was on top, as fatherhood was seen as the ultimate form of masculinity. Others preferred football players that performed very well, stating they showed perseverance. Nelson Mandela was a popular role model as well; boys stated he had the guts to stand up against the regime. During the workshops boys showed positive and negative feelings towards the concept of masculinity. Many opinions reflect two sides of the same coin. 'Having guts' for instance is highly appreciated, but bragging is not appreciated at all. Both behaviours are connected to a characteristic that is viewed by boys as typical masculine: a winner's mentality. Table 1 displays the key aspects of masculinity for the participating boys, and their negative and positive forms of expression.

After their reflection on masculinities boys were invited to come up with their own life experiences with social norms of masculinity. The participants expressed many occasions in which they felt pressured into doing things they did not feel comfortable with. Their stories can be clustered in two themes: (1) peer pressure to cross boundaries and join activities such as stealing, mobbing, fighting, using drugs and alcohol and harassing girls and (2) fear to be rejected for exhibiting gender non-conforming behaviour, for instance by not wearing the right clothes, not liking football or R&B music, not being assertive. The seven storyboards the boys developed collectively combined their own stories to

a story they could all identify with.

After the seven scenarios were posted online most boys advised the main character in the scenario that either he should have the guts to do his own thing or he should point out to his peers to behave themselves (with remarks like 'get a grip on yourself' and 'are you crazy?'). A smaller group reacted to the social pressure on the main character by saying he should comply with his peers, act out in an aggressive way or outdo the others. The third smallest category contained reactions that served to establish the masculine status of the respondent, by displaying dirty language and jokes, suggesting they did not take the scenarios seriously but felt a need to express that nonetheless. Boys were asked to vote which scenario was most relevant to their lives. The two scenarios about girls were chosen most (together 66% of the votes).

Gender transformative work

With regard to the second research aim, the workshops illuminate the conditions needed to create a safe space for boys to reflect on masculinities. Peer pressure amongst boys remained an obstacle for an open exchange of experiences. If the atmosphere was not safe, boys easily slipped back to performing macho behaviour, making jokes and showing off, to ensure their social position in the group. This was contra-productive in the process of reflection and transforming gender norms. The traditional norms of masculinity were confirmed,

Table 2

Content of the seven storyboards

Peer pressure	Rejection because of gender non-conform behaviour
Your friends challenge you to touch the breasts of a girl who is dancing in front of you	Your friend is laughed at because he is afraid of dogs
You are with your girlfriend and your friends ask you to come to hang out together	You are laughed at because you like ballet
Your friends pressure you to rob a shop together	
Your friends are about to beat somebody up	
Your friends steal something from the shop	

weakness was punished, and homosexuality was taboo. This happened for instance during a workshop when one of the boys explained his attitude towards homosexuality. He said everybody has the right to be who he is, but he did not feel comfortable with men displaying explicitly that they were gay, such as an actor in a well-known TV 'soap opera'. The other boys laughed at him for watching soap television and called him a 'faggot'.

The competences of the trainers are absolutely crucial. Important elements are the use of humour, being authentic, playful, taking the boys seriously and daring to show their own vulnerability. Although there were also good workshops led by a combination of male and female trainers, the participants spoke out more openly when the trainers were male. Male trainers could open up the discussion by using examples from their own experience. Other conditions for safe spaces are trainers who are clear about the rules and who do not hesitate to intervene when boundaries are crossed, in a friendly, respectful way.

Discussion

The campaign confirms the conclusion of Pulerwitz et al. that a combination of interactive, small-group, male-only education sessions and a social marketing campaign is an effective strategy. The concrete task of making storyboards that would be published online and the chance to be part of a song by famous artists stimulated the active involvement of boys during the workshops. We also found that adolescent boys are really open to talk about the issue when a safe space is offered. Boys reflect in the retro perspective interviews that it was the first time they could freely and openly exchange these experiences. Adolescence seems a good moment to invite boys, as in this period many boys feel insecure and lost. As one of the participants stated: "Beat the Macho helped me to open up. When you go to high school nobody prepares you.

Big chance that you do not feel comfortable. Big chance you do not dare to be yourself. You become very introverted. Beat the Macho is a good instrument to help you reflect, connect and open up."

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