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Research 2011

PLA Summary

EXPLORING DIMENSIONS OF MASCULINITIES, FEMININITIES AND
VIOLENCE WITH YOUNG MEN AND YOUNG WOMEN IN K. MITROVICA





M: RESEARCH PLA SUMMARY

Exploring Dimensions of Masculinities,
Femininities and Violence
With Young Men and Young Women in K. Mitrovica

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Background

Since 2006, CARE North West Balkans and its partners have implemented the groundbreaking Young Men Initiative. The Initiative seeks to support young men aged 14 to 18 in the Western Balkans to enact more gender equitable social norms and healthy lifestyles, and to discourage violent behavior against the community, women, and peers. With the start of its second phase in 2010, the Initiative has expanded its geographic scope to include more communities in the Western Balkans, including K. Mitrovica. While continuing to focus on young men, the Initiative's second phase also plans to expand its engagement with young women.

The Young Men Initiative builds on recent global research affirming that rigid gender norms of masculinity and femininity are “gateway factors,” linked to a range of harmful outcomes, including gender-based violence and poor reproductive health. There has been a growing recognition of the role that male socialization plays in boys’ and men’s use of violence — among boys and men, and against women and girls. At the same time, interventions working with men to deconstruct masculine identities have successfully shown the contribution that men can make as allies and anti-violence activists. Evidence further demonstrates that interventions explicitly designed to engage men in transforming gender norms are more effective in producing positive health and gender outcomes than those without this approach.

Funded primarily by the Norwegian government, the project works in collaboration with seven youth service organizations and one communication/campaign development organization from the Western Balkan region. CARE partners with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) on the project’s monitoring, evaluation, and action-research components, and with Promundo and its Project H (young men) and M (young women) models, to adapt intervention approaches.

BACKGROUND

RESEARCH

In light of limited regional data related to the gender dynamics of violence among youth, in 2007 the Young Men Initiative carried out formative, participatory research in four Balkan countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia) to explore the current experience of young men in the Balkans, and used the resulting data to ground its interventions. This report seeks to contribute further to the emerging data in the region by focusing on the context of K. Mitrovica, and including the perspectives of young women as well as young men. It shares findings from formative, participatory learning and action (PLA) exercises carried out with 27 young men and young women in K. Mitrovica from June to August 2011.

Research Findings

For most of the young men and young women who participated in the research, this was their first opportunity to openly discuss and critically reflect, with their peers, on masculinities, femininities, and violence. Young men and young women across all sites expressed their appreciation for such an opportunity – and recommended that future opportunities for such dialogue be expanded.

What follows are highlights of the findings from the PLA exercises conducted with young men and young women K. Mitrovica. These highlights primarily focus on common themes among the groups; please see the full report for discussion of nuances among sites.

Gender Norms and Roles

Throughout the PLA, the participants engaged in a series of different exercises, activities, and discussions to identify characteristics central to definitions of “hegemonic” masculinity or femininity or of an “ideal” man or woman. The young men and young women across the groups identified several common defining features of masculinity and femininity in their communities, a number of which emerged vividly in the exercises with 3-D Images, where the participants used modeling clay to construct models of “ideal” men and “ideal” women.

Central characteristics of “ideal” masculinity included: physical strength and sexual prowess; getting married; providing for their families and parents and, for some, “protecting” family and friends; personality characteristics including honesty, fairness toward others, and receiving and retaining respect; and deep emotional bonds to family and male friends (although men are not expected to show emotion openly). Compared to ideal men, young men reported that “typical” men in their communities lack employment and income; some young men also felt that typical men are “too aggressive,” a perception shared by young women.

Central characteristics of “ideal” femininity included: personality characteristics including intelligence, kindness, independence, and confidence or “courage”; and maintaining a strong family role as wives and mothers while also enjoying expanded opportunities in education and employment. Young men as well as young women shared these “ideals” for women. Young women were themselves mixed in whether certain physical characteristics defined an “ideal” woman.

GENDER NORMS

Social Spaces and Influences that Shape Gender Norms and Violence

Young men and young women pointed to family as the core social influence throughout all phases of their lives. Young men and women see family as a particularly important source of advice and guidance when facing challenges, and for proper behavior and character formation. Young men and young women debated the relative influence of family and peers (versus parents during adolescence), but all agreed that same-sex peers are also a major source of social influence for young men and young women during adolescence.

Coffee shops, athletic facilities, and social media sites are key places where young men socialize in their communities. Some PLA groups of young men included sports betting bars and sports fan clubs as other important places, with the latter often becoming the scene of fights between men. Some young men also named coaches as influential figures. Young men differed in the importance they placed on school as a social influence; some noted the expectation experienced by some young men, and perceived to be shared by parents, that acting up in school is part of a young man's typical behavior and that studying is not masculine.

Young women in K. Mitrovica identified coffee shops, home, and social media sites as the social spaces in which they spend most of their time; certain streets near prime shopping locations were also important. The young women's 24-hour clocks of activities included their time at school as well as designated times for studying and preparing for school. Young women (like young men) characterize studying, and doing well academically, as a norm for young women but not for young men.

Although they noted "changes from before," young men and young women reported that in most families young women spend more time on household chores — and that there are only a few particular chores that are men's responsibility. When asked to reflect on differences in the division of household labor and privileges, young women identified these differences as unequal and unfair; some young men, when asked to reflect on patterns of 24-hour clocks, also identified this division as unfair.

Young men and young women identified little green space and few other public spaces for interaction in their communities, and expressed a desire for venues and activities that would support youth socializing and engagement.

Power, Respect and Gender Equality in Relationships

Young men across all groups characterized their relationships with their male friends in terms of emotional intimacy, trust, and loyalty. Young men highlighted that trust includes an expectation that male friends will protect each other, including in physical fights if necessary. They also highlighted that an important part of close friendships is open communication, so that friends can confide any personal and family problems and advise each other. Disrespect was most often identified in peer pressure from a member of their group to carry out harmful behavior (such as drinking or using drugs).

The young women identified honesty, support, and intimacy as important qualities in their friendships with other young women. However, the young women also spoke about lack of solidarity as one of the main challenges to female friendships; they pointed to gossiping and exclusion based on class and other social differences.

Both young men and young women pointed to a desire for shared power and greater emotional intimacy when describing their ideals of respectful romantic relationships. At the same time, young women and young men debated to what extent power should be fully shared, and whether men should retain some (small) degree of greater authority. Young men especially debated to what extent they could imagine full equality — for instance, within the context of household roles.

Young men and young women expressed a high level of discomfort with same-sex relationships. Some young men said that visible same-sex relationships would provoke them to use violence. Young women were, relative to the young men, generally more accepting of homosexuality and friendships with homosexuals. Yet many of the young women also expressed homophobic attitudes.

Significantly, young women and young men all expressed support for gender equality. Additionally, while there were debates within and across groups regarding the extent to which advances had been made thus far, there was a consensus that gender equality had not yet been achieved — and that K. Mitrovica was “behind” other parts of the region.

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However, while the young men generally voiced support for gender equality, many of their specific attitudes and perceptions regarding relationships and family roles reflected non-equitable norms. Moreover, while almost all young women saw empowerment in a positive light, many young men across all groups expressed various concerns regarding the concept of empowerment, in theory as well as in practice.

Contexts, Root Causes, and Alternatives to Violence

Young men and young women readily identified, and demonstrated familiarity with, a number of forms of physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Types of violence identified included family violence (against children and women), domestic violence (against women), psychological violence (in the form of insults and name-calling), sexual violence (rape), and manifestations of these types of violence in schools, workplaces, and other sites. Young women and young men highlighted that physical violence among young men was the most common type of violence experienced by young men, whereas young women typically engage in psychological violence.

Contexts, Root Causes, and Alternatives to Violence

Young men and young women in K. Mitrovica group identified violence related to political divisions in their community. It is also of note that, across groups, young men did not identify bullying — or behaviors that would be classified by researchers as bullying — as a problem in their schools and communities; this stands in contrast to other regional findings regarding the pervasiveness of bullying among young men in schools, and to the results of other studies in the Western Balkans.

Young men located sites of increased physical violence among young men in areas around their schools, and also in public spaces where young men of different social or peer groups come into close physical contact with each other. Violence among young men often originates in a trivial misunderstanding or provocation and then escalates; jealousy over perceived infidelity by a girlfriend was another key contributing factor in violence among men. Specific cafés and bars were also identified as sites of frequent violence, and for some young men sporting events are sites of potential violence, as well.

Almost all young men and young women share a broad opposition to violence. Young men and young women alike see much violence among young men as needless — often resulting from “small things” that then escalate, due to pride or a difficulty with self-control. At the same time, many young women and young men feel that the use of violence to defend oneself remains important, and report that men who do not use violence may face negative reactions in the community. Almost all young men and young women also strongly oppose violence against women, in general. Yet both young men and young women expressed divided opinions as to whether violence against a woman is ever justified.

The young men and young women who support use of violence against women “in certain situations” seem to share similar beliefs: that slapping or hitting may not be violence, and/or may be a form of needed “education” for women; and that a woman’s possible infidelity demands harsh, violent punishment. Young men perceive an array of root causes for male-to-male violence — ranging from inborn personality traits (having poor character, being “nervous” and lacking self-control), to difficult family situations (including witnessing violence within the family), to poor intellectual development and communication skills.

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Some group discussions also brought up the role of alcohol, affiliation with sports clubs, and, prejudice as other causes of violence. Young women shared these analyses, although they also pointed to “excessive male pride” as a root cause of male-to-male violence.

Young men and young women also identified many similar root causes for violence against women, including some men’s tendencies to “nervousness,” family exposure to violence, and the potential of economic stress to exacerbate aggression. A few discussions among young women also pointed to men’s desire “to dominate”—and young men’s perceived need to assert their “morals” and “pride”—as root causes of violence against women. Yet overall there was little explicit articulation of how gender inequalities, or rigid norms of masculinity and femininity, might contribute to violence against women. Among the supports that young men identified for alternatives to violence: Many young men pointed to supports that lie outside the direct control of young men, such as innate characteristics like having a good character or “being relaxed and not as pressured,” maturing out of adolescence, or the need for increased security patrols and surveillance. Yet young men did identify their friends as an important, potential source of support for decisions not to use violence.

Related to women’s ability to leave violent relationships: A number of young men and young women identified social disapproval of divorce as a barrier, although many young men and women also pointed to improved laws that should enable women’s right to leave violent situations, in theory if not practice. Young women identified women’s self-esteem and “courage” to assert their rights, and social, particularly family support, as key to women’s ability to leave situations of abuse.

A significant gap in the PLA research, and a potential area of difference in perceptions among young women and young men, relates to young women’s experiences of sexual pressure, coercion, and control in their communities and dating relationships. Young women referred to female peers who had experienced sexual pressure and coercion, whereas young men did not discuss these concerns.

FUTURE VISIONS AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Across the PLA groups, the PLA exercises concluded with young men and young women envisioning what their “ideal” relationships would look like five years in the future, in 2016. Almost all of the visions emphasized greater gender equality and less violence in families and among peers. Visions also emphasized the importance of economic opportunities for young men.

Actions, Recommended by Young Men and Young Women

Young men and young women in the PLA groups recommended actions that institutions could take to help support young people in achieving their visions of greater gender equality and reduced violence, including the following:

- **Partner** with the Ministry of Education, police, and health clinics to improve their responses to violence among young men and against young women.
- **Continue** NGO support of youth on issues of gender norms, roles, and violence, especially through research and training (such as the PLA activity carried out).
- **Facilitate** debates and other participatory activities for youth on these topics, including activities that bring young women and young men together.
- **Enlist** parents’ support for changes — given the key role that their families, and especially their parents, play in shaping norms and expectations for young men and young women.
- **Reach** young men through friends, especially around issues related to reducing violence and promoting respect.
- **Coordinate** activities to improve community resources for youth, including: more green space, youth centers, and sports.

Program Implications

In addition to the young people's recommendations, the research team includes the following reflections that may be useful for future research and programming with youth in local context:

YOUNG MEN AND YOUNG WOMEN ARE EAGER FOR SOLUTIONS TO YOUTH VIOLENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITY.

Across the groups, the young people disapproved of the current levels of violence among youth, particularly among young men. Solutions that support youth's desire for change often require a combination of individual and structural level efforts. Specific activities should seek to build young people's sense of self-efficacy to prevent violence, and promote conflict resolution and anger management skills-building. At a broader level, it is also important to support youth-oriented activities, facilities, and services in local communities, and to strengthen response systems in schools and other youth social spaces.

THERE IS A NEED FOR INCREASED UNDERSTANDING AMONG YOUTH ABOUT THE RANGE OF ACTS THAT CONSTITUTE VIOLENCE, AND FOR FURTHER RESEARCH TO EXPLORE HOW YOUTH UNDERSTAND THE VARIOUS MANIFESTATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE.

Interventions are needed to expand young people's definition of violence against women so that it includes slapping and hitting, and to unpack and contest the perception that violence is needed for "education." Areas for further research and understanding include sexual relationships among youth, and the dynamics of gender norms, power, and coercion in these relationships.

THERE IS A NEED TO EXPAND EXISTING EXPECTATIONS FOR BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, AND TO PROMOTE RESPECT FOR A DIVERSITY OF MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES.

Both young men and young women spoke of a series of gender-specific expectations for men and women. However, only a few also articulated the "costs" associated with some of these expectations. In working with youth — especially young men — to promote more gender equitable attitudes and behavior, a necessary first step is to help them identify the consequences

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of rigid models of masculinities and femininities. Programs should also help youth visualize the benefits, or what is to be gained, from changing or expanding certain expectations concerning men's roles, including the ways in which they should interact with each other and with women.

DIVERGENT OPINIONS ABOUT GENDER ROLES AND VIOLENCE CAN PROVIDE ENTRY POINTS FOR PEER-LED EDUCATION.

Across and within the PLA groups, there was a range of opinions about men's and women's roles in the family and in intimate relationships, as well as about the use of violence against women and among men. These variations among peers can serve as key entry points for knowledgeable and well-trained peer-led efforts to engage youth in critical reflections on gender equality and violence.

YOUNG MEN AND YOUNG WOMEN HOLD MANY GENDER STEREOTYPES ABOUT EACH OTHER, BUT ARE ALSO EAGER FOR DIALOGUE TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE OPPOSITE SEX.

Both young men and young women expressed an interest in opportunities to engage in dialogue and debate with young members of the opposite sex, in order to better understand their attitudes on issues such as gender roles and relationships. While young men and young women come together in various settings, they rarely have the opportunity to engage in facilitated and critical reflections on issues related to gender, sexuality, and violence. Such joint activities can serve as valuable stepping stones to increased respect, understanding, and communication in male-female friendships and romantic relationships.

NOT ONLY PEERS, BUT PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND SPORTS ALSO OFFER IMPORTANT POINTS FOR INTERVENTION.

As in many other contexts, peers wield a great influence on young men's and young women's attitudes and behaviors in K. Mitrovica. Programs should therefore focus on promoting positive peer-group norms and peer support networks. At the same time, the youth who participated in the PLA exercises emphasized that parents continue to be a main source of guidance for them. Programs therefore need to involve parents in meaningful ways. Similarly,

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teachers can be important role models for youth. However, the young people described many teachers who perpetuate harmful norms regarding gender and violence. School-based efforts therefore also need to include gender awareness training for teachers, as well as a review of school policies related to sexual harassment, peer violence, and other issues. Given the powerful role of sports in young men's socialization, sports and coaches may be another strategic point for promoting gender equality.

FURTHER RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES SHOULD CONTINUE TO ENGAGE YOUNG MEN AND YOUNG WOMEN AND DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR GENDERED LIVES.

Potential areas for further research include: the gender content of social media; youth perceptions and experiences of violence, including the extent of psychological and sexual coercion within dating relationships; and further reflection on how and where young men and women are able to live outside of current gender inequitable norms, and with what consequences or benefits. Young women and young men emphasized that they felt engaged with and valued being involved in the PLA process — and expressed their desire to see such opportunities for structured, critical reflection expanded in the future.

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