

Men Showing Up

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A growing interest in “men’s work” is blossoming around us. Social services organizations and health providers are recognizing boys and men as important constituencies with unmet needs. Women’s organizations are actively recruiting men as volunteers and staff. Corporations, sports clubs and government agencies are providing sexual harassment and violence prevention training to their (often mostly male) staff. Grassroots men’s groups are forming to address men’s isolation, men’s violence against women, men’s health, fathering, and mentoring.

As calls come in to Men’s Resources International from around the world, we are often asked how to create and sustain community-based men’s initiatives. While a thorough answer to that question is provided in our leadership training programs, the following lessons from the past 25 years seem particularly valuable to share at this time of great possibility and great challenge.

Demystify the costs and benefits of masculinity. One essential foundation of our approach to men’s work is a firm understanding that men are both privileged and damaged by gender roles and sexism. While these two aspects of male socialization (men as oppressor and men as victim) have often been presented as contradictory and politically incompatible, we recognize that men’s actual experience, in fact, combines both dimensions into a powerful system of social conditioning. As a result of this more complete picture of men’s experience we have been able to develop effective outreach, education and support strategies.

Affirm men’s nature. Our belief that men are naturally loving, caring and sensitive with women, children and other men has informed all of our work. We recognize that this is often buried under layers of mistrust and fear and protected by a hard crust of privilege, so that what we may see is isolation, dehumanization, and/or abusiveness. However, we also know that with support, safety and encouragement men can reclaim their ability to be open and connected. This belief goes a long way toward creating an environment where learning and growth can happen.

Commit to being allies with women. Women have clearly led the way for us to examine the role of masculinity, gender relations and institutional sexism in our lives. It is also clear that we have an important part to play as men in challenging rigid gender roles and dominating forms of masculinity. Building ally relationships with women and women’s organizations has to be a vital goal from the beginning. As we develop relationships of equality, respect and trust we contradict the legacies of hurt, anger and fear, and model what is possible between women and men. Together, we become a strong voice in the community.

Attend to men's emotional experience. The women's movement taught us that "the personal is the political." Men's emotional repression, isolation and illiteracy are a primary symptom of rigid masculinity and often lead to controlling, addictive and abusive behaviors. By creating opportunities for men to learn how to safely and compassionately attend to their own and others' emotional experience we help men reclaim their full selves, teach an essential life skill, build a strong community of connection and support, and create a new culture of masculinity.

Directly challenge men's violence. All of us have been impacted in some way by men's violence or abuse. A code of silence often surrounds these experiences. We have learned to be afraid of "breaking ranks" and speaking out. One of the most powerful things we can do is to create an environment that supports men to find ways to take a stand in challenging the masculine culture of violence – by talking together about our own experiences, by confronting others about their attitudes and behaviors, or by making a statement in our community.

Celebrate diversity among men. The dominant male stereotype assumes that there is one right way to be a powerful male. This leaves most of us feeling devalued, marginalized and disempowered, while we attempt to "pass" by hiding the parts of ourselves that don't fit the image. By highlighting and honoring the great diversity among men we expose the lie of the stereotype, and make room for the full range of men's self-expression.

Show up. Many men and women have experienced physical and/or emotional abandonment or betrayal by men who were important in their lives. We have lost confidence we can count on men to consistently show up. At Men's Resources International we have always seen men's work as a long term commitment. After 25 years of showing up, week after week and year after year, we have demonstrated that this work can be more than a passing fad.

For information: www.mensresourcesinternational.org