

Safe passages into adulthood: Preventing gender-based violence and its consequences

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Gender-based violence affects the physical and mental health of girls and boys, men and women worldwide. A recent study by researchers from the Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown University addresses the challenge of developing effective strategies to change inequitable and harmful social norms that result in gender-based violence.

Inequitable [gender norms](#) are not only related to [domestic violence](#), but also to other behaviors such as multiple sexual partners, smoking and alcohol abuse which lead to poor health outcomes.

The findings of the Safe Passages study, which note the importance of mobilizing broad community support to meet the challenge, are relevant to addressing [sexual violence](#) in urban neighborhoods, suburban settings, rural environs as well as college campuses or refugee camps. In each of these settings, beliefs about what it means to be a man or a woman can result in coerced and forced sex.

"If the community expects boys to dominate and be sexually aggressive and girls to be passive, then there is a general assumption that girls must be coerced into sex," said Rebecka Lundgren, MPH, who led the study. "Boys who are not aggressive may be ridiculed or looked down upon. Yet, boys and young men rarely have the opportunity to observe and learn from male role models who protect and support the girls and women in their lives." Lundgren is the director of research at the Institute for Reproductive Health.

How to address this behavior? Lundgren says parents and other family members, teachers, religious leaders and peers should talk about and reflect on these norms and consider alternative ways of demonstrating their masculinity and femininity that lead to strong, healthy relationships.

"Efforts to transform gender roles to lay the foundation for positive and respectful relationships must begin early and continue throughout life. Ideally this change begins with parents and grandparents, who consider the messages they are passing on to children when they encourage boys to grow up to be 'big and strong' and girls to be 'nurturing and kind'."

Rigid gender norms and roles, according to Lundgren, are often harmful for males ("real men" must provide for their families and are "less manly" if unable to do so, often resulting in [violence](#)) and females (women should maintain family harmony, even if it means accepting occasional violence). Efforts to prevent violence must tackle the complex challenge of transforming these gender norms, according to Lundgren and study co-author Melissa K. Adams, MPH, a former senior program officer at the Institute.

Finding and supporting leaders within the community who are committed to change and able to advocate for new models of masculinity and femininity can create an environment that does not tolerate violence, according to Lundgren. She says that community campaigns and programs that communicate with both boys and girls rather than single sex efforts have the greatest likelihood of success.

In their study, Lundgren and Adams sought understanding of the processes by which youth are socialized into gender norms and how these gender norms are associated with violence and other negative health outcomes. To gain this insight, they conducted research in a post-conflict setting in Northern Uganda with high rates of gender-based violence, sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies.

They spoke with men, women and children returning to their communities following two decades of war—the lifespan of an entire generation. These community members, despite experiencing social and cultural upheaval that legitimized domestic violence, demonstrated a desire to rebuild protective cultural traditions and to challenge inequitable gender norms. Lundgren stresses that the need to understand gender norms and how they generate gender-based violence is universal and not limited to any one region or country.

"Helping societies to value more equitable gender norms—a critical step towards preventing intimate partner violence—requires that individuals be respected, valued and appreciated. Interventions that provide positive social support can facilitate beneficial change," Lundgren said.

More information: "Safe Passages: Building on Cultural Traditions to Prevent Gender-Based Violence throughout the Life Course" by Lundgren and Adams was published this summer in *Anthropological Approaches to Gender-based Violence and Human Rights*, Working Paper #304 of the Gender, Development, and Globalization Program of the Center for Gender in Global Context at Michigan State University.

Provided by Georgetown University Medical Center

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