


Changing what it means to ‘become a man’: participants’ reflections on a school-based programme to redefine masculinity in the Balkans

Sophie Namy^{a*}, Brian Heilman^b, Shawna Stich^b, John Crownover^c, Besnik Leka^d and Jeffrey Edmeades^e 

^a*Raising Voices, Kampala, Uganda;* ^b*Independent Researcher;* ^c*CARE International Balkans, Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina;* ^d*CARE International Balkans, Prishtina, Kosovo;* ^e*International Center for Research on Women, Washington, DC, USA*

(Received 20 October 2014; accepted 5 July 2015)

Calls to engage men and boys in efforts to promote health, prevent violence and advance gender equality have grown in recent years. However, there remains little evidence or reflection on how most effectively to change harmful norms related to masculinity. The study addresses this gap by exploring the perspectives of participants in the Young Men Initiative (YMI), an innovative programme that aimed to promote healthier masculinities among boys attending vocational high schools in several Balkan countries through educational workshops, residential retreats and a social marketing campaign. Qualitative data were collected through 37 in-depth interviews and 11 focus-group discussions with boys, youth facilitators and teachers. Findings from four schools (in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Prishtina and Zagreb) suggest that several elements of the programme resonated strongly with participants and supported their meaningful engagement in project activities. Five themes emerged as most salient in identifying how and why specific aspects of YMI positively influenced participants: personal reflection, experience-based learning, connections with youth facilitators, new peer groups and aspirational messaging. Building on these insights, the study highlights potentially useful strategies for other programmes seeking to reach boys and transform their understanding of masculinity.

Keywords: Masculinity; gender attitudes; young men; violence; Balkans

Introduction

Over the last 15 years, a substantial body of research has demonstrated that adherence to ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell 1987) – normative ideals of masculinity that emphasise and enforce certain men’s dominance, privilege and power over women and other men – underlies a range of negative behaviours for both men and women, including the perpetration of violence against women, engagement in HIV-risk behaviours and the abuse of drugs and/or alcohol (Barker, Ricardo, and Nascimento 2007; Hatcher et al. 2014; Heise 2011; Pulerwitz et al. 2006). In response, there has been a proliferation of initiatives to engage men and boys in order to promote more positive versions of masculinity (emphasising flexible gender roles, balanced power in intimate relationships and non-violence) as a pathway to prevent violence against women, reduce HIV risk, as well as to promote men’s own health and wellbeing.

*Corresponding author. Email: sophie@raisingvoices.org

The evidence from these programmes suggests that hegemonic notions of masculinity are not fixed; rather, they can be challenged, resisted and transformed (Das et al. 2012; Lundgren et al. 2013). A review of 65 evaluations of interventions to reduce young men's perpetration of sexual violence concluded that the studies 'provide substantial evidence of effectiveness of interventions to improve boys' and young men's attitudes towards rape and other forms of violence against women, as well as attitudes towards rigid gender stereotypes that condone or allow this violence to occur' (Ricardo, Eads, and Barker 2011, 5). Despite these positive indications of attitudinal change, rigorous evidence on the extent to which male engagement programmes can shift behaviours and social norms is less conclusive (Fulu, Kerr-Wilson, and Lang 2014; Jewkes, Flood, and Lang 2014).

While there exists a growing consensus about why to engage men and boys, less discussion has taken place around how to engage them most effectively in efforts to change inequitable and/or violent forms of masculinity (Casey et al. 2013; Dworkin, Fleming, and Colvin 2015; Minerson et al. 2011). The current study aims to address this gap by presenting findings from discussions with boys, youth facilitators and teachers from 2011 and 2013 who participated in the Young Men Initiative (YMI), an innovative programme intended to promote the uptake of gender-equitable, non-violent, healthy lifestyles among adolescent boys in four Balkan countries. The primary objective of the analysis is to understand how boys experienced and described various components of YMI. Such reflections highlight why certain elements were/were not effective and suggest potentially useful strategies for other programmes seeking to reach boys and transform their understanding of masculinity.

Programme background

The Balkan context

Ethnic conflict has been a common feature across the Balkans since the former Yugoslavia dissolved violently in the 1990s. War, combined with factors such as men's compulsory military service and heightened ethno-nationalism, reinforced traditional gender norms that emphasised women's subservience and men's roles as providers and protectors (O'Reilly 2012). Recent studies demonstrate that many young men equate ideal manhood with physical strength, (hetero)sexual prowess, providing for the family and 'manly' activities such as consuming alcohol (Eckman et al. 2012). Despite important ethnic, religious and cultural differences across the region, research suggests that patriarchal, violent and homophobic notions of masculinity are widespread (Barker et al. 2011; Barker and Pawlak 2014).

Studies also underscore the high prevalence of victimisation and perpetration of violence across the region. A study in Kosovo found that 27% of respondents (male and female) aged 11 to 18 years reported experiencing physical violence at some point in their lives (UNICEF 2005). Quantitative data collected from adult men in Croatia through the International Men and Gender Equality Survey show a similar trend: 77% of respondents report having been bullied in their school or neighbourhood as children and 16% of adult respondents report witnessing intimate partner violence in their childhood home (Barker et al. 2011). Such experiences can have lasting and profound consequences; numerous studies demonstrate strong associations between childhood experiences of violence and the likelihood of perpetrating and/or experiencing violence as an adult (Contreras et al. 2012; Kishor and Bradley 2012).

Programme details

Within this regional context, CARE International Balkans (CARE) and its partners have been implementing YMI with young men in order to change the dominant masculine ideals that underlie violence, sexual risk-taking and other unhealthy behaviours. Between 2007 and 2012, the programme reached approximately 5000 boys (aged 15–19) attending 15 vocational schools (in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo and Serbia) with activities and messages promoting positive shifts in four core domains: gender attitudes, violence, sexual health and substance use.¹ The focus on vocational schools aligned with CARE's mission to work with vulnerable youth, as students attending such schools typically come from economically disadvantaged households and many have experienced disciplinary problems and/or poor academic performance during primary education.

Facilitators from local youth organisations led YMI programme activities with technical assistance and training from CARE. Promundo and the International Center for Research on Women supported programme design and evaluation. While the YMI intervention typically spanned a single academic year (approximately eight months), some programme activities continued to function afterward through the 'Be a Man' clubs, which were created as part of the programme. Furthermore, ministries of education in Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia have accredited the YMI curriculum for use in all secondary schools.

The YMI consisted of three synergistic components: (1) group education sessions led by youth facilitators (typically male aged 20 to 25, although some were female) and integrated within the regular school schedule; (2) optional residential retreats; and (3) Be a Man school clubs, responsible for leading and coordinating a social marketing campaign aimed at changing popular conceptions of what constitutes 'manhood'. All first and second year students attending intervention schools participated in eight hour-long classroom sessions (approximately one per month over the school year). In addition, many participants opted to join one intensive residential retreat during the programme period and all students were invited to participate in school-wide activities organised by the Be a Man clubs. While specific club activities varied by site, common events included street/graffiti art, film projects, dramas and online discussions. Be a Man campaign activities and social media posts utilised materials that were created specifically for the programme by a creative team comprised of professionals and youth from the region (see Figure 1). While YMI did include activities for girls, the majority



Figure 1. 'Be a Man' campaign poster.⁵

of students in participating vocational schools were male and programme research focused on male students.²

The curriculum for YMI’s educational sessions was adapted from Promundo’s Programme H manual,³ designed to provoke critical reflection on gender socialisation and related perceptions, as well as the impacts of gender discrimination. Rather than using didactic training methods, YMI workshops utilised participatory and interactive techniques (e.g. role play, group brainstorming, games, etc.) and emphasised asking provocative questions and creating space for boys to reflect on issues themselves. The programme included 21 modules organised into four content areas (gender, violence, sexual and reproductive health, and substance use). Basic workshops were delivered during the school day, while advanced modules were offered during the residential retreats where more time was available for discussion. The sessions are briefly summarised in Figure 2; for more details see CARE International (2012).

Theory

As noted above, YMI is adapted from Programme H, a group education methodology designed to promote gender equality, decrease violence and reduce sexually transmitted infections. Versions of this programme have been implemented in over 20 countries, with a growing number of evaluations suggesting promising results. Findings from quasi-experimental studies in Brazil, Chile and India have found several statistically significant effects, including improvements in reported condom use (Brazil, Chile and India) and decreased self-reports of perpetrating intimate partner violence among married men (India) (Barker et al. 2012; Pulerwitz et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2008).

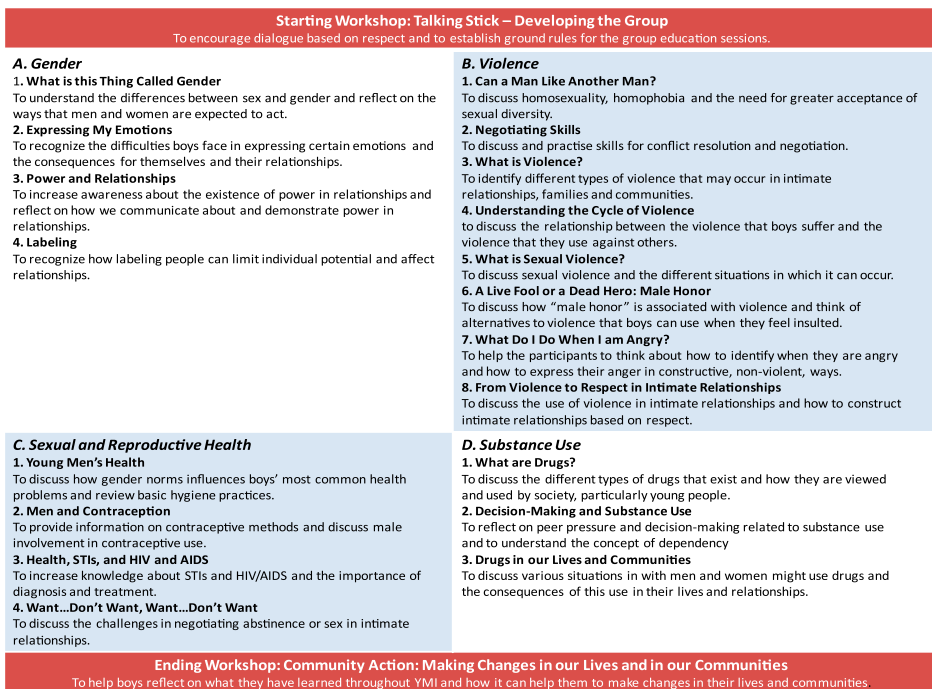


Figure 2. Summary of Young Men Initiative’s group education sessions.

The adaptation of the programme for use in the Balkans was based on extensive formative research with boys in five Balkan countries (Eckman et al. 2007, 2012). Unlike many other versions of Programme H, YMI was implemented in schools and targeted adolescent boys specifically. This focus was based on the understanding that adolescence represents a pivotal moment in the socialisation process, when attitudes towards violence and gender roles are formulated and solidified (Kaufman 2000; Lundgren et al. 2013), as well as the recognition that schools are important institutions in constructing and reinforcing gender norms (Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach 2006).

Both the Programme H and YMI programme theory hypothesise that if students learn to recognise harmful gender norms and are provided safe spaces to practise questioning these constructs, then there is a greater likelihood of internalising new ideas in support of gender-equitable, healthy and non-violent behaviours. The methodology also emphasises supporting influences and structures, such as positive peer groups and role models, and the existing policy environment, as described in Figure 3 (adapted from Promundo et al. 2013).

Programme research and development

Strong collaboration between research and programming partners, which included formative research and a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework, was a defining characteristic of the YMI initiative. Annual evaluation results were discussed in partner workshops and informed specific revisions to YMI's design, most notably the decision to embed the basic educational sessions within the regular school day (previously all YMI activities were voluntary and extracurricular). This revised approach, first implemented in 2011, has been evaluated in four schools (in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Prishtina and Zagreb) through quantitative, self-administered surveys given to 1248 boys interviewed immediately before and after the eight-month implementation cycle. Findings from these evaluations (including a quasi-experimental design in Prishtina, Kosovo) showed promising results, particularly in improving attitudes related to violence against women, homophobia, gender roles and the use of violence against peers; however, no consistent evidence of behavioural changes emerged (e.g. violence perpetration and alcohol use). Stronger outcomes were observed among boys who participated in one of

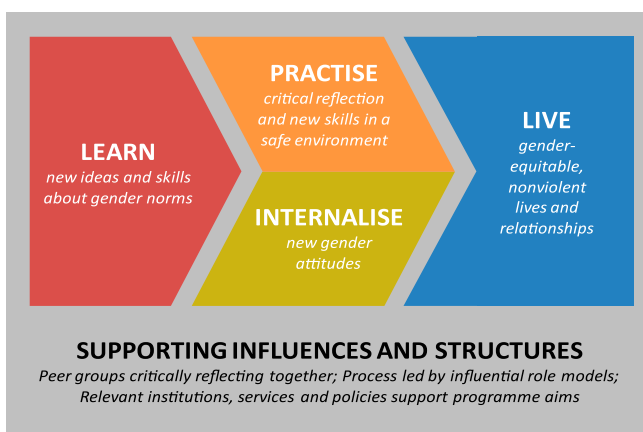


Figure 3. The Young Men Initiative programme theory.

the residential retreats, suggesting that more intensive programming outside the classroom accelerated change; for more details see Namy et al. (2014).⁴

The current study moves away from a focus on outcomes in order to explore how boys experienced and described the programme. This focus is useful to better understand the potential effectiveness of the various programming elements included in YMI and to highlight promising strategies that may have applicability for programme designers and implementers in other settings.

Methods

The data included in this analysis come from 37 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 11 focus-group discussions (FGDs) with male YMI students (aged 14 to 16), youth facilitators and teachers from four YMI schools in Belgrade (Serbia), Prishtina (Kosovo), Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Zagreb (Croatia). The IDIs and FGDs were held at the end of the academic year and YMI implementation period. The IDIs with participants focused on their perceptions of the programme, including their understanding of how the programme worked, most/least memorable aspects and motivations for participation. The FGDs with teachers explored whether and how they supported the programme objectives, as well as their impressions of the extent to which YMI was influencing the overall environment within the school. The IDIs with YMI facilitators aimed to capture any challenges and innovations in the implementation process, particularly related to students' receptiveness and sustained engagement. The qualitative sample is summarised in Table 1.

Student participants were purposively selected by implementing partners to achieve a balanced distribution across grades and participation level (i.e., students who attended classroom sessions only and those who opted into the residential retreats). Youth facilitators selected for the interviews were recommended by the implementing organisations. Every teacher in participating schools was invited to participate in the FGDs, with final selection based on availability.

Data from IDIs and FGDs were transcribed, translated into English and coded (based on a combination of *a priori* and emergent themes) by two independent coders. Coding was performed manually (data from Sarajevo and Zagreb) and using Atlas.ti (data from Belgrade and Prishtina). The Framework Method (Ritchie and Lewis 2003), frequently used in thematic analysis of qualitative data in public health research (Gale et al. 2013), was applied to help reduce the data and identify common patterns and differences across respondents and implementation sites.

Table 1. Qualitative sample.

School location	Programme year	In-depth interviews		Focus-group discussions	
		YMI Participants	YMI Facilitators	YMI Participants	Teachers
Belgrade	2012/2013	8	2	2	1
Sarajevo	2011/2012	8	1	2	1
Prishtina	2012/2013	7	2	1	1
Zagreb	2011/2012	8	1	2	1
Total			37		11

Note: All Young Men Initiative (YMI) facilitators interviewed were male except one (in Belgrade); focus-group discussions had 6 to 8 participants each.

All YMI research followed strict ethical principles of human subjects research on violence against children, emphasising consent, confidentiality and referrals (CP MERG 2012). The research protocol was approved by ICRW's ethical review board (Case Number 11-0008) as well as by education ministries in the four countries, and permission was granted by the participating schools. During the individual consent process, the purpose of the evaluation and voluntary nature of participation was clearly explained to potential participants. Written consent was obtained prior to any data collection; the decision to waive parental consent was made (and approved by the ethics committee) based on input from local researchers and is consistent with other study protocols from the region addressing similar age groups. Researchers were trained to watch for signs of distress and all respondents were given a list of nearby referral services. Pseudonyms are used to identify individual respondents in this paper.

Results

The analyses provided valuable insights about how boys perceived programme activities and YMI's structure, including what they viewed as the most crucial components of the programme. Five themes emerged as the most salient: personal reflection, experience-based learning, connections with youth facilitators, new peer groups and aspirational messaging. In addition, some participant reflections revealed aspects of entrenched norms and resistance to the programme.

Personal reflection: 'What does it mean to become a man?'

The YMI participants consistently noted that the interactive curriculum inspired them to think more critically about what it means to be a man, as well as the consequences of dominant masculine ideals. Similarly, interview responses frequently reflected an appreciation of multiple masculinities and a growing ability to recognise gender norms as socially constructed and changeable. When researchers probed to understand how these changes came about, boys emphasised that the process of questioning dominant beliefs helped them understand that such ideas can be contested:

I think that in our region, in the Balkans region, there was a standard that a man brings bread, and a woman doesn't – that a woman stays at home as a housewife. However, we all asked ourselves, 'Why shouldn't a woman bring it as well?' So, there should be no difference between the man and woman, only [their] sex is different. (Kenan, YMI participant Sarajevo, IDI)

Similarly Draško, a youth facilitator from Belgrade, noted the power of questioning as an initial step towards change:

I think that many of [the students] already know something ... but after [the YMI training] they become more sensitised. For example after the homophobia workshops, one guy told me, 'I'm totally confused now, I don't know what to think.' I asked him why, and he said, 'I don't know, I'm a mess, because you gave a lot of information and my attitudes aren't the same, so I don't know what to think.' ... So I think it opens some questions in their heads, which is the most important for me. (Draško, male YMI facilitator Belgrade, IDI)

For some boys, this process of reflecting on gender norms and practises became deeply personal, enabling them to connect their own attitudes and behaviours to the issues dis-

cussed in YMI sessions. As illustrated below, this personal identification with harmful masculinities and the consequences of violence against others served as a powerful motivator for change:

To become a man here in our country, we smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol. [During the workshops] I kept thinking, who am I? What kind of man am I? ... Now [I realise] all the smoking and alcoholic drinks do not make a man, but the opposite of a man. ... Those values which we discussed have changed all the rules. (Lorik, YMI participant Prishtina, IDI)

Interviewer When you went through this workshop on labelling [negative stereotypes], what were you really thinking about?

Participant Well, I was thinking how bad it was that I had insulted these [boys] – all who I have insulted because they had some flaws, and so on. And I felt, you know, very stupid because I did that. (Stefan, YMI participant Belgrade, IDI)

Experience-based learning: ‘You really see how it is’

Another theme that emerged is that YMI sessions enabled participants to gain a direct experience of harmful expressions of masculinity – such as being stereotyped or having power over another individual. As noted in the programme background, the YMI curriculum incorporated several interactive techniques; one such activity included in the Power and Relationships module was consistently identified as a favourite session. In addition, some students commented that the extended engagement with YMI experienced during the residential retreats was useful for integrating new ideas:

Well, the most interesting to me was Power and Relations, because, you know, we had an activity where we line up in two groups, and look opposite at each other, like mirrors. And now this one has the honour of being a ruler, and the other one was a servant, and he has to do whatever the first one is doing ... and then facilitator asks, ‘How do you feel?’ ... It kind of left an impression. You really see how it is when someone rules over you and what is the feeling when you rule over someone. (Adan, YMI participant Sarajevo, IDI)

In the classroom there was just talking for 40 minutes and then we forget everything that was said there. But where the advanced training is concerned, you have three days and you have from 8am to 11 pm or midnight to discuss, not only training, but other topics as well. And then we understand the issues better ... these three days make these topics get into your head. (Dardan, YMI participant Prishtina, IDI)

Importantly, some boys internalised this analysis of power and applied it to their own relationships. For example, Filip used the language of power to explain how YMI shifted his understanding of emotional violence:

[I learned] that it is not nice to label, because when someone labels us we feel humiliated. And when we label someone, [we act] as if we are omnipotent, how do you say – more powerful than the person that we label. (Filip, YMI participant Zagreb, IDI)

Connections with youth facilitators: ‘With them you can really talk’

Nearly all students interviewed described having strong relationships with YMI facilitators. This closeness was often explained in terms of facilitators’ age, approachability, informal style and similar background. In other words, boys perceived YMI facilitators to be relatable and familiar. Students further described how trust in their

facilitators enabled them to feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues, and these positive connections were also noted in interviews with facilitators and teachers. Such experiences highlight how the interpersonal dynamics between participants and youth facilitators were critical in creating safe, confidential spaces for programme activities:

With [YMI facilitators] you can really talk, because they are not some professors. I mean, some hold doctorate degrees, but they are not the kind of people that you have to watch how you express yourself. You can freely address them informally and talk about everything. (Marko, YMI participant Zagreb, IDI)

I think [the students] were listened to. They were listened to in the way that let them talk, as they talk with their peers. Therefore they don't have to worry if they would be judged. (Lana, female teacher Zagreb, FGD)

Interviews with facilitators also reflected a commitment and effort to connect with participants, particularly when facilitating YMI sessions. For instance, facilitators reported frequently adapting programme materials to increase the resonance of specific examples and/or to better suit the students' existing knowledge. Such efforts to understand students' daily realities and creatively integrate this context within programme delivery served to strengthen the relationship between facilitators and students. In turn, this mutual trust and closeness helped position some facilitators as positive role models and friends:

Well they are [role models] certainly, because they told us what they were like before and how they changed through these workshops. ... When we know someone has done something, and later realised that it is not good, then we can trust him, because he has done it. It is different if someone who has never done it before would speak about it. (Domagoj, YMI participant Zagreb, IDI)

We are really friends. Some of [the students] call us to ask if we can take a coffee. Some of them message us on Facebook or call to ask about a problem with their girlfriends. We are part of the friendship. (Besmir, male YMI facilitator Prishtina, IDI)

The case of Prishtina was unique in fostering frequent informal interactions between YMI facilitators and participants, as the implementing partner's office was located in the centre of town with a street-level entrance open to students. As such, the office functioned as a casual, daily meeting space for boys to hang out, do homework and talk with other students and facilitators. Evaluation results from Prishtina were the strongest of the four schools, and it is likely that regular engagement with facilitators in their own office (where they carried out youth-focused activism work beyond YMI) deepened participants' engagement with the programme and understanding of core concepts.

New peer groups: 'We belong to this team'

The YMI's role in expanding peer networks and deepening existing friendships was another consistent theme uncovered in the analysis. In particular, students who attended a residential retreat described forming strong relationships, often with individuals they may not have interacted with otherwise (either due to a lack of opportunity or existing prejudices). Some participants indicated that the immersive setting and emotional experiences of the retreats were influential in cultivating these new relationships:

Because we had training outside, it was residential, there were friends we didn't know ... we have become familiar with each other, we socialise, and this continues. Based on the training we had together, we have become good friends. (Lorik, YMI participant Prishtina, IDI)

Before I came to the advanced training, I didn't have that opinion [that I could be friends with a gay person]. I have made friends with such a boy. I would never have done that before, because on the one hand, I was afraid of him, and on the other hand, I was afraid people would say that I was gay, too. But today, I think Be a Man has changed my opinion completely. (Krenar, YMI participant Prishtina, FGD)

Responses further suggested that new peer groups were often strengthened by a sense of shared responsibility for promoting the goals of the programme. This theme was often linked to Be a Man club activities, which were designed and led by students. The leadership and activism that characterised these school-wide events was especially motivational for some participants and simultaneously served to enhance connections between peers. Participants described how membership in the Be a Man club invoked a certain responsibility in upholding positive attitudes and behaviours:

When you are a Be a Man club member your awareness stops you from doing bad things. For example, for me my awareness stops me from doing things, even when nobody sees me In my opinion, [you can only be a member] if you don't smoke, don't exercise physical, emotional, or sexual violence, and so on. (Fatos, YMI participant Prishtina, IDI)

We were all happy that we would be the ones to distribute the condoms It was as if we belong to this team and, like, it somehow left the best impression on me We are now, you know, like some collective that fights together for something important. Not that we fight [physically], of course. We fight against violence and sexually transmitted diseases. (Adan, YMI participant Sarajevo, IDI)

Another element that helped solidify new friendships and promote engagement derived from the fact that students experienced YMI activities as fun. The value of creating a 'cool' persona for YMI was noted by a facilitator in Zagreb, who explained that the initial receptiveness among students is often linked to how the programme is first perceived and who within the school endorses the sessions (e.g. whether the most influential students also engage).

Aspirational messaging: 'People can be changed'

Boys' descriptions suggested that the programme's use of positive, empowering messages (Be a Man! Change the Rules!) may have shaped participant experiences in subtle yet profound ways. For example, when asked about the 'main purpose' of YMI, 14 boys (out of the 31 interviewed) explained the programme objectives in terms of personal and collective transformation, and expressed a sense of optimism that change is possible; in contrast, the remaining respondents typically commented that the programme was designed to 'raise awareness', 'help students learn' or 'have fun'. Interestingly, responses emphasising the programme's transformative aim were most often expressed by boys who had attended a residential retreat (11 times out of 14), suggesting the potential value of the immersive environment for inculcating the desire for change:

If I do not label, I believe that my friends will also not label. So that if this club, the Be a Man club, inspires one person ... then this one [person] can encourage others not to do that. So, if at least one person gets interested, this one could make others interested. (Domagoj, YMI participant Zagreb, IDI)

The most important purpose, the main point is that [YMI] made some kind of turning point, primarily in my life, because I have realised that there are so many things that I need to know ... I did not know that so many young people are going astray and that they can return to the right path and that it is never too late. I realised that people can be changed. (Emir, YMI participant Sarajevo, IDI)

Entrenched norms and resistance: 'It isn't normal'

While interview respondents provided many personal accounts of how the programme prompted a shift in attitudes towards greater acceptance and non-violence, some interviews also revealed aspects of entrenched patriarchy and hegemonic masculine ideals. Specific examples varied between sites. In Prishtina, participants sometimes expressed controlling views when questioned about the characteristics of 'ideal' girls. In Zagreb and Belgrade, homophobic attitudes frequently emerged, despite active participation in the programme:

An ideal girl first of all needs to know how to respect you as a partner. Second she needs to know how to respect your family. Third she needs to know how to dress. ... Every man has his own features, you know, that he would like his wife to respect, to keep her under control. (Fitim, YMI participant Prishtina, FGD)

Rarely anyone likes homosexuals except themselves. I look at it as a disease, like something that isn't normal. A lot of people would say that. (Antonio, YMI participant Zagreb, IDI)

The experience in Belgrade illustrates the salience of another related insight, that masculinity is frequently perceived as a sensitive topic and participants' first impressions are critical. In the Belgrade school, many students initially believed the Be a Man campaign was connected to the heavily politicised and violent gay pride parade that had recently taken place. Subsequently, students suspected that YMI was designed to promote homosexuality. In light of this misperception, facilitators had difficulty connecting with students, some of whom actively resisted the programme:

In the beginning we had a problem to make the students trust us. They [the students] were very suspicious about everything It was particularly hard to get them to trust us that we aren't a 'gay organisation' or we're not trying to convert them to be gay or to brainwash them or something like that. (Draško, male YMI facilitator Belgrade, IDI)

Discussion

By synthesising participant and facilitator perspectives from several years of YMI programming, this study helps to shed light on how and why specific elements of YMI were (or were not) effective. In alignment with the theory underpinning the programme (see Figure 2), boys described that learning to identify harmful gender norms and actively questioning these constructs (both within their personal lives and broader community) were salient aspects of the programme experience. For some participants,

this process enabled them to envision alternative versions of masculinity and femininity, thus helping them internalise new ideas.

Participants further explained that facilitators' non-judgmental style prompted openness and comfort during this shared reflection process. Moreover, discussions revealed that some boys viewed facilitators as credible role models who – along with the positive tone of the Be a Man campaign – inspired a sense of optimism that change is possible. These reflections support several promising strategies for reaching boys (and men) identified in other research, such as an emphasis on personal and collective reflection (within a safe space) to shift attitudes and norms (Barker, Ricardo, and Nascimento 2007; Gibbs et al. 2015); use of aspirational messages to minimise defensiveness and promote activism (Michau et al. 2014); and the importance of positive facilitation and role modelling (Barker et al. 2004; Minerson et al. 2011).

At the same time, findings uncovered additional components that had a positive influence on participants, thus expanding upon the nascent literature on how best to engage boys in transforming patriarchal gender norms. In particular, the YMI experience illustrates the importance of relationship building at various levels in order to foster an environment that is conducive to change. For example, genuine, personal connections between facilitators and participants emerged as a necessary step for creating safe spaces and opportunities for positive role modelling. Similarly, the programme helped establish and nurture new supportive peer groups, often based on a shared sense of upholding YMI values and leading efforts under the Be a Man campaign. The programme's ability to cultivate meaningful relationships among action-oriented peer groups suggests that youth leadership and strengthening social support systems can be mutually reinforcing, viable elements of programming with boys.

Participant reflections also highlighted the value of programme's experiential, interactive curriculum in creating opportunities for boys to reach their own conclusions and to gain first-hand experiences of being subjected to harmful expressions of masculinity, such as feeling powerless or being stereotyped. While some boys continued to express homophobic and controlling attitudes (towards girls), for many what they learned and practised within the YMI sessions provided an initial impetus to resist dominant gender norms. Facilitators were also able to increase the resonance of YMI content by creatively delivering sessions (e.g., by adapting the examples provided in the manual to better reflect the experiences of specific cities, schools and students). In addition, some boys suggested that the more intensive engagement experienced during the residential retreats was important for encouraging new ideas to take hold. The added value of the immersive setting was further supported by the transformative, aspirational vision of the programme shared by many retreat participants; in comparison, boys who only participated in the classroom sessions tended to describe the programme aims more modestly – as helping students learn, or to raise awareness. Finally, observations from facilitators highlight that positive perceptions are essential, especially early in the programme. Here the case of the Belgrade school serves as a useful example, illustrating how students' initial mistrust of YMI's objectives likely undermined the programme's success in that site.

Taken as a whole, study results point to several specific considerations that may have applicability beyond the Balkans context, particularly for school-based programming with young men:

- *Ensure positive first impressions:* Early perceptions have a lasting influence, particularly during this life stage, and boys may initially be suspicious of mes-

sages related to gender and masculinity. Carefully planning programme introductions as well as keeping track of related external events could be useful to address and diffuse any potential misconceptions.

- *Tailor the curriculum for the programme context and enable further adaptations through flexible delivery:* While formative research to inform programme design (and/or adaptation) prior to implementation is essential, it is also valuable to allow for flexibility and creativity during programme delivery in order to enhance participants' receptiveness and the overall resonance of the content.
- *Carefully consider who is facilitating the programme:* To build trust and meaningful connections, facilitators should be perceived as relatable and approachable (i.e., ideally be close in age and possess similar life experiences) and also embody core programme values within their own attitudes and behaviours. Creating opportunities for *informal* interactions with facilitators may also help to deepen relationships.
- *Encourage youth leadership and reciprocal accountability:* Boys' active leadership in planning and facilitating programme activities can enhance social support and motivation and help inculcate a sense of personal responsibility for programme objectives.
- *Extend programming beyond the classroom:* Shifting deeply entrenched attitudes and discussing sensitive issues can require more intensity and longer dialogue than is possible within a single session. Holding activities in more immersive environments is a promising strategy to help participants internalise new ideas.
- *Make the programme fun and aspirational:* A 'cool' and 'fun' persona for the programme is more likely to capture and sustain attention. In addition, using provocative and empowering messages can help spark a desire for change aligned with programme goals.

Limitations and further questions

There are several limitations to this study. Participants were purposively selected and frequently identified by implementing partners, which suggests that the boys interviewed may have been among those most engaged with YMI. As such, their perspectives may illustrate more optimal experiences than those shared by all students. Similarly, the facilitators interviewed were those recommended by implementing organisations.

Some critical questions for engaging boys remain unanswered. In light of the qualitative, exploratory nature of the research, the study did not systematically assess the prevalence of continued homophobic and patriarchal views expressed by some participants. These responses likely reflect the deeply entrenched patriarchal context in which these boys live, and raise important questions around the limits of change that interventions such as this can achieve within short timeframes – considerations raised in other studies of male engagement programming (Gibbs et al. 2015).

In addition, given the programmatic and research focus on boys (due to the largely male composition of students and YMI facilitators), the study is unable to compare the relative merits of mixed-sex (versus single-sex) facilitation or discussion groups, nor explore how girls would experience a similar approach. Finally, the success of gender-transformative programming fundamentally hinges on the ability to convince male participants to dismantle norms that uphold men's power and privilege (Casey et al. 2013), an issue that the study does not directly explore. Further research is required to better understand how this inherent tension unfolds in practice.

Conclusion

In the context of limited resources and overlapping, complex problems, male engagement to promote gender equality can only be part of the solution. As has been noted in the literature, focusing exclusively on boys/men prevents a 'gender synchronised' approach (engaging boys, girls, men and women simultaneously and together), which is a necessary strategy for transforming inequitable gender norms (Greene and Levack 2010, 5). As such, the rhetoric of male engagement must be critically assessed (Flood 2015). Consideration of when and why to apply this approach should be interrogated and based on contextual circumstances, implementing organisations' particular strengths and other existing programming in the same setting. Work with men and boys should, whenever possible, be combined with complementary and/or integrated approaches that include girls and women. Furthermore, the ability of curriculum-based programmes to fundamentally shift gender-related behaviours and norms should not be overstated, as these approaches leave broader social and normative structures largely uncontested. However, as the YMI experience (and several other male engagement programmes) indicates, ideas about masculinity can be shifted within project timelines. By identifying effective elements of a programme to redefine masculinities in several Balkan countries, the present study provides useful insights for others engaged in similar work.

Acknowledgements

CARE International Balkans coordinates YMI with partner organisations in each site: Centar E8, Peer Educators' Network, the Asocijacija XY, and Status M. In addition, the partnership included several independent researchers: Srdjan Dusanic, Ivana Jugovic, Ereblir Kadriu, Biljana Maletin and Vladimir Turjacanin. The authors would like to express their gratitude to all partners, participating schools and student participants. In addition, we thank the guest editors of this special issue of *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, as well as anonymous reviewers for their insightful contributions.

Disclosure statement

John Crownover and Besnik Leka work with CARE and helped coordinate the implementation of YMI. The remaining authors have no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research was supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs under grant REF-10/0074; and CARE Norway and CARE International Balkans [grant number IOP-01/2012].

Notes

1. While YMI is still ongoing in several countries in the region, this paper focuses on the 2011 to 2013 implementation cycle. The selection of specific countries reflects donor priorities.
2. The YMI is currently piloting a fully integrated approach (with boys and girls).
3. See <http://www.promundo.org.br/en/activities/activities-posts/program-h/>.
4. One exception is the school evaluated in Belgrade, where no positive outcomes were observed. While more information is needed to fully explain this result, monitoring data suggested that external political events negatively impacted students' initial receptiveness and willingness to engage in the programme.
5. Translation: Be a Man! 1. Change the rules 2. Build your brain 3. Use condoms without shame 4. Fall in love 5. Keep a strong head.

ORCID

Jeffrey Edmeades  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4092-7700>

References

- Barker, G., and P. Pawlak. 2014. *Understanding Young Men and Masculinities in the Balkans: Implications for Health, Development and Peace*. Washington, DC: CARE International.
- Barker, G., M. Nascimento, M. Segundo, and J. Pulerwitz. 2004. "How Do We Know If Men Have Changed? Promoting and Measuring Attitude Change with Young Men: Lessons from Program H in Latin America." In *Gender Equality and Men: Learning from Practice*, edited by S. Ruxton, 147–161. Oxford: Oxfam GB.
- Barker, G., J. M. Contreras, B. Heilman, A. Singh, and M. Nascimento. 2011. *Evolving Men: Initial Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)*. Washington, DC: ICRW.
- Barker, G., C. Ricardo, and M. Nascimento. 2007. *Engaging Men and Boys in Changing Gender-based Inequity in Health: Evidence from Programme Interventions*. Geneva: WHO.
- Barker, G., R. Verma, J. Crownover, M. Segundo, V. Fonseca, J. M. Contreras, B. Heilman, and P. Pawlak. 2012. "Boys and Education in the Global South: Emerging Vulnerabilities and New Opportunities for Promoting Changes in Gender Norms." *THYMOS: Journal of Boyhood Studies* 6 (2): 137–150.
- CARE International. 2012. *The Young Men Initiative: Engaging Young Men in the Western Balkans in Gender Equality and Violence Prevention: A Case Study*. Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina: CARE International Balkans.
- Casey, E. A., J. Carlson, C. Fraguera-Rios, E. Kimball, T. B. Neugut, R. M. Tolman, and J. L. Edleson. 2013. "Context, Challenges, and Tensions in Global Efforts to Engage Men in the Prevention of Violence against Women: An Ecological Analysis." *Men and Masculinities* 16 (2): 228–251.
- Connell, R. 1987. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Contreras, J. M., B. Heilman, G. Barker, A. Singh, R. Verma, and J. Bloomfield. 2012. *Bridges to Adulthood: Understanding the Lifelong Influence of Men's Childhood Experiences of Violence Analyzing Data from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey*. Washington, DC: ICRW.
- CP MERG. 2012. *Ethical Principles, Dilemmas and Risks in Collecting Data on Violence against Children: A Review of Available Literature*. New York: UNICEF.
- Das, A., E. Mogford, S. Singh, R. Barbhuiya, S. Chandra, and R. Wahl. 2012. "Reviewing Responsibilities and Renewing Relationships: An Intervention with Men on Violence against Women in India." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 14 (6): 659–675.
- Dunne, M., S. Humphreys, and F. Leach. 2006. "Gender Violence in Schools in the Developing World." *Gender & Education* 18 (1): 75–98.
- Dworkin, S. L., P. J. Fleming, and C. J. Colvin. 2015. "The Promises and Limitations of Gender-transformative Health Programming with Men: Critical Reflections from the Field." *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. doi:10.1080/13691058.2015.1035751.
- Eckman, A., A. Jain, S. Degnan-Kambou, D. Bartel, and J. Crownover. 2007. *Exploring Dimensions of Masculinity and Violence*. Washington, DC: CARE International Balkans.
- Eckman, A., C. Ricardo, E. Kadriu, O. Stula, J. Crownover, and B. Leka. 2012. *Exploring Dimensions of Masculinities, Femininities and Violence with Young Men and Young Women in Kosovo*. Prishtina, Kosovo: CARE International Balkans.
- Flood, M. 2015. "Work with Men to End Violence against Women: A Critical Stocktake." *Culture Health & Sexuality*. doi:10.1080/13691058.2015.1070435
- Fulu, E., A. Kerr-Wilson, and J. Lang. 2014. *What Works to Prevent Women and Girls? Evidence Review of Interventions*. Pretoria, South Africa: Medical Research Council.
- Gale, N., G. Heath, E. Cameron, S. Rashid, and S. Redwood. 2013. "Using the Framework Method for the Analysis of Qualitative Data in Multi-disciplinary Health Research." *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 13: 117–124.

- Gibbs, A., R. Jewkes, Y. Sikweyiya, and S. Willan. 2015. "Reconstructing Masculinity? A Qualitative Evaluation of the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures Interventions in Urban Informal Settlements in South Africa." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17 (2): 208–222.
- Greene, M., and A. Levack. 2010. *Synchronising Gender Strategies: A Cooperative Model for Improving Reproductive Health and Transforming Gender Relations*. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.
- Hatcher, A. M., C. J. Colvin, N. Ndlovu, and S. L. Dworkin. 2014. "Intimate Partner Violence among Rural South African Men: Alcohol Use, Sexual Decision-making, and Partner Communication." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 16 (9): 1023–1039.
- Heise, L. 2011. *What Works to Prevent Partner Violence? An Evidence Overview*. London: DFID.
- Jewkes, R., M. Flood, and J. Lang. 2014. "From Work with Men and Boys to Changes of Social Norms and Reduction of Inequities in Gender Relations: A Conceptual Shift in Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls." *The Lancet* 385 (9977): 1580–1589.
- Kaufman, M. 2000. "Working with Men and Boys to Challenge Sexism and End Men's Violence." In *Male Roles, Masculinities and Violence: A Culture of Peace Perspective*, edited by I. Brienes, R. Connell and I. Eide, 213–222. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- Kishor, S., and S. E. K. Bradley. 2012. *Women's and Men's Experience of Spousal Violence in Two African Countries: Does Gender Matter?* Calverton, Maryland: ICF International.
- Lundgren, R., M. Beckman, S. P. Chaurasiya, B. Subhedi, and B. Kerner. 2013. "Whose Turn to Do the Dishes? Transforming Gender Attitudes and Behaviours among Very Young Adolescents in Nepal." *Gender and Development* 21 (1): 127–145.
- Michau, L., J. Horn, A. Bank, M. Dutt, and C. Zimmerman. 2014. "Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls: Lessons from Practice." *The Lancet* 385 (9978): 1672–1684.
- Minerson, T., H. Carolo, T. Dinner, and C. Jones. 2011. *Issue Brief: Engaging Men and Boys to Reduce and Prevent Gender-based Violence*. Toronto: Status of Women Canada.
- Namy, S., B. Heilman, S. Stich, and J. Edmeades. 2014. *Be a Man, Change the Rules! Findings and Lessons from Seven Years of CARE International Balkans' Young Men Initiative*. Washington, DC: ICRW.
- O'Reilly, M. 2012. "Muscular Interventionism: Gender, Power and Liberal Peacebuilding in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14 (4): 529–548.
- Promundo, Instituto PAPAI, Salud y Género, and ECOS. 2013. *Program H|M|D: A Toolkit for Action, Engaging Youth to Achieve Gender Equity*. Rio de Janeiro: Promundo.
- Pulerwitz, J., G. Barker, M. Segundo, and M. Nascimento. 2006. *Promoting More Gender-equitable Norms and Behaviors among Young Men as an HIV/AIDS Prevention Strategy*. Washington, DC: Population Council.
- Ricardo, C., M. Eads, and G. Barker. 2011. *Engaging Boys and Men in the Prevention of Sexual Violence: A Systematic and Global Review of Evaluated Interventions*. Pretoria, South Africa: Sexual Violence Research Initiative.
- Ritchie, J., and J. Lewis, eds. 2003. *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: SAGE.
- UNICEF. 2005. *Research into Violence against Children in Schools in Kosovo*. New York: United Nations.
- Verma, R., J. Pulerwitz, V. S. Mahendra, S. Khandekar, A. Singh, S. S. Das, S. Mehra, A. Nura, and G. Barker. 2008. *Promoting Gender Equity as a Strategy to Reduce HIV Risk and Gender-based Violence among Young Men in India*. Washington, DC: Population Council.

Résumé

L'appel à l'implication des hommes et des garçons dans la promotion de la santé, la prévention de la violence et les progrès vers l'égalité des genres s'est renforcé ces dernières années. Cependant, les preuves et la réflexion sur la manière la plus efficace de modifier les normes préjudiciables de la masculinité sont encore limitées. Cette étude traite de ces lacunes en explorant les points de vue des participants au programme Young Men Initiative (YMI). Celui-ci est un programme innovant qui avait pour objectif la promotion d'une plus saine masculinité parmi les garçons fréquentant des lycées professionnels dans plusieurs pays de la région des Balkans, à travers des ateliers

pédagogiques, des retraites et une campagne de marketing social. Des données qualitatives ont été collectées au cours de 37 entretiens en profondeur et de 11 groupes de discussion thématique avec des garçons, des animateurs pour les jeunes et des enseignants. Les résultats obtenus dans quatre écoles (à Belgrade, Sarajevo, Pristina et Zagreb) suggèrent que plusieurs éléments du programme trouvaient un écho parmi les participants et confortaient leur engagement significatif dans des activités du projet. Concernant la manière selon laquelle et les raisons pour lesquelles certains aspects spécifiques de la YMI influençaient positivement les participants, cinq thèmes prédominants ont émergé : la réflexion personnelle, l'apprentissage fondé sur l'expérience, les relations avec les animateurs, de nouveaux groupes de pairs et des messages suscitant les aspirations. En s'appuyant sur ces observations, l'étude met en lumière les stratégies potentiellement utiles pour d'autres programmes destinés à des garçons et visant à transformer leur compréhension de la masculinité.

Resumen

En los últimos años ha aumentado el llamamiento a favor de que hombres y chicos participen en fomentar la salud, evitar la violencia y avanzar en la igualdad de sexos. Sin embargo, hay poca evidencia o reflexión sobre cómo cambiar de manera más eficaz las normas perjudiciales relacionadas con la masculinidad. En este estudio abordamos este vacío al analizar las perspectivas de los participantes en el innovador programa para hombres jóvenes Young Men Initiative (YMI) cuya finalidad es fomentar masculinidades más saludables entre los chicos que asisten a escuelas secundarias de formación profesional en varios países de los Balcanes mediante talleres educativos, convivencias y una campaña de publicidad social. Se recabaron datos cualitativos a través de 37 entrevistas exhaustivas y 11 charlas en grupo con chicos, facilitadores para jóvenes y profesores. Los resultados de cuatro escuelas (en Belgrado, Sarajevo, Pristina y Zagreb) indican que varios elementos del programa tuvieron un gran efecto en los participantes y apoyaron su implicación positiva en las actividades del proyecto. A la hora de identificar cómo y por qué determinados aspectos del programa YMI influyeron positivamente en los participantes surgieron cinco temas destacados: reflexión personal, aprendizaje basado en la experiencia, conexiones con facilitadores para jóvenes, nuevos compañeros y mensajes ambiciosos. A partir de estas perspectivas, en este estudio ponemos de relieve las estrategias potencialmente útiles para otros programas que tienen como finalidad llegar a los chicos y transformar su concepto de masculinidad.