

# Eight Ways Men and Boys Are Helping to End Gender-Based Violence

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“What can men and boys do to end gender-based violence?”

It’s that darn question again, the one that well-intended people ask without recognizing the assumption of exclusivity behind it. It’s a question I have come to both anticipate when I talk to people about the book I co-wrote, [Hey, Shorty!: A Guide to Combating Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools and on the Streets](#), yet I still find myself wincing a bit when it is asked. I don’t blame the interrogator for proposing such an inquiry. I blame the social construction of gender-based violence, and those it affects, as a “women’s issue” for this question’s ubiquity. And truly, I’d rather it be asked than ignored.

My pat answer to the question is this: men and boys are already involved in and leading efforts to end gender-based violence, and more are joining the ranks of gender justice activism every day. Gay, bisexual, queer, and transmen have been struggling with heterosexist and homophobic violence for as long as women have spoken out about their own unique brand of misogynist hostility. And these same men and boys have been creating their own solutions too.

But one need not be LGBTQ to have a history with gendered cruelty; straight male victims of domestic violence, intimate partner abuse, and incest have long suffered at the hands of fathers, boyfriends, uncles, and cousins. They have been impotent witnesses to women’s and girls’ suffering, and strong allies in fighting back. For reasons such as these, it is important to unearth the hidden resistance to gender-based violence that has been developed and directed by men. This is a critical part of broadening the definition of who is affected by this issue, and moving from a model where men are assumed to be deficits in the work to one where they are assets to a comprehensive and inclusive anti-violence movement that is able to meet everyone’s distinct needs.

## 1. Using film and hip-hop as a teaching tool: Byron Hurt

[Byron Hurt](#)’s documentary *Beyond Beats and Rhymes* is one of the most useful tools I’ve come across for deconstructing “masculinity, sexism, violence and homophobia in today’s hip-hop culture.” Instead of taking the traditional route of blaming a vaguely defined and erroneously homogeneous hip-hop culture for women’s degradation, Hurt focuses the discussion squarely on the individual men who participate in creating a limited conception of black masculinity that limits both men and women. He does so by featuring interviews with men and women who create and consume in hip-hop in various capacities, and puts the responsibility on men for developing solutions to eradicate violence. In addition to this award-winning film, Hurt has nearly twenty years of male-to-male gender-based violence prevention work under his belt, with a concentration on hyper-masculine spaces like professional athletics and the military.

## **2. Redefining strength & masculinity: Men Can Stop Rape**

Since 1997, [Men Can Stop Rape \(MCSR\)](#) has been a leader in redefining ideas about strength and masculinity, and establishing new socio-cultural norms for boys and men that do not rely on violence and domination. Although they do some direct service work with boys and men, the focus of MCSR is on training already established organizations on how to implement the MCSR program model to educate and mobilize their own communities. The model is used in universities, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies to unpack traditional masculinity, identify a range of healthy gender expressions for boys and men, explore the intersection of gender role expectations and rape culture, discuss male survival of and healing from sexual assault, connect sexism to other oppressions (e.g., homophobia and racism), and consider how to be better allies to women and girls. After the training, MCSR staff continues to support service providers with technical assistance and resources as they implement the program with boys and men of all ages.

## **3. Making sex about pleasure not danger: Coalition for Positive Sexuality**

Imagine what the world would look like if we no longer framed discussions about sex and sexuality from the standpoint of what people, especially youth, *don't* like or *shouldn't* be doing, but instead approached them from a place of what makes us happy and feels good. This is exactly what [Coalition for Positive Sexuality](#) does with their “Just Say Yes!” (or “Di Que Si!”) brochures and online forums for teens of all genders and sexualities. In an abstinence-only nation, models for positive sexuality are scarce, but a comprehensive approach to sex education that validates the diversity among and within gender, sexual identities, and expressions can help intimate partners recognize, name, and fulfill authentic desires and pleasure. At present sex, sexuality, and relationships are largely constructed as sites of risk and safety, which establishes a predator/prey dynamic among the people involved. Coalition for Positive Sexuality encourages openness, exploration, choice, respect, and enthusiastic consent in a language that is inclusive and reflective of youth culture.

## **4. Creating new ideals for young black and Latino men: Brotherhood/Sister Sol**

A core element of [Brotherhood/Sister Sol](#)'s multi-year youth development program for black and Latino men and boys ages 6 to 22 years old is a commitment to deconstruct sexism and misogyny, promote sexual education and socially responsible relationships, and reduce gender bias. Its aim is to use a strengths perspective to empower black and Latino youth to develop into critical thinkers and community leaders. They do so in a neighborhood plagued by the challenges of poverty, such as drug use, lack of affordable housing, overcrowded schools, and environmental toxicity. Using a combination of mentoring and community organizing, Brotherhood/Sister Sol participants are given the space and guidance to question rigid standards of masculinity and femininity and promote a new ideal amongst their peers.

## **5. Deconstructing men's relationship with pornography: Robert Jensen**

In *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* [media scholar Robert Jensen](#) uses personal anecdotes along with academic research to build upon the work of radical anti-pornography

feminists and argue that men who consume pornography are robbing themselves, and women, of authentic sexual pleasure and their humanity. He criticizes the way masculinity is used as a tool of dominion over women and men, and advocates charting new terrain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that goes beyond paternalistic protection notions of gender equality. Jensen actively tours North America speaking to audiences about destructive masculinity and sexual commodification.

## **6. Bringing gender education into public schools: The Boys Project**

During the years I worked with Girls for Gender Equity, there was one request I received from parents more than any other: when will you begin a program like this for boys? Luckily, I had a local resource to refer them to – [The Boys Project](#). Developed in three age cohorts – elementary, middle, and high school – the program provides a trusted adult and an accepting boy-only environment in which young men can examine the unhealthy messages boys internalize about gender, connect social expectations to changing physiology and psychology throughout adolescence, develop an understanding of sexual harassment and violence (including LGBTQ bullying and boy-on-boy abuse), and challenge gender norms in their own personal growth and development. The Boys Project runs in schools and community-based organizations in tandem with The Girls Project so that the program participants can reinforce each other’s understanding.

## **7. African men preventing violence against women: Ebony Men’s Resource Centre**

In collaboration with Men’s Resources International, [Ebony Men’s Resource Center](#) (EMRC) in Nigeria was started to identify ways men can partner with women to end gender-based violence. Among the goals of EMRC is the establishment of a group of men with social capital who can intervene in situations of domestic violence and change social attitudes men hold that perpetuate violence against women and children. Once the program has proven successful, EMRC will send male delegates to other organizations to help them to replicate the model and build an African men’s network for violence prevention and positive masculinity.

## **8. Documenting the global transgender experience: Transrespect Versus Transphobia Worldwide**

A project of Transgender Europe, [Transrespect Versus Transphobia Worldwide](#) (TVT) is a comparative global study of gender-based violence experienced by trans people from Afghanistan to Macedonia to Zimbabwe. Led by researchers Carsten Balzer and Jan Simon Hutta, TVT monitors reported murders of trans people, maps the legal systems of each country, and examines the legal and social structures of the societies to determine best practices and recommendations for human rights organizations, governmental institutions, the public, and trans activists who advocate an end to gender-based violence and discrimination.

This list is nowhere near comprehensive. But it is a place where we can begin to expand our ideas about where people are positioned in anti-violence and gender justice work, so that perhaps in the future the question will no longer be “what can boys and men do” but “how can I be a part of creating social change?”

Mandy Van Deven is an internationally published writer, progressive activist, and co-author of [Hey, Shorty!: A Guide to Combating Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools and on the Streets](#). You can find more about her work at [www.mandyvandeven.com](http://www.mandyvandeven.com).