



# National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

## Engaging Men: Triumphs, Troubles, and Tools

### WEBINAR QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

On February 4, 2015 Trace Fleming (Sexual Violence Program Director for 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance), Kris Macomber, PhD (Sociology Faculty for Meredith College), and Ben Atherton-Zeman (Artistic Director for Voices of Men) presented the webinar session “Engaging Men: Triumphs, Troubles, and Tools.” A repeat session of the webinar was held on April 15, 2015. The following information outlines the questions that were posed by participants during both webinar sessions and the presenters’ responses. This webinar series was designed to generate dialogue about the current proliferation of “engaging men” work, and to explore the benefits of men’s expanding involvement, the impact of this shift on community-based work, and the unintended consequences of men’s leadership.

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**Q: I hear about accountability a lot. But, what does it mean and what does it look like (especially from newcomers)?**

**Kris:** It can look like many things. It is both things “to do” and “not to do.”

- Being aware of male privilege and how it shows up in the work;
- Soliciting women’s advice and feedback
- Working in partnership with women’s organizations
- Being receptive to critique (rather than defensive)
- Continually learning
- Being knowledgeable about the history/herstory of the work, which is historically women and survivor-led

Also....

- Not seeking to control, dominate or co-opt the work
- Not competing with women’s organizations for funding

The thread that combines all of these “do’s” and “don’ts” is an intentional commitment to building gender equity into the culture of anti-violence work.

**Trace:** To me, accountability means taking responsibility for my actions. It means looking at myself and my work critically to see where I can be better and then making actual steps towards being better. It means accepting constructive criticism without defense and apologizing when I mess up.

**Q: How do we come up with a term beyond 'Engaging Men and boys' that doesn't exclude women and girls? It's vital that women and girls are not left out!**

**Kris:** This is such a great question. The language we use matters so much; in this case it sends a message about who is invited and who is not. I think the one term that is most inclusive and that I like a lot is “healthy relationship education.”

I could see how there would be resistance to letting go of the term “engaging men” because a big part of “engaging men work” is addressing men and masculinity specifically, which is why “men” is always included in the naming of this work. However, I think we could broaden the definition of “healthy relationship” to include the relationship we have with ourselves (i.e. how are men are shaped by and how do they negotiate socially constructed notions of masculinity and “manhood”). So, perhaps “healthy relationships work” can become a more broadly used term than “engaging men work.”

**Ben:** I don't know, but when talking about Engaging Men and Boys, I feel it's important to stress that women have been doing the majority of the work on these issues. Men need to do more work than we have been, while bearing in mind that we can't exclude women and girls.

**Q: How do we create safe spaces for public discourse?**

**Ben:** Safe for whom? I want to ensure safe spaces for women and girls, and for victims of violence. Many times, it's important to confront us men on our sexism – it might not feel “safe” for us, but sometimes feeling safe isn't the same as BEING safe. We men feel attacked sometimes, when we're not being attacked – we're being confronted on our sexism.

**Trace:** In my opinion, we absolutely have to have safe places where people can respectfully dialog with each other without fear that they will “say the wrong thing” or feel that they aren't “enough” (“feminist enough”, “advocate enough”, etc.). There's no way in my mind that we can be as productive as we want to be in this movement if people feel threatened or that they'll be publically shamed for not having the same opinions as others. It disturbs me greatly when these critical conversations develop into bullying situations where there is name-calling and disrespect. That's so not modeling the behavior that we want to see. I don't care how heated the verbal exchange gets – if we reduce ourselves to that kind of bullying behavior, we are not moving forward. That said, we also do not have to subject ourselves to bullying either. I would say that whatever format you use, there would need to be very structured rules and where everyone is very clear about the boundaries from the get-go. I would place conversation facilitators in the room or in the group who could shut down trolling or any hateful behaviors if they come up.

**Q: If there were one thing we can step up and do (as men), what would that be?**

**Ben:** Great question! I'd love to hear what women have to say about this. My opinion is: listen to women, learn from women, and contribute time and money to women's groups.

**Kris:** I think instead of jumping to start men's groups and investing so much time doing "engaging men" work with other men (only), men can invest time and attention supporting women's efforts and organizations. Attend conferences, trainings, and workshops led by local and/or state women's DV/SA organizations.

**Trace:** I like Ben's answer. Be brave enough to ask the women and girls in your life about their experiences and then be even braver by really listening without interrupting and without judging. See where those conversations take you. I think you'll be very surprised where you end up.

**Q: How do we open up these activities to get to the community and society level changes?**

**Ben:** Follow in the footsteps of the anti-violence organizations that are already doing that – No More during the Super Bowl, Breakthrough at other sporting events, the White Ribbon Campaign, etc.

**Kris:** I agree with Ben: link up with existing organizations and efforts that are already doing this work at these levels.

**Trace:** Ben and Kris's thoughts here are perfect. I completely agree. I'd also suggest for newer advocates that they think about their community partners. I feel that your community partners have to "buy-in" to the change and that starts with their relationship with you. Be very good at what you do in your community and be constantly learning, because those partners have to feel like they can trust you, and that you know what you're talking about. That makes a huge difference for when you want to build the partnerships that will help you move forward on larger projects in your community.

**Q: What are some ways we can institutionalize accountability in our organization?**

**Ben:** See the five steps sheets available at <http://www.voicesofmen.org/handouts.html>. Contact me for more questions and brainstorming.

**Kris:** Yes, Ben's five steps are great. Here are some other suggestions:

- Implement a process within the workplace where you address issues of privilege and inequality internally.
- For women-led organizations doing work with men, I think it can be really helpful to identify how you would like your partnerships with men, men's groups, and men's organizations to look like. What would an equitable arrangement look like? If you have a vision, you can write it down and create some guidelines. You could draw on past experiences to figure out what could have gone better.

For example, “The last time we co-sponsored an event with [Insert name of men’s organization] we ended up doing most of the logistics. It put a huge drain on our staff and it was not an equal division of labor. We also had different versions for the role that our organization would play in marketing the event. We wanted to market it to member programs, while they wanted to market it to college campuses so that more youth men would come. Ultimately, what was supposed to be a community engagement event turned into an “engaging men” event, where the focus was almost entirely on men.” Having a record of what went wrong can help flesh out what you would like your partnerships to look like in the future.

**Trace:** I think accountability has to start within ourselves – but certainly it is appropriate for agencies and organizations to work daily on accountability too. Agency leaders have to be really ready to listen to their employees and even more importantly to the one’s their agency serves. Honest staff conversations need to be had – and that can be brutal as egos and defensiveness can really get in our way, but it’s worth it. We can’t fix anything unless you know that it’s broken and how it got broken to begin with. I would also suggest that transparency is also critical. Share with those you serve what changes your agency has recognized as needing to make, then share the steps in which you plan to make those changes.

**Q: What is the difference between engaging men and involving men? Or are they the same?**

**Kris:** I actually think there are two different approaches. There is “engaging men work,” which targets primarily men and male youth. This work is predominantly led by men and men’s organizations. And, then there are efforts to involve men that don’t necessarily see “engaging men work” as the only pathway in or venue for their involvement.

**Trace:** I agree with Kris. To me, “engaging men” and “involving men” are different approaches. Engaging men in my opinion starts with helping them be more aware of anti-violence issues and asking them to act. Involving men is having them participate in different activities, response teams, committees, and councils.

**Ben:** I would add that, even though this work is predominantly led by men and men’s organizations, that doesn’t have to be the case. Kris and I wrote about this for XY Online, available at: <http://www.xyonline.net/content/%E2%80%9Cengaging-men%E2%80%9D-work-it-men-only> – why aren’t more women (like Kris!) seen as experts on engaging men?

**Q: I work mainly within bystander intervention (Green Dot). How do we specifically reach out to men to be better active bystanders?**

**Ben:** By defining “active bystander” as stopping behavior on the bottom of the pyramid. Contact me for more thoughts re: working with Green Dot – I am such a fan of Green Dot and just entered your poetry contest!

**Q: What makes spaces unsafe for men, and what would make them feel safe?**

**Ben:** See above re: feeling safe vs. being safe. We need to warn men to expect suspicion from women – we as a gender have well earned women’s suspicion! But stay with these men as they experience this movement – they will also face adulation for doing very little. They will have to deal with both responsibly, and they’ll need our help to do so.

**Q: What strategies have been effective in walking that line between getting men involved and not replicating sexism in the movement?**

**Ben:** I used to think we needed to use different messages to get men in the door, then talk about male privilege and such once they are “in.” But women have challenged me on this, and I think it’s possible to do both at once, using the five steps or equivalent.

**Kris:** I attempted to address this in my response above about how to institutionalize accountability. Hopefully, that helps. To reiterate my point, being clear about what equitable partnerships between women and men looks like can be very helpful. I think a major goal is to maintain an intentional focus on working with men in ways that builds gender equity.

**Q: I know the issue of 'Engaging Men' in the title is necessary to get men into the room, but why is this? Is it because of fear that the event will be thought of as 'male bashing' or guilt raising if it is called something else?**

**Ben:** I think that men sometimes won’t even come to an event that has “Engaging Men” in the title! But it’s possible to “mandate” attendance in certain situations – I think that it’s fine to do that, then make additional involvement the choice of the men. The low- hanging fruit will fall, but not if they’re not mandated or strongly encouraged to attend.

**Kris:** In my research, I found that one way to make what is historically considered “women’s work” appealing to men is to redefine it as “men’s work.” It has been a strategic move and in many ways an effective one for bringing anti-violence messaging to male audiences – but there are some unintended consequences as well (i.e. male-only space can lead to co-optation, “boys clubs,” and of course, it does not invite women and girls).

**Ben:** I would actually advocate for NO exclusive male-only space. At the Boston chapter of NOMAS, for example, we used to host “men’s discussion groups.” We advertised it as aimed at male-identified folks (cis or trans) but that nobody would be turned away. There might be a few women who want to attend out of curiosity, but they probably won’t stay for many meetings.

**Q: I work on a university campus specifically around male victims of sexual assault both in awareness building and in direct service. I have a hard time using language "men's violence against women" exclusively because it doesn't allow men to be victims themselves. Research is telling us more and more men have been abused as children or in adulthood and that population is ignored. Just wondering on your thoughts on how we keep our centers as inclusive as possible and supporting everyone.**

**Ben:** I agree – probably “gender-based violence” is better, and many women’s groups are using that term. But some women’s groups and advocates seem worried about “neutralizing” terms, and keeping men out of the spotlight as the ones mostly responsible – even most male victims of sexual violence are victimized by men (usually adult men victimizing boys, apparently).

**Kris:** I think you bring up a really important issue. It's also a question I am hearing more often throughout the work. There are different dynamics at play with intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and child sexual abuse. So, the terms we use depends on the nature of the conversation. That being said, a conversation that unites all three forms of violence (IPV, SA, and CSA), could focus on how masculinity is defined in ways that promotes power over others, sexual dominance, aggression, etc. That kind of framework applies to an analysis of men as perpetrators of sexual assault against women partners and also child sexual abuse.

**Trace:** I agree with you that there are male survivors and that they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. They deserve access to services and advocacy without any hesitation. In ten years of advocacy work, I have never seen a SV program that would not provide services to someone that identifies as a man. Many agencies I know are actively trying to push for gender neutral language and inclusive services. That said, the fact remains that there are more victims of sexual and domestic violence that are women than men. Men’s violence towards other men is also alarmingly high, proving that the patriarchal culture that we have in this society is harmful and not addressing either of those types of violence is also harmful. Not talking about it doesn’t make it any less true. It’s a delicate balance and one that will take a long time to find.

**Q: Does any of Kris's research touch on international male engagement issues?**

**Kris:** My research focuses on men’s involvement in anti-violence work in the U.S.

**Ben:** There are many international researchers who are focusing on this – Krizia Nardini from Italy comes to mind as one of them. Contact the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities for more resources on this: <http://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/csmm/index.html>

**Q: I wonder if there are any programs/activities centered around "flipping the script" and having women fill positions typically filled by men and then vice-versa. For example, men cooking, stay at home fathers, etc.**

**Ben:** Yes – Jonathan Grove had a program where fraternity men cooked for women who were residents in DV shelters for Mother’s Day. According to him, it was a moving experience for all involved. There are many other examples, but that’s what comes to mind. Internationally, lots of “engaging men” programs

focus on men filling such positions – doing housework, childcare and so forth – contact MenEngage for more information about that.

**Trace:** I think that sometimes when there's no one doing something you want to see in your area, that's your chance to do it. I'd love to see what you come with. Challenging gender stereotypes is so important. I was just thinking how I'd love to see parenting classes that encourage parents to allow boys to play with dolls and kitchen toys. I mean really, how can we expect boys to become gentle fathers (and partners, and people) if they don't ever get a chance to practice?

**Q: Have there been any efforts to organize the men who work in this field?**

**Ben:** The menagainstviolence Yahoo group is a wonderful effort to organize men and others who care about engaging men accountably and sustainably, from a feminist perspective. I suggest you join!

**Kris:** I agree with Ben that the menagainstviolence yahoo group is a great resource. There are also many national organizations such as Men Can Stop Rape, Men Stopping Violence, and A Call to Men. Also, state DV and SA coalitions often have initiatives that work to involve men. The website XY: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Politics (organized by Michael Flood) is another fantastic resource. Futures Without Violence is another organization that does great education programming with men and male youth.

**Q: How do we address male leaders or national organizations that consistently fail to live up to these standards, but continue to hold themselves out as leaders?**

**Kris:** I see a few pathways here. One, we/you can take the hard line and stop collaborating, donating, partnering, and associating with organizations who “fail to live up to these standards.” Two, if you think it's worthwhile to struggle through trying to communicate with the organization in hopes that it will lead to some kind of change, then continue to communicate with them. This is a really difficult challenge because you can plead your case all day, but if people and/or organizations refuse to hear it and do anything about it, then it's hard to see how communicating with them will get any kind of good result.

**Q: Can you speak to the tension between men not pulling their weight and men's voices drowning out women's? My male-identified friends have told me that it's tough for them to determine which they're doing at times.**

**Ben:** Outstanding question! I think it can be a tension, but also not – I've seen men drown out the voices of women while NOT doing too much work – also men doing lots of work, yet not drowning out. In other words, both sides are not necessarily on either end of a fulcrum – they may be separate bars. It's possible, and desirable, for men to do lots of hard work while still not drowning out the voices of women. Checking in with the women around you is key, for men. Having women, role models, mentors in your life that will challenge you.

**Trace:** Thank you for asking this. I've been in groups where this has happened and it's really uncomfortable and frustrating. Creating a safe space for women and men to be able to communicate together respectfully is very important. I think if you're talking about creating a new project, or group (work or support) coming together at the first meeting and creating together with the group members what all of the expectations are could be a helpful, so that everyone is on the same page. I would also encourage the leaders of the group to be really on the lookout for people feeling uncomfortable so they can reach out to the person creating the negative situation and try to help them understand why their behavior has been problematic. I've found, like the situation that you described, often people who are being offensive may not know that they are upsetting anyone. If they cannot handle constructive criticism they may not be ready to be a part of your group.

**Q: Any tips or creative ideas for the step before men are engaged in the movement? What outreach has worked to get them in the door to begin with?**

**Ben:** Survivor stories, followed by simple tasks that men can do. Steps one and two on the five steps to engage men.

**Trace:** I've found building relationships with men can help. I was just saying this to my co-worker about some of our law enforcement officers. They tend to be more willing to come to things if they know us. I encourage networking and going the extra mile with other community partners when you can so that can help build that trust so when you invite them to your events, they might be more likely to show up and help out.

**Q: Has anyone incorporated simple handouts/information re: sexism – examples of sexist comments, inappropriate behavior, etc. – that you could provide incoming male board members or other key volunteers?**

**Ben:** I'd recommend HAVEN's remarkable pyramid, which is part of your handout packet. Also, male board members should be required to take your volunteer training.

**Trace:** HAVEN is great! I would say that it should be an absolute expectation that any male acting as an agent of your agency in any capacity should participate in your volunteer training.

**Kris:** What a great idea, Anne. I haven't seen anyone do this. But, there might be a fantastic opportunity to create a document like this. Something like a "Guidelines for Creating a Healthy, Equitable Culture." I would love to help agencies and organizations work on something like this!