

Chapter 1

Why the worry about young men?

Young men aged 15–24 die at rates far higher than their female counterparts, and at rates higher than men of any other age group. Worldwide, the leading causes of death for young men aged 15–24 are traffic accidents and homicide – both directly related to how boys and men are socialized. In much of Latin America, the Caribbean and parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the leading cause of early death far and away is homicide. Even in parts of the world where young men’s mortality rates are lower overall – such as Western Europe – more than 60 per cent of mortality among boys and young men from birth to age 24 is due to external causes, again mostly accidents and violence. In countries such as Jamaica, Brazil, Colombia and some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, young men’s mortality rates are higher than in countries with declared wars.

In India and other parts of South Asia, there have been numerous studies and reports on ‘missing women and girls’, referring to girls who were not born because of selective abortion and others who died in infancy because of the widespread bias in favour of boys. In parts of Latin America, while on a much smaller scale, there are ‘missing young men’. In Brazil, for example, the 2000 census confirmed that there were nearly 200,000 fewer men than women in the age range 15–29 because of higher rates of mortality through accidents, homicide and suicide among young men (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) 2004). By the year 2050, Brazil will have 6 million fewer men than women, principally because of violence (O Globo 2004c).

Generally, biology provides for slightly more boys to be born because the XY chromosome structure leaves boys more vulnerable to some illnesses. Nature compensates to even out the chances that there will be equal numbers of boys and girls. In some parts of the world, however, cultures intervene in gendered ways to change these ratios. In India and other parts of South Asia, the bias in favour of boys means that millions of girls are missing – they were never born or died early because of selective abortion and female infanticide. In parts of Latin America, young men are missing because they died in violence and traffic accidents: victims too, of rigid ways of defining what it means to be men and women.

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In much of the world, young men die earlier than young women and die more often than older men largely because they are trying to live up to certain models of manhood – they are dying to prove that they are ‘real men’. They are driving a car or motorcycle too fast mostly to demonstrate to others that they like the thrill of risk and daring. Or they are on the streets, often working, or maybe just hanging out in public spaces where gang-related and other forms of violence most frequently occur, or they gravitate to a violent version of manhood associated with gangs.

In many low-income urban areas, gangs (most involved in drug trafficking or other illegal activities) vie for territory and for the energy, loyalties and identities of young men. In some low-income areas – the garrison communities of Kingston, Jamaica, the low-income, urban areas (*comunas*) of Medellín, Colombia, Rio de Janeiro’s *favelas* (low-income areas), inner city areas in the United States, and shantytowns in parts of Central and South America – gang leaders are seen by many young people as homegrown heroes.

In parts of Africa, local militia leaders and local gangs hold similar power. In the Delta region of Nigeria, armed groups of young men used to attack only foreign oil company installations and staff. In some cities, they have now extended their violence to control entire neighbourhoods. In South Africa, there are reports of former African National Congress (ANC) combatants – lacking jobs, job skills and the social recognition they once had – being involved in gang-related violence. All of these groups attract mostly low-income young men to versions of manhood who use violence as a means to cope with their sense of social exclusion.

In many such settings, gang-involved young men are sought after as sexual partners by young women and emulated by other young men. They hold power, have money in their pockets and, by their willingness to use violence against police and rival gangs, they have status. To be a *bandido* (member of the drug-trafficking group or *comando*) in Brazil’s *favelas*, a drug Don in a Kingston garrison community or a *gangbanger* in a US inner city area, is to have a name and clout in a setting where many young people perceive themselves to be excluded and disenfranchised.

The violence that young men are too often victims of (and that some carry out) also has major implications for the health and well-being of girls and women. Studies from around the world find that between one-fifth and one-half of adult women surveyed have been victims of physical violence from male partners. We know that the patterns of attitudes and behaviours that lead some men to use violence against women begin in childhood and adolescence, and that this gender-based violence often begins in dating or courtship relationships.

From a public health perspective, it could be concluded from even the most superficial glance at the data that being a young man between the ages of 15 and 24, particularly a low-income, urban-based young man, is in itself a risk factor. As a researcher in Rio de Janeiro has described it, the high rate of

homicides there is a 'male social pathology' (O Globo 2002a). Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO) suggests that being male, with regard to homicide, is a 'strong demographic risk factor' (WHO 2002: 25). This clarifies the issue about as much as saying that driving a car puts one at risk for traffic accidents. To say that being a young man is a 'risk factor' or that violence in the region is a 'male social pathology' offers relatively little explanation of the factors at play. What specifically is it about being a young man, and being a low-income young man in particular, that is the risk or the pathology? And, what is known about the young men in these settings who are not involved in gang-related and other forms of violence? Indeed, how do we explain how even in low-income, violent settings, the majority of young men generally do *not* become involved in gang-related violence?

In the school setting, it has clearly been seen how rigid views about gender affect both boys and girls. Since the early 1980s, efforts to improve school enrolment in developing countries have rightly focused on the major disadvantages affecting girls and young women. As a result of these initiatives, girls' enrolment in primary education in developing countries increased from 93 per cent in 1990 to 96 per cent in 1999. According to figures by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2002), 86 countries have already achieved gender parity in primary education and 35 are close to doing so. Since the early 1990s, in parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, and in a few countries in Asia, and in nearly all of Western Europe and North America, girls have been enrolled at slightly higher rates than boys and are performing better than boys in school on several measures (reading levels and standardized test scores) (UNESCO 2002). Researchers have noted that low-income, urban-based boys in some countries are the group most likely to drop out of school.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA 2003), half of all new human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) cases occur among young people aged 15–24. Worldwide, on average young men generally have penetrative sex earlier and with more partners before forming a stable union than do young women. The exceptions are parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, where girls have earlier average ages of sexual debut, sometimes as a result of forced or coerced sex by older men. Boys and young men are often socialized to see themselves as having a greater need for sex, and for risky sex, and as sexually dominating women. Even after forming stable unions or getting married, men are also more likely than women to have occasional sexual partners outside their stable relationship. This greater number of sexual partners and longer period of sexual experimentation stage for young men on average than young women has major implications for HIV transmission, and is another rationale for seeking to understand their needs and realities and directing services and education to them.

Violence in major cities may be a male social pathology. By the same token, HIV and the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is largely spread

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by the sexual behaviour of men, whether with male or female partners. The majority of cases of HIV/AIDS in the world occur via sexual transmission between men and women. Approximately one in every seven cases of HIV infection worldwide is via sexual transmission between men. An estimated 10 per cent of the world's cases of HIV are via injecting drug use; 80 per cent of those among men (Panos Institute 1998). In sub-Saharan Africa, the vast majority of HIV transmission is heterosexual, often in situations in which men's greater power in intimate relationships means that they control or dominate sexual decision-making. We might also say then that HIV, in the way it is spread, is mostly a function of the sexual behaviour of men. While the number of women who are HIV-positive is now higher than men in some countries, it is the sexual behaviour of men that largely drives the epidemic.

Recognizing these trends, in 2000–01, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) dedicated its World AIDS Campaign to the issue of men's behaviour and the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Background documents for the campaign sought to place men's sexual behaviour in a context of gender socialization, explaining how the way boys and men are raised in many parts of the world makes both them and their partners vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Nonetheless, in some parts of the world, the tendency has been to blame men for HIV/AIDS. A headline in a newspaper in Portugal, reacting to the campaign, said: 'AIDS: Men are to blame' (A Capital 2000).

In 2003, with the Global Emergency AIDS Act in the US Congress, some lawmakers in the United States decided that African men were the problem behind HIV/AIDS and included language in the bill that called for changing how African men treat women, with funding provided for 'assistance for the purpose of encouraging men to be responsible in their sexual behavior, child rearing and to respect women'. While many persons would likely agree with the sentiment of this statement, it is important that we avoid blaming individual men and instead examine more closely how it is that social constructions of gender and manhood lead to HIV-related vulnerability.

Indeed, in the name of thoughtful inquiry, policy development and social justice, it is imperative to understand what exactly it is about the socialization of some men and boys that leads to these behaviours. Simply blaming men and boys leads to punitive, unjust and ineffective policies. In many parts of the world, it has become something of a national sport to demonize young men, particularly low-income young men – and in Brazil and the United States, low-income young men of African descent or other immigrant groups. Punitive policies and widespread incarceration, as opposed to genuine rehabilitation and reinsertion programmes, are the norm in Latin America, much of the English-speaking Caribbean and the United States. In the United States and Brazil, as has been widely reported, young men of African American descent are far more likely to have been in prison than to have studied in university. In one neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil,

among 450 men interviewed, aged 15–60, 29 per cent had been arrested or picked up by police at least once.¹

As French sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2001) and other authors have argued, zero tolerance policies, whether in Brazil, the United States or the United Kingdom have resulted in the rounding up of large numbers of young people, usually low-income young men (and often from disadvantaged immigrant groups or those of African descent), or the incarceration of these young men over relatively minor offences. It has become convenient in some policy-making circles in parts of the world to incarcerate low-income young men rather than to try to understand how delinquent behaviour might be prevented, or to understand the contexts of structural disadvantage, life circumstances and gender socialization that lead to such behaviours.

Some authors have suggested that too many young men in a society is a problem and that the age structure of many developing countries – of having too many idle and unemployed young men – is in itself a factor associated with violence. For example, a World Bank document states: ‘Large-scale unemployment, combined with rapid demographic growth, creates a large pool of idle young men with few prospects and little to lose’ (Michailof et al. 2002: 3). Clearly, unemployment is a major issue for economies with rapid population growth and a large population of youth seeking work.

Various researchers describe out-of-work young men as a menace and in negative and pessimistic tones, with the implication that they can and will be sucked into violence at any moment. Mesquida and Wiener (1999) make a strong and convincing case that one of the most reliable factors in explaining conflict is the relative number of young men compared to the population as a whole. They attribute young men’s violence to competition for female partners and competition with older males for access to economic and political resources. In analysing data from more than 45 countries and 12 tribal societies, they find – even controlling for income distribution and per capita gross national product, which themselves are also associated with conflict – that the ratio of young men aged 15–29 for every 100 men aged 30 and over is associated with higher rates of conflict. In a similar vein, Cincotta et al. (2003) state:

Why are youth bulges so often volatile? The short answer is: too many young men with not enough to do. When a population as a whole is growing, ever larger numbers of young males come of age each year, ready for work, in search of respect from their male peers and elders. Typically, they are eager to achieve an identity, assert their independence and impress young females. While unemployment rates tend to be high in development countries, unemployment among young adult males is usually from three to five times as high as adult’s rates, with lengthy periods between the end of schooling and first placement in a job.

(Cincotta et al. 2003: 44)

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Other authors have argued, however, that having a large population of young men is not sufficient to explain the kind of violence and conflict that occur, nor the intricacies with how specific violent groups form and how youth do or do not become part of such groups (see Urdal 2002, for example). Indeed, however compelling the argument is that too many young men is the problem, it is important to affirm that in any of these settings, only a minority of young men participate in such conflicts. For example, the vast majority of young men – even those unemployed and out-of-school – were not involved in Charles Taylor's war in Liberia, nor become involved in gangs in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*. Indeed, even in the poorest countries with the largest proportion of youth in their populations, the vast majority of young men do not get involved in violence. There is tremendous variation within countries and among young men, and numerous intervening variables from family to community, to individual perceptions. In many settings, there is ultimately a racist implication in such arguments that low-income young men (many of whom are of African descent) in places like Africa are inherently violent and unstable for societies.

Thus, to associate violence or the spread of HIV/AIDS with manhood or masculinities, or too many young men in a society is necessary, but not sufficient. Violence is nearly always gendered, as it also takes place within specific dimensions and conditions of power, social class structure and cultural context, as are the behaviours and circumstances that facilitate the transmission of HIV/AIDS. But it must be kept in mind that serious interpersonal violence is carried out only by a minority of young men, even in the low-income settings discussed here. And, interpersonal violence is only one issue related to low-income young men, as is HIV/AIDS.

Another caveat is in order. Fundamentally, these overall tendencies related to violence, HIV/AIDS and education mask the tremendous diversity of young men and their realities. For every young man who recreates traditional and sometimes violent versions of manhood, there is another young man who lives in fear of this violence. For every young man who hits his female partner, there is a brother or son who cringes at the violence he witnesses men using against his sister or his mother. For every young man who refuses to use a condom, there is another who discusses sexual health issues with his partner. In discussions of male 'social pathologies', particularly in discussions related to HIV/AIDS and to violence, these alternative voices are often lost.

These issues must also be understood within the context of social exclusion. As will be discussed, the needs, realities and socialization of young men and young women in southern countries, and in low-income areas in northern, more industrialized countries, take place against a backdrop of unequal access to education, employment and income. At the same time, these young men live in consumer-oriented economies in which young people are the deliberate targets of mass marketers. In this skewed system, low-income young people too often lack legitimate means to acquire those very goods they are bombarded into wanting.

This book will ask: what is the trouble with young men? It is impossible to answer that question without also looking at the underlying perversity of social structures that measure individual worth and status by goods acquired and consumed, that target a steady stream of messages to young men and young women to want certain goods, to dress certain ways, and then deprive them of the means to acquire those goods.

Behind all of these issues, culturally proscribed versions of manhood, of what societies and individuals define what it means to be a man, are at play. Researchers and advocates for more than 30 years have created a field of 'gender studies' and carried out gender analyses examining how culturally proscribed versions of womanhood – of what it means to be a woman – have constrained and limited the life choices, health and well-being, and human rights of girls and women. These studies and initiatives opened the door for seeing gender as a social – not a biological – phenomenon, and for understanding how some aspects of manhoods as traditionally constructed are often harmful or negative for women and girls.

More recently, newer questions in the field of gender studies have emerged. Women and men have recognized that there are often negative consequences for men and boys in some of the ways that manhoods are traditionally and rigidly constructed in many parts of the world. A partial list of some of these negative outcomes has already been presented: dying younger, driving too fast, using violence to achieve their ends and dropping out of school earlier in part because of having to work outside the home at relatively early ages. All of these will be discussed in detail.

At times the field of gender studies or gender has been polarized: girls and women are always dominated and subjugated and men and boys are always dominant, brutish and obtain benefits from the unequal gender order, what Australian sociologist R.W. Connell (1994) has called the 'patriarchal dividend'. Some voices in the field have said that until the inequalities affecting girls and women are redressed, that the issues of boys and men are secondary. Most advocates and researchers, however, are now saying that women's well-being cannot be improved without including boys and men and that it is vital to examine how some narrowly and rigidly defined versions of masculinity also bring with them negative consequences for boys and men.

In saying this, however, we must be careful not to throw out, or portray as negative, all gendered and sexed aspects of being human. The specific and different ways that young women and young men experience sexual pleasure, for example, are not inherently bad and should not be characterized as such. The problem arises when domination, coercion or power imbalances exist, or when one gendered or sexed way is portrayed as better or superior to the other. The gendered pleasure that boys experience in testing the limits of their physical strength and stamina can be positive – and is a realm that is increasingly being opened up for girls and women. The pleasure that many women derive from breastfeeding is positive; the problem is when women are

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reduced to maternal roles or subjugated. Again, the challenge is how to open the realm of caregiving in all its forms to boys and men. Men will not be able to breastfeed – without considerable biomedical re-engineering – but they can and should take on caregiving roles. This is all to say that sex differences and gender differences are not inherently bad; it is power imbalances and rigidly proscribed gender differences that are the problems.

This book emerges from the perspective that narrowly defined gender orders are negative for boys, girls, men and women. It will explore the realities, complexities and vulnerabilities of low-income, urban-based young men across several domains of their health and development. This book will rely heavily on the words and experiences of young men interviewed since 1994 in the United States and Brazil, and to a lesser extent in the Caribbean and Nigeria, and other parts of Africa. It will rely most heavily on interviews with young men in Brazil, where I live, to provide in-depth examples and case studies. It will be impossible in this space to do justice to the complexity of the cultural and contextual differences between young men in these four settings, but comparisons and differences will be highlighted. For example, the dimension of race, or ethnicity, and social exclusion based on race is a major factor in the United States, Brazil and the Caribbean for the young men interviewed there – nearly all of whom were of African descent in those three settings. In Nigeria and Uganda, for example, race is a ‘constant’, but social class differences and religious and ethnic group tensions loom large for low-income young men, intersecting with what it means to be a man. In sum, in including so many regions, we will lose in-depth detail but be able to demonstrate that these trends and issues – of boys dying to be men – are not an isolated phenomenon.

This book will examine five major issues related to young men in these settings:

- the general challenges they face to coming of age in settings of social exclusion
- their vulnerability to becoming involved in gang-related violence or being a victim of such violence
- their gender-specific access to and performance in school
- their access to the job market, the challenges they face in acquiring employment and the meaning of work in terms of defining their identities
- their interactions with young women, including becoming fathers and issues related to sexuality and reproductive health as well as the use of violence in intimate relationships, and the implications of these for HIV/AIDS prevention.

This book will focus mostly on young men who define themselves as heterosexual, or on heterosexual masculinities. It will comment on the homophobic attitudes of some young men, and on the role of homophobia in

socializing young men, but the focus is specifically on heterosexual young men, their attitudes toward young women, and their interactions with the violent versions of manhood associated with gang-related violence (which is also largely heterosexual and often homophobic).

The focus here is on a fairly loose population called ‘young men,’ referring to young people between the ages of 15 and 24. These age boundaries are not, however, fixed in stone. ‘Youth’ in Nigeria, for example, can go up to 30 years according to some federal government policies, and up to 40 and beyond according to how families and communities define hierarchy and power over the life-cycle.

The reasons for focusing on *young* men are multiple. Youth is a socially constructed life phase and phenomenon that is lived out within the biological matrix of puberty and adolescent physiological development – and puberty itself is lived out in the socially constructed matrix of gender. Young men experience the biological, body-based phenomena of spermatogenesis (having the first ejaculation), sexual desire and a physical growth spurt (both in height and muscle mass) within socially proscribed frameworks that measure and assess this sexual desire, growth and stamina. Biology provides a template – the hardware – for physical growth, sexual desire and reproductive capabilities.

Society in turn creates and recreates a valorative framework for these biological phenomena and provides hierarchies. Being bigger, faster and stronger and using violence to resolve conflicts and achieve dominance are often valued or glorified, while being smaller, having a modest physical stature and modest strength and using words instead of fists to resolve conflicts frequently are not. Having more sexual conquests is valued, that is channelling sexual desire in a way that emphasizes quantity of relationships and partners rather than quality in relationships. And of course, that sexual desire and the biological phenomenon of ejaculation must be engaged in heterosexual activity (or at least fantasizing about heterosexual sex). To be a ‘real man’ in most settings any same-sex attraction must be repressed or denied.

Youth is also the phase of life when young men generally have their first penetrative sex, experience their first intimate relationships (not necessarily in the same relationships), and are enjoined to acquire work or earn income outside the household. It is during this period when many young men leave school or are forced out of school. Young men are crossing the socially defined space between childhood and adulthood and generally taking on more complex and demanding roles in society.

They are also becoming aware. Again, biology provides a template for neurological development – for the ability to think, reason and contemplate in abstract ways. Not all human beings achieve this potential, and not all cultures promote this kind of thinking, but the biological potential for abstract thinking is, from what we know from the field of neurosciences, universal. With abstract thinking comes the ability to imagine what-if and to

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compare ideals – of justice, access to goods and income, those who have and those who want – with the realities of tremendous inequalities. Young men and women can, and in some settings do, project and imagine the kind of persons they want to be – they acquire subjectivity. It is within this imagining, this self-awareness and this ability to compare ideals with the real, that psychic frustration emerges. We will hear in the voices of many young men frustration over social exclusion and over their lack of access of power and income and women and a keen awareness of their limited ability to change these realities.

Nigerian young men show anger toward the ‘elites’ and the *Al-hajis* (men, of some income, who have done the pilgrimage to Mecca). Youth living in post-apartheid South Africa show frustration over the lack of jobs and compare the ideal they once held of social equality coming with democracy with the reality of tremendous income inequalities. Low-income Brazilian young men show resentment toward middle class youth and adults and sometimes toward drug traffickers who they perceive get ‘all the good girls’. African American young men in the United States show a similar disdain toward white young men (and whites in general) and to gangbangers. Low-income Caribbean youth compare themselves to their North American counterparts and those Caribbean young men who were able to migrate to the United States. Behind this frustration is a comparison between what they would like to achieve (or what society tells them they should achieve) and what they are able to achieve.

This frustration, apart from the psychological strain it causes on young men themselves, is the incubator of social unrest and of some forms of violence (including gang involvement), seen in various forms in the areas studied here: ethnic tensions in Nigeria, violence in the garrison communities of Jamaica and drug-trafficking gangs in the United States and Brazil. Low-income young men in these settings are frequently torn between using conventional, non-violent means to achieving their ends and acquire status, income and women (or perhaps not to be able to acquire these things), or using violent ways to achieve them, which generally involves becoming part of gangs or violent groups. As one young man in Brazil said: ‘Either you’re going to work, or you’re going to rob. But you’re not gonna be 25 years old and depending on your parents.’

This gravitation toward a violent version of manhood or a conventional, ‘working man’ version of manhood is perhaps the central identity struggle for young men in these settings. In all these settings, and around the world, there is a clear and direct social pressure to achieve a productive version of manhood – in some settings, by whatever means necessary. There is individual decision-making involved in this process, at least for most young men. There are others, however, who seem to merely go with the flow, following the actions of their peers or families with relatively little reflection. But even those young men who apparently choose to be part of gangs or violent versions of manhood perceive pressure and expectations to produce or earn money, even if it involves violence.

Finally, there is a demographic reason for focusing on young men aged 15–24 in 2004. The majority of the world's population lives in developing countries or southern countries. Due to fertility trends, the size of the present-day youth population (using the World Health Organization's definition of youth, ages 10–24) is larger both numerically and proportionally than it has ever been. Nearly half of the people alive now on the planet are under age 25, and 1 billion are between the ages of 10 and 19 (UNFPA 2003). With declining fertility in most of the world, there will likely never be in human history a youth cohort this large again. Pessimists, as discussed earlier, see this as cause for alarm.

Others see young men's violence or unsafe sexual activity as a passing behaviour, arguing that most boys grow out of delinquency and risk-taking behaviour, which some young men do. But this argument that youth is a passing phase, or that youth violence is a 'developmental' phenomenon that passes with age, makes sense only if we see young people as human beings in the making and not actual human beings in the present. For the young people of this generation, alive in the here and now, violence and unsafe sexual behaviour has very real consequences and those who suffer from these cannot wait around for 'youthful behaviour' to pass.

Optimists, myself included, see the current youth demographic wave as an opportunity. Rethinking gender norms together with the current youth cohort, particularly rethinking what it means to be a man, could have implications for today's youth and generations to come. Of course, changing the gender order is not straightforward or simple, nor is it mine or yours to carry out. It is complex, usually slow, and must be carried out by and with communities and young people themselves. It must be collective and it must be structural; reaching two dozen in one low-income community will not lead to broad social change. While the challenge is enormous, there are some ideas of how and where to start this kind of process.

This book is part overview, part research, highly pragmatic and at times highly personal. In my professional activities, I have taken an activist stance on these issues and I will show that mindset in this book. My burning questions are: from what is known about how young men are socialized, what can we do to change the directions of some of these trends? How can we promote versions of manhood that are less violent, more gender-equitable and better for young men and young women? What has been learned from existing experiences in engaging communities, policy-makers and young men themselves in promoting other ways of being men? This book will conclude with implications and insights on what can be done about these issues – to promote versions of manhood based on respect, non-violence and a culture of care rather than on violence and domination.