Masculinity in an HIV intervention

Based on work at two Durban township schools, MARK THORPE argues space must be made for boy's voices and the renegotiation of masculinity in youth HIV interventions

In 2001 I engaged in a participatory evaluation of an educational intervention around gender and HIV in two township high schools in Durban. The intervention was part of Gender, Violence and HIV, the Durban-London research project from which this issue of *Agenda* emerges. It used a new programme, Mobilising Young Men to Care, developed by DramAidE - an organisation providing HIV and life skills workshops through drama - in response to their belief that 'without addressing gender and getting young men fully involved, realistic behaviour changes will not take place' (DramAidE, 2000:3). For the evaluation, over a period of one month I took part in 15 workshops in each school, led by a facilitator from DramAidE. The workshops were attended by 30 learners between the ages of 14 and 16, and took place in a classroom and a library. Two single-sex focus groups and a number of short interviews were also conducted, as well as a half-day training session for teachers in each school.

One of the findings, and the focus of this *briefing*, was that of the power imbalance that existed between girls and boys in sexual relationships. While this was not the only dynamic between boys and girls played out in the workshops, I believe it is important to address this issue in HIV interventions. This *briefing* asserts there is often a 'silence' around masculinity in HIV programmes (Morrell, forthcoming 2003), and that it is essential to address issues of masculinity and allow space for boy's voices, if alternative 'safe' forms of sexual relationships are to develop.

The *briefing* first looks at three important dynamics that emerged in the workshops in relation to sexual relationships and strongly related to the dominant masculinity - power, contract and violence. It then points to the silence in HIV interventions around masculinity and asserts that space must be made for boy's voices and the renegotiation of masculine identity. It goes on to discusses the different discourses that were present in the workshops around HIV, sexual relationships and the construction of masculinity, noting alternate discourses emerging from the boys themselves, which should form the basis for change. Based on issues evident in the alternate discourse, it asserts some implications for HIV education in schools.

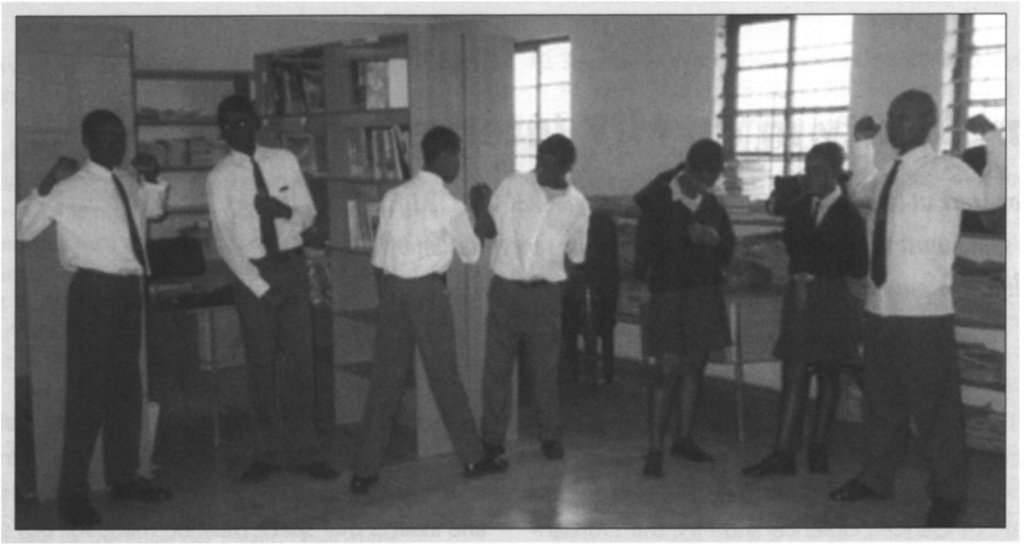
Three dynamics of sexual relationships

Power

Within the workshops, power resided predominantly with the boys, both at a conscious and unconscious level. Discussion was dominated by the boys, who would often cut off or contradict girls when they spoke. Boys dominated group work and small group dramas. It became clear that this power dynamic was a general feature of participants lives - sharing control, in terms of decisions within relationships, was not seen as a possibility by the boys, and girls generally agreed that power was vested in boys.

Boy: *I must be the one in power...*

As described by both boys and girls, power in relationships is demonstrated in a number of ways by the boy: having many partners, maintaining 'control' in



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Girls are the recipients of power, while boys exhibit it

a sexual relationship, having more knowledge about the partner's whereabouts and activities than the girl has about his, and the threat of physical abuse. As with many general trends, this was not universal. As we will see, girls in some contexts did exhibit power, and boys recounted 'powerlessness' in some contexts too, but the general pattern of power relations was overwhelmingly male-dominated.

If we look at this photograph, where participants were asked to freeze in an action reflecting 'power', we can see that the girls are standing as if they have nothing active to say about the word. They are the recipients of power, whilst the boys exhibit it.

Most comments about the roots of this power were simple ones pertaining to the idea: 'that is just the way it is'. A teacher in the teacher training workshops mentioned how some traditional songs and sayings, shared by parents with their children, reinforce the idea that it is acceptable for a boy to tease and demean a girl and assert his superiority over her. Students also supported the idea that this status quo was set up at an early age. It was part of the 'culture'. However, given the overwhelming agreement about the power dynamics in relationships, there was surprisingly little ability by the students to express any reason for why this had to be so, as demonstrated by these rather confused and illogical statements:

Boy: *She has to tell me what she is doing...because I trust her.*
Boy: *...because if we are equal she will want to give her opinion...and me, too, I want to give my opinion.*

In their attempts to justify their power dominance and control of relationships and the fact that boys and girls are not 'equal', boys struggled to find coherence. It would appear that power was something that just could not be shared. They also saw it as hierarchical and linear.

Boy: *No I don't want to oppress other people, but I want to be the one on the top.*

In an exercise, 'The great game of power' - where chairs have to be placed to so as to portray one as more powerful than the others - boys placed chairs on top of each other to represent one having power over the others, despite alternative ways to display power, such as an 'independent' chair, or a chair 'commanding respect' by being in front of the others. In general, there was a lack of 'alternative' ways for both genders to understand power relations, other than dominance for the boy. Models of power sharing or even of communication on an equal footing were outside of their experience.

Contract

A contract was implicit in many of the reported sexual encounters and relationships. In simple terms, while boys looked for sexual gratification or conquest, often

expressed in terms of a man's 'needs', girls looked for status and particularly lifestyle or financial rewards.

(During a role-play)
Girl: *Why do you keep on persuading her?*
Boy: *I have to satisfy my needs...*

(In an all-girl group discussion)
Girl: *As part of our culture a real man must provide materially.*

These were, of course, not the only things sought after by the girls and boys, but they played a central part in the motivation and orientation towards sexual encounters and relationships. The term 'contract' is used because there were a number of codes or 'understandings' that were apparently present in the way that young people related, though not always verbalised between them. An example, which became evident through role-playing and open discussion, was that the only way for a girl to avoid sex was to completely ignore the boy requesting it. To engage in conversation about it, was to invite a 'challenge' for the boy to get what he wanted - was to start to 'play the game'. Exacerbating this, girls suggested that even if they wanted sex it was not for them to 'request' this from a boy, because of the image of promiscuity that would be carried by this request. Hence they admitted sometimes girls did 'mean yes when they say no'. This further problematised the dynamic, as boys often claimed to be unable to identify a 'real' no, supposedly justifying sexual coercion.

Just as 'tradition' was used to justify power, so it was an element in the contract, from the obvious *lobola* or 'bride price' issue, to questions of the female obligation to have sex. Sometimes participants would 'fall back' on a notion that the contract was within a fixed 'culture' and therefore had to be supported, such as sex without a condom and having many partners.

Some elements of contract as perceived by boys were: if a boy has a girlfriend she is not to talk to other boys at all, or to talk to other girls about the him; actively making a girl jealous is necessary to keep her attached; if a boy takes a girl 'out' and this involves spending money, he has the right to expect sex, on his terms. Surprisingly absent from the boy/girl exchange were notions of sharing personal and emotional issues and being able to trust each other with sensitive issues. This did not seem to be nurtured in the dynamics of most sexual relationships.

Despite the fact that girls had an agenda of improved image and lifestyle, as well as sexual pleasure (which was more difficult to elicit), it is important to understand and acknowledge that that this contract was built on a bedrock of unequal power relations, as outlined earlier. It was clear that this contract or arrangement between boy and girl teenagers was skewed by the power dynamic. Even if the girl was able to get something from it, she did not control what was going on, and if she attempted to, one of the consequences, other than the breakdown of the relationship, was violence. This is the third dynamic.

Sometimes girls did 'mean yes when they say no'

Violence

Violence in relationships was accepted as a reality in general group discussion and entered students' self-created 'plays', but was rarely owned by an individual as their own experience. Of significance was the use of, 'some friends say'. This was often the way boys referred to situations that might have been seen as unacceptable in the context of the workshop, even if they themselves may have agreed with them.

Violence in relationships, at least in the abstract sense, was not seen as a 'good' thing. However, despite recognition of violence as a negative aspect of relationships, it was seen by many boys, and some girls, as a normal or even necessary part of 'relationship discipline'. As a response to 'Why do some boys hit girls?' a boy asserted:

...because maybe this girl [has] done something wrong, and she's got to respect you...

The phrase 'done something wrong' alluded again to a set of 'rules' as discussed previously, which, when broken, required 'punishment'. The violence here arose as a response to the perceived breaking of the contract, and the imbalance of power relations would allow it to occur. Amongst boys, 'respect' of girls for boys seemed to generally equate with 'obey' or 'agree'.

...some friends say she is making you a fool, they will say you have to beat her until she has sex with you.

In the above, the 'making you a fool' refers to a boy having a girlfriend with whom he is not having sex. The contract or 'understanding' is that for a girl to have the status of 'girlfriend' she must offer sex or she is making a fool of the boy. Just as the boy was evidently 'in control' in relationships, he was also the one to act on any grievance held against a girl.

"They will say you have to beat her until she has sex with you"

...some would say she will always act like that if you don't teach her a lesson.

There was an understanding amongst boys, that violence against girls was a result of a girl not behaving in a way acceptable for her gender role. There were a number of more specific reasons given for violence: refusal to have sex, perceived unfaithfulness (girl talking to another boy), 'showing up' a man in public, as well as friends' opinions of the girl. In the words of one boy:

...because maybe your friends say 'ah, your girlfriend is cheeky' and then when you are alone with her you will think about that...

In general, boys' justification of violence came from the view that violence was 'defensive', rather than 'offensive'. It was necessary to safeguard their image or respect in front of others (see also Wood and Jewkes, 2001).

Girls knew the reasons why violence or beatings happened and could identify it as bad behaviour, but would not take the issue up in direct confrontation with a boy. There were a few exceptions to this. In one school where the average student age was a year older, and the culture of the school lent itself to more open voicing of opinions, several older girls were more vocal about the apparent double standards that govern relationships, and particularly the difficulty of the threat of violence when negotiating sex with boys. When reasoned challenges were posed by girls this seemed to upset the power dynamic and **threaten** boys, who began to react more aggressively in their responses.

Relating the dynamics

What is the link between the elements of power, contract and violence? As we have seen the power is vested in men, or in the words of Connell (1995:79), boys were exploiting the 'patriarchal dividend' of being male. The contract is based on perceived gains by both boys and girls, but the power dynamic means that only the boys have any recourse to act when they perceive unfairness or a breaking of their understanding of the 'contract'. The action that they take is often that of 'punishment' in the form of violence. Boys use violence to try to reassert their 'rules' and power base. This dynamic, revealed in the microcosm of the workshops, is an obstacle to negotiation around sex (eg refusal, postponement or condom use) - a vital tool for the prevention of HIV amongst youth.

Silence on masculinity

Morrell (forthcoming 2003) claims that one of the most significant causes of failure in HIV education programmes is the 'silence' on issues of masculinity and the 'silence' of men's voices. This *briefing* agrees that this is a serious barrier to developing safer sexual practice in a context of HIV. When power and decision-making rest in the hands of boys, and male-violence is legitimated, there is need for boys to find alternate models of masculinity to this hegemonic one.

It was only after some time into the intervention, and in particular circumstances (one-to-one chats, or single-sex forums) that boy's feelings around more personal and sensitive issues, and alternate ways of being emerged. I believe that this intervention created space for dis-

cussion of themes that are traditionally unspoken by boys through fear of exposing weakness. It is in this space that we, as facilitators, saw the glimpses of vulnerability and expressions that cut against hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, through several interviews and single-sex focus groups, I came to see the oversimplification of seeing boy-learners as placed irrevocably in the camp of hegemonic and oppressive masculinity. There were issues that they wanted to talk about - issues that worried them and impacted on their daily decisions.

A major area of work in HIV education is helping young people to tackle their expectations of sexual conduct and to explore the way gender is constructed. In order for change to occur it is important to work with the alternate ways of being, or discourses which emerge from youth themselves. Any intervention to change masculinity must begin with boys' own experiences. Consider the following exchange:

Facilitator: *Do you sometimes have one [girlfriend] who is like a friend, you like to talk to her...find her enjoyable to know as a person?*
Boy: *Yeh, I do...*
Facilitator: *Only one of them? I mean if you had to be with this person for two hours, no touching. Is there one you'd choose?*
Boy: *Say you have three girls...you only have one girl...who you don't want to use [her] fully, maybe only once, twice per month, because...you really like her.*
Facilitator: *And she is the one you don't sleep with so much?*
Boy: *Yeh...*

Despite the fact that this boy is not faithful to the girl he likes most, by stating that he does not want to 'use her fully', he was allowing the facilitator to see some alternate 'caring' motivation in his sexual relationships. He is not presenting a neat picture of faithful monogamy. But providing space for boys to say what really happens must be the starting point and from this, 'more respectful, autonomous masculinities' (Morrell, 2001:22) may be encouraged to emerge.

I now look briefly at the way in which the boys talked and thought about sexual relations in the context of HIV education - the discourses in which their discussion and thinking was placed. I identify three discourses, hegemonic masculinity, education-responsive, and then an alternate discourse that came from within boys' own experiences and provides hope for change.

Teenage discourses around sex and HIV

Dominant versus education-responsive

A particular discourse of masculinity emerged as dominant or hegemonic in the evaluation. This masculinity deploys violence but,

Hegemonic masculinity does not rely on brute force for its efficacy, but on a range of mechanisms which create a gender consensus that legitimates the power of men (Morrell, 2001:9).

Any intervention to change masculinity must begin with boys' own experiences

In the workshop context, masculinity involved subjugation, violence, assumption of power, the 'right' to many partners and control in all aspects of the sexual relationship. There are five aspects to this discourse of teenage masculinity: sex as a 'need' to be gratified on demand; several partners are necessary to be a real man; a 'no' from a girl actually means 'yes'; the rejection of masturbation and sex with a condom as unmanly; and the exchange of effort or money for sex (Thorpe, 2000).

An opposing discourse was also displayed, which I have referred to as 'education-responsive' (Thorpe, 2000:1). This way of speaking about HIV employs the learners' knowledge of what the 'correct' answers are - that is, the answers the facilitator or leader is looking for. If a group is asked by a facilitator 'should boys hit girls?' in the context of a workshop around HIV and gender, it is likely they will know the desired response is 'no', and often they will unanimously give it, even if it is not really their belief. This discourse is full of 'ready' answers that will please the facilitator, the most obvious in the HIV education context being that people should use a condom when having sex. Here are some statements within the education-responsive discourse; there was

a difficulty in seeking the substance beneath the words, and often when pushed the responses became unconvincing:

Like me, I was the one in charge and she must listen to me always, but now I know...it is 50/50.

What makes a real man is a man who doesn't hit a woman, because if you hit a woman you are a coward.

'Education' around HIV prevention has reached far and wide, as have the teachings of 'life skills' programmes that pursue fairness and justice for all, and this 'education-responsive discourse' is a result. This discourse resonates with the impasse currently facing South African youth - that they 'have the knowledge' but are not able, willing, or empowered to make changes to behaviour in line with that knowledge so as to stop the spread of HIV.

I was the one in charge but now I know it is 50/50

The two discourses often would meet in the sessions, from minor disagreements in discussion, to more heated debates, as well as in character constructions in the dramas. For example, one boy argued that a person 'only has one heart, so how can you have more than one girlfriend?', while another insisted that 'you have to have many girlfriends to be a real man'

The discourse of relationships based on male control was the strongest, particularly in the dynamics of the workshop activities themselves. Further into the month, many comments exhibited the 'education-responsive' discourse, as students understood better what the aims of the workshops were, and as they were challenged in their responses. However, in my analysis it was not this 'education-responsive' discourse that was the most fruitful.

Fragile but emerging alternatives

I believe the greatest challenge to the hegemonic masculinity, was a third and less clear-cut way of talking about sex and relationships. In this discourse, boys were less concerned to please or to impress, but more . concerned to 'work through' the issues. By the end of the intervention some of the 'education-responsive' discourse had become more than a 'token' response. This was apparent through my knowledge of the group and the way opinions were expressed and discussed, with neither the 'tidy' answers of the 'education-responsive' discourse or the socially entrenched hegemonic discourse.

This 'alternative' discourse - related but not identical to 'education-response' discourse in content - was one we might be able to call 'gender-sensitive', or at least more 'critical'. It displayed an ability to tackle seriously the issues around violence, the right to refuse sex, the right to insist on safe sex, and to challenge some entrenched perceptions of gender roles on a personal level, whether by using less stereotyped gender roles in drama, or talking of more creative solutions. In this kind of language there was more openness about the difficulties in sexual relationships, and a readiness to look for solutions, even if that might involve some change, both for boys and girls.

I do not claim that boys and girls in the workshops were suddenly able to articulate convincingly a new way of perceiving of themselves in relation to the opposite sex. However, I believe it helpful to point to a few dynamics of this more hopeful discourse of sexual relationships to help strengthen strategies for HIV interventions in schools.

Implications for HIV education

As the intervention continued and this more critical, if fragile, discourse emerged, it became clearer which issues were important to boys, and also which approaches were proving the most effective. I will deal with issues and then approaches.

Firstly, there was a **financial element to relationships**, which was of great importance to boys (and girls). Both boys and girls struggled in their everyday lives economically, and relationships were not outside of this sphere of concern. Boys may tend towards crime

or informal activities when desperate for money; girls may tend towards exploiting their sexual appeal. In looking at basic prevention strategies such as condom use, it is therefore important to note that the monetary value of the sexual encounter impacts on the way sex is negotiated.

Boy: *If a girl wants to go for it without a condom, then he will definitely go for it.*
Facilitator: *Why?*
Boy: *He has been spending a lot of money, so he will go for it.*

The boy in this exchange felt he had 'paid for' flesh-to-flesh sex - it had a higher monetary value. These perceptions must be tackled and young people encouraged to weigh this against the 'value' of life, of a healthy future, something that was of great concern to the students.

A second issue was the **lack of opportunity to talk** about sexual issues other than amongst themselves. Clinic staff were found to be unapproachable and parents would seldom engage on this level even if they knew about and even supported (this was often the case for parents of boys) the sexual relationships their children were in. The young people showed a desire for more opportunity to talk with teachers, who they claimed would be easier to talk to about sex and relationships than parents or medical staff. Also, relating to elders in general, there were **few role models** in their immediate lives or even in the public realm who could display for them an alternative way to engage in relationships, while at the same time retaining a positive peer image.

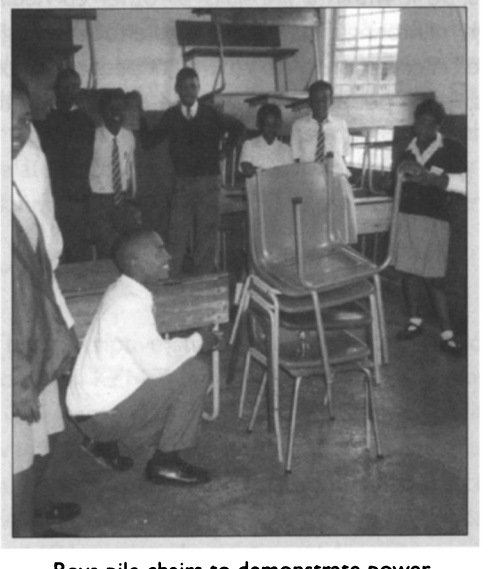
Another key issue for the boys was the **influence of other boys'** opinions of them, and it was found that one-to-one interviews allowed them to express in confidence things they could not express in the presence of their peers. For example, some boys on their own said that a boy would be teased if he could not report having had sex with a girlfriend:

...if people know that you failed to have sex, they will laugh, they can say you are nothing.

On their own, several boys felt that the collective 'group' attitude to HIV was not serious in the way they knew it should be. One boy, after explaining his desire to become a doctor, became gravely serious and said that he had to be careful of HIV, and even that he would rather abstain from sex, 'otherwise, why do I study, I am just studying for death'.

Moving on to some of the strategies employed, key was providing **space for boys** to negotiate issues of masculine identity and the difficulties attached to relationships in the context of an HIV environment. But girls were also given a safe forum in which to speak to boys and make sure that boys actually listened, which proved important to boys' developing an understanding of the girls' points of view. This may be difficult to control or implement, perhaps requiring a carefully designed mixture of single-sex and mixed-sex groupings, but it came out as an important factor in creating productive discussion.

A key element of the work was to encourage boys to **develop empathy** - in challenge to hegemonic masculinity. Through drama, the young people were able to look at a particular scenario and deal with it through role-play and discussion. Boys were encouraged to recognise that there were ways to look at a situation



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Boys pile chairs to demonstrate power

other than their own, and to take into account other people's perspectives.

As time went on, discussion led to greater recognition of shared experience and common vulnerability. This was often related to conflict, or other difficulties in the arena of sexual activity, such as getting access to condoms. As one person exposed a situation, others were freed to talk about it, whether STIs, family attitudes to sexual partners, or peer pressure. There was a real sense of 'release' sometimes when students were able to share an issue, especially for boys in a context where hegemonic masculinity does not allow for the expression of emotion or problems.

Conclusion

Boys' dominance and control over sexual relationships and the predominant negative ways of resolving conflict, without open communication, and often through violence, exacerbates the spread of HIV and hinders both gender groups from achieving workable safe sexual relationships. This dominant discourse of masculinity can be challenged by counter-nurturing alternate discourse and voices emerging from boys themselves - authentic and not 'education-responsive' voices. I believe that in schools a space can be provided for this, be it within a 'life skills' or other curricula, through mentoring and a pastoral system, or through sustained interventions of community or peer-education groups. Young people must have the opportunity to collectively find their own ways to cope with the dangers of teenage sexual life in the context of HIV.

As a final word, I would like to highlight that this programme was based around an HIV prevention strategy that combined elements of a gender perspective with information around protection from HIV. In the current situation, tackling the issues of HIV-stigma, of 'living positively' and caring for those suffering with AIDS is equally crucial.

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