

MEN CAN

CREATING CULTURES FREE FROM VIOLENCE

STOP RAPE INC

The Dominant Story of Masculinity and the Counterstory

Storytellers have held a tremendous and well-respected place throughout history. Storytellers tell us about our past, trading stories about triumph and failure, glory and disgrace. Storytellers are also the ones who entertain us, who give us a moment away from our lives to bask in the tales of others, both past and present. It is through storytellers that we know our history and where we came from. It is also through storytellers that we learn about the lives of others, about their beliefs and histories. Stories can be as varied as the many different storytellers in the world.

The dominant story of manhood reinforces values and messages associated with a shared understanding of what it means to be a man. In and through the dominant story, we come to believe that there is only one way to be a man, and that way is to cultivate a strong, unfeeling, and subjugating personality. In the dominant story, power and physical strength define a man. The counterstory, however, resists the values and expectations of masculinity's dominant stories, and thus opens space for alternatives. We all know men who live the counterstory of masculinity, we just do not always realize it.

The Dominant Story

What is a Dominant Story?

Men Can Stop Rape's work is based on a theoretical framework adapted from Hilde Nelson's *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair*, which outlines dominant story and counterstory theory, especially as it applies to masculinity. A dominant story as it relates to manhood is a narrative representing the values and messages associated with a shared understanding of what it means to be a man as defined by traditional masculinity. Dominant stories can be communicated through movies, magazines, ads, commercials, TV shows, music, literature, and various other cultural productions. They can also be shared within institutions and communicated interpersonally.

The stories are dominant because they are pervasive and powerful, obscuring and diminishing the possibility of alternatives. Many of the activities we facilitate with young men focus on exposing the dominant story and its influences on our lives. This allows us to not only acknowledge ways in which the socialization of men contributes to gender based violence, but also how men feel constricted by gender norms.

What is wrong with dominant stories?

When we believe in dominant stories, it is harder to hear those stories of individuals, including our own stories, which go against the dominant story and are not included in the dominant story. Sometimes, when so many people believe in one story, we tend to discredit the stories of individuals that do not fit the dominant story. Stories that are told over and over again, and are believed by a large number of people, often go unquestioned. Throughout history, we have seen large communities, groups of people, even nations believe in one dominant story, only to find out later how the story was not true.

The Counterstory**What is a counterstory?**

A *counterstory* is a narrative that resists the values and expectations of masculinity's dominant stories and therefore represents a moral shift. Because a dominant story cannot define and encapsulate the entirety of male experience, there are always opportunities to develop and communicate stories that exist in tension with traditional masculinity. Clearly, for example, there are times when men feel or express emotions that go against traditional norms, and these are opportunities to develop and communicate counterstories.

Counterstories serve as Men Can Stop Rape's foundation for developing healthier masculinities open to more diverse expressions. We use dominant stories and counterstories to encourage individuals to share through stories their conflicts with the expectations of traditional manhood, to speak out about times they have chosen to challenge those expectations, and ultimately, to help make the counterstory the common story. "The Strongest Man" exercise is an activity that we use to highlight the alternative masculinities already a part of our personal lives.

If counterstories are true, why don't we hear more of them?

While there are only a few dominant stories in the world, these stories are told again and again, loudly, and through many different ways. Often it doesn't feel like there is space for people to tell their stories, so we don't speak them. But the space is there – sometimes we just need to take a chance to fill up the space with what we believe. And the more we tell counterstories, the more space we create for others to tell counterstories, and the easier it will be for others to speak their truth. To hear more counterstories, we need to tell more counterstories.

HOW CAN I TELL A COUNTERSTORY?

Start by telling someone you trust. Celebrate a good deed or accomplishment with a mentor. Talk to a good friend about how a joke someone told made you uncomfortable. Ask a colleague what she or he honestly thinks about an advertisement (and make sure that you say what you think). Keep practicing with your allies. Soon, you will start to appreciate how good it feels to tell your truth, rather than the story that we've been told over and over. Take a risk by sharing something about yourself that others might not know. If something feels or seems wrong to you, ask someone else how they feel about it.

The Real Man and The Dominant Story

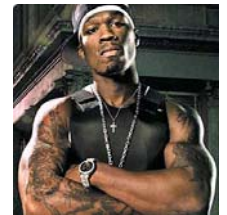
Learning Objectives:

1. To identify dominant traits that are associated with traditional notions of masculinity
2. To recognize traits associated with the dominant story of masculinity in oneself, and begin to evaluate the pressure exerted to be considered a “real man”
3. To recognize counterstories of masculinity and strength in your environment
4. To connect traditional masculinity with the prevalence of sexual assault

What You Need:

1. 5 pairs of recognizable male images from popular culture
2. Flip chart and a set of colored markers or chalkboard and chalk

(Time approx. 30 minutes)



Exercise

FACILITATOR:

“We believe that men have to get involved with women in ending dating and domestic violence – because it affects men’s lives as well as women’s lives. But why have so few men found the strength to stand up alongside women and work to prevent rape? To get at the answer to this question, we need to take a look at the messages we get about what it means to be a man in our society and, more specifically, what it means to be a REAL MAN. For example (transition right into REAL MAN exercise), “I have pictures of these two men here. Who would society say is the real man, and why would society say that?”

REAL MAN:

Hold up pictures of pairs of men and generate from discussion a list of characteristics that describe a REAL MAN. Below are some examples of pairs you might choose:

<i>Tiger Woods</i>	<i>Vs.</i>	<i>LeBron James</i>
<i>Donald Trump</i>	<i>Vs.</i>	<i>Jay-Z</i>
<i>50 Cent</i>	<i>Vs.</i>	<i>George Bush</i>
<i>Darth Vader</i>	<i>Vs.</i>	<i>Yoda</i>
<i>Arnold Schwarzenegger the Terminator</i>	<i>Vs.</i>	<i>Arnold Schwarzenegger the Governor</i>

Now ask the audience to come up with a list of things that our society says that “real men” do or are or don’t do or aren’t. Feel free to ask follow-up questions based on audience responses (e.g., if someone says that real men are not emotional, ask about anger; if someone says that real men don’t cry, ask about what emotions men can show, etc.).

You should be able to generate at least 15 or 20 statements (real men win, are in control, know what a woman wants, don’t admit they are wrong, ask for directions, take no for an answer, etc).

The point here is to show that there are, in fact, numerous ways in which men are confined by gender stereotypes and that it is freeing for men to be able to tear down some of these expectations. Because trying to live up to the confines of the “real man” box (what we call the list of traits created by the activity) leads to violence against men and women, ultimately the work we do benefits men as well as women.

For places to find popular, high profile men, visit:

- mtv.com
- cnn.com
- rollingstone.com
- spin.com