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RAISING CARING MEN: A CONVERSATION WITH GARY BARKER

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon)

Abstract:
IJPS Editor-in-Chief Riane Eisler interviews Gary Barker, President and CEO of Promundo, co-founder of MenCare, and coordinator of the International Men and Gender Equality Survey, about his work in changing rigid gender stereotypes and the role this plays in moving to a more equitable, less violent, more caring future for both men and women.

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Riane Eisler: Gary, you head Promundo, a global leader in promoting gender justice and preventing violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls. What in your personal life led you to this work?

Gary Barker: In 1977, in my high school in Houston, Texas, I witnessed a high school shooting – long before we called them that. A young man killed another young man, supposedly in a dispute over a girl. As teachers escorted us outside the school the day of the killing, there was a striking gender difference: girls were crying and hugging each other. Boys were kicking the ground and saying things like, "Dude, did you see that?" Women teachers were consoling the girls. Male teachers were taking control. We had witnessed the death of a fellow student, and the boys and men could not express our

sadness and our humanity. The great wall of manhood told us that we were not supposed to show emotions. We were supposed to man up. I think that was one of the moments when our harmful ideas about manhood, both in the lives of the young men involved in the killing and all of us, became clear to me. In my family, I saw other ideas about manhood. My father was a social worker and my siblings are adopted, and we nearly always had foster children in our home as well. At home I saw the idea that manhood is about caring, about empathy, about social justice. I hope that's what I've taken into the world.

Eisler: You and Promundo work with men and boys to transform harmful gender norms and unequal power dynamics. Can you tell us a little about what you and Promundo do?

Barker: Starting initially in low income areas in Rio de Janeiro and then taking the approach globally, we identify young and adult men who already support and believe in equitable, non-violent, and healthy ideas about manhood, and work with them to promote nonviolent and caring versions of masculinities in the social institutions where they are constructed. Our approaches, including our Manhood 2.0 group education for young men and our Fatherhood 2.0 materials, all build on voices of resistance to promote critical reflection and collective action to transform harmful, inequitable, and violent versions of masculinities at the community level, and within schools, the health sector, and workplaces.

We also carry out research for advocacy to call attention to why and how to engage men as allies in the journey to gender justice. The International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES), our multi-country survey of men and women, is the largest, most complex study on men's and women's practices and attitudes as they relate to gender equality. Together with Axe/Unilever, Promundo developed the Man Box scale, a set of attitude questions that measure restrictive norms related to manhood. And we carry out local and international campaigns. MenCare, Promundo's global initiative to

promote men's involvement as equitable, non-violent fathers and caregivers, is now active in 45 countries.

Eisler: Your research, programs, and advocacy efforts are geared to engaging men by showing that promoting healthy masculinity (or positive notions of "what it means to be a man") and femininity (or "what it means to be a woman") is essential for men; for example, it helps prevent men from being subject to violence. How do you open the conversation with boys? With men? What kinds of responses are you getting?

Barker: We start our conversations with a Paulo Freire (2005)-inspired approach of consciousness raising, getting young and adult men to think about how restrictive ideas about manhood (the Man Box) have affected their own lives, and from there we reflect about how it has affected women, and non-binary individuals. We start the work where men hang out. If it's young men, we reach them via schools or sports programs. With adult men, we reach them via workplaces, or recruit them via their female partners, or in prenatal visits where lots of men go in some parts of the world.

In terms of responses, we're finding that individual men and boys, that health providers, that teachers and coaches, are hungering for ways to engage men as part of ending violence against women, as involved fathers, and as partners to empowering women. We've focused on making our materials adaptable and open source. We emphasize the positive, finding ways men already contribute to gender equality and caregiving, while also calling men out for the harm that some do. And we find, whether through interviews or rigorous impact evaluation, that men will change, in their relationships, in how they treat their own bodies, and in reducing their use of violence. We, and they, also find that their own lives improve when they embrace more equitable, caring ways of being men.

Eisler: You have worked with the United Nations, the World Bank, the World Health Organization, and national governments to adopt policies and scale up programs that reinforce personal and social change by engaging men and boys in changing the old linking of masculinity with domination and violence. What do you think is most effective in engaging leaders in these organizations?

Barker: Ultimately it has been a combination of evidence and empathy, that is, having data (e.g. the IMAGES research, evaluation research, the Man Box study) showing why ideas about manhood matter and how men can change. And also having stories of change. We use films that present real-life stories of men embracing change and the benefits to them, their male or female partners, and their children, when they embrace that change. And we go with concrete examples of what works – at the program level and at the policy level.

Eisler: Since its founding in Brazil in 1997, Promundo has worked in more than 40 countries. Can you tell us about how your work is tailored to these different cultures? How do you open the conversation with boys? With men? What are the places in the lives of boys and men that create entry points for your work?

Barker: Although we "package" our approaches, that is making them available in manual format, we always work with partners to adapt them to the local context, changing case studies, identifying local stories and examples of men who break out of the "Man Box." But we find that across culture settings, including in post-conflict settings, the approach of identifying voices of resistance and engaging young and adult men (and women and girls) in this conscious-raising approach and taking that conversation into key spaces to reinforce the messages works. And the entry points for that work are as varied as the 40 countries we have worked – from refugee camps where men are frustrated with no place to go, to after-school programs, to juvenile detention centers, to UN peacekeeping missions, to natural gas extraction sites.

Eisler: You have been conducting surveys of men's attitudes toward women, fathering, violence, and other important matters in a number of countries. What are you learning?

Barker: Since 2008, we have carried out household surveys in nearly 40 countries in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and parts of Asia, with some components applied as well in the US, the UK, and northern Europe. On the hopeful side, we find that there is a slow but steady trajectory of men accepting gender equality around the world. Young men almost everywhere in the world are more equitable and accepting of women's equality than older men. Urban young men, educated young men are even more likely to believe women are their equals. As the world is becoming more urban and more educated, this bodes well for men being on board.

But there is backlash. In the U.S. and the Middle East, and some other settings, we see young men gravitating toward or hanging on to a tough guy version of manhood, a belief they have to control women, that a real man doesn't back down from a fight, that a real man doesn't talk about his problems or seek help, and the like. We see this particularly among young men with some education who are unemployed or worry about their work prospects. In other words, these are young men all dressed up with no place to go, scared of their future prospects, sometimes not able to get married or start a family because of lack of work, who find some self-worth by taking on the tough guy routine.

And everywhere we look there are least 25% to 33% of men who generally support an idea that women and men are equal and should have equal rights (Levtov et al, 2014), until it gets close to home. When we ask about jobs (who should have them if they are scarce) or about quotas for university, parliaments, boards, or jobs, men's support for gender equality, well, it becomes less.

What works to change ideas about manhood? We find again and again that involved fatherhood and women's paid work are the game changers. Among men and women who believe in gender equality more than their peers, having fathers or men in the household who did more of the hands-on care work, having fathers or men who make decisions in equitable ways, and having mothers who worked, are key drivers (Kato-Wallace, Barker, Eads, & Levtov, 2014). Pretty obvious: if we need women in the workforce, we also need men doing half the care work. And in conservative areas where men do a little work, it goes a long way: their daughters have more empowered views and their sons are more likely to be involved fathers. This bodes well for a future of caring manhood.

In terms of violence, we find that violence drives violence. Nearly 2/3 of men grow up experiencing physical violence either at home, in schools or in their communities (Contreras, Heilman, Barker, Singh, Verma, & Bloomfield, 2012). Experiencing and witnessing such violence is the largest single driver of men's use of violence against women and against children. The biggest driver of men's sexual harassment is: believing in a tough-guy, inequitable version of manhood.

We also know from our Man Box study, for example, just how much men are not doing well when it comes to depression, seeking help, and thinking about suicide (Heilman, Barker, & Harrison, 2017). Everywhere we look, men's substance abuse (drugs and alcohol) is far higher than women's. Men are less likely to be depressed than women (using a global standardized set of questions about depressive symptoms) but men are far less likely to seek help or even tell anyone they are depressed or sad. Men are more likely to be lonely. And 33% to 80% of men are worried about their ability to be providers. They are ashamed, distraught, and say they stay away from their families because of not having enough work or income. We should be worried about the men who feel they can't achieve meaningful work (Barker et al., 2011).

And finally, we find that men have more equitable ideas about men and women are happier, healthier men (and their wives are happier with them). So, if men are resistant to quotas and to giving up power and privilege, which they generally are, they are also more likely to have better mental health, not to have considered suicide, to report overall life happiness, and to be happier with their partners if they believe in gender equality. Not surprisingly, women across countries who say their husbands share equally in decision-making (that is, their husbands are not tyrants or despots) are happier with their husbands and happier with their intimate lives with their partners or husbands (Barker et al., 2011).

Eisler: After recent mass shootings, we have been talking more about the issue of male sexual entitlement, what Michael Kimmel, in his book *Angry White Men* (2017), calls "aggrieved entitlement" (p. xxii). How is Promundo addressing this, and what are your thoughts about this aspect of male socialization?

Barker: We know and see how angry men, particularly angry white men, are driving elections and causing harm in countries around the world, with a wave of anti-immigrant leaders being elected, and increased misogyny in some settings. We have included this topic in our research and are working with some governments to try to help them think about how they can help men see the benefits of healthy manhood. We find that it's a combination of calling men into the benefits of equality while calling out some men for the harm they cause. And it's about acknowledging that we need to help men find new, more flexible identities, so that they see themselves beyond the role of provider, for example as caregivers, as engaged in their communities, as voices for non-violence. In spite of how grim it looks, we find there are still more voices of men who want to do the right thing than men who want to oppress. The oppressors make more noise, and they make the news, but the majority of men can be called in, want to be called in, to positive ways of being men.

Eisler: Violence against girls and women is still a global pandemic with disastrous personal, social, and economic consequences. I have proposed that international law, especially the Rome Statute's "Crimes against humanity" section, should be used to hold governments accountable when they fail to enact and/or enforce laws against these systematic and egregious human rights violations, often still justified in the name of tradition or religion. How do you think this proposal can gain support?

Barker: One of the biggest challenges with ending violence against women and getting governments to take action is to help show them how prevention can work, that it does work, that we have fundable, scalable approaches that need to be rolled out. I think many governments are stuck in the response to survivors – which needs to be there, of course – but have not built and implemented evidence-based prevention. I think we need to be more solutions-oriented, highlighting five to ten things governments can do to take to scale prevention. It's not enough to support survivors and arrest perpetrators. We must move toward a large vision of prevention.

Eisler: What role can scholars play in shifting gender roles and relations from domination to partnership? What role can this journal play?

Barker: Related to the point above, we need research and voices that build on the solutions. Whether violence or angry white men or sexual harassment, the media flow focuses on the crisis and the problem. Scholars must be part of highlighting the solution. For all the harm that patriarchy and the Man Box brings to the lives of women and men, there is resilience and there are voices of resistance. There are effective programs and policies and change movements. Scholars can tell those stories, as can this journal. We need them now more than ever.

Eisler: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Barker: I think the most challenging part of our work is overcoming the layers of harmful ideas about manhood that continue to get support in the media, by some celebrities and by some politicians. I think appealing to the best in men, engaging men to embrace equality, building a male ethic of peace and caregiving, is one of the key issues of our time. And if we're making a dent in the cause, it is because we have built on the legacy of women's rights activists and feminists and racial justice activists who "woke" us.

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Gary Barker is President and CEO of Promundo, dedicated to promoting gender justice and preventing violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls. He is co-founder of MenCare, a global campaign to promote men's involvement as equitable, non-violent caregivers, and of MenEngage, a global alliance of more than 700 NGOs and UN agencies working toward gender equality and he coordinates IMAGES (the International Men and Gender Equality Survey), a multi-country survey of men's attitudes and behaviors related to violence, fatherhood, and gender equality. For more information on Promundo, please go to https://promundoglobal.org/. For the 2018 webinar with Gary Barker and Riane Eisler on "Raising Caring Men," please go to https://centerforpartnership.org/news-events/promundo/.

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