

# Gender Norms: A Key to Improving Reproductive Health Outcomes for At-Risk Youth



**TrueChild** is an action tank of leading authorities that promotes gender transformative approaches to reproductive health, educational under-achievement, and gender-based violence. Gender transformative approaches are those which highlight, challenge and ultimately change harmful gender norms. TrueChild is especially interested in the challenges faced by at-risk youth, like those who are of color, LGBTQ, or in disinvested communities. To achieve our goals we conduct four activities: 1) Create white papers and other intellectual collateral; 2) Conduct trainings on gender norms; 3) Partners with community organizations to develop model “best practice” programs; and, 4) Convene policy-makers and leading authorities so that research begins to inform practice.

## RESEARCH

More than two decades of research—often originating in US colleges and universities—have crystallized the strongest possible links between internalizing narrow norms of traditional masculinity and femininity and lower reproductive health outcomes for at-risk youth, because gender “scripts” for how boys and girls are supposed to act are what drive behavior in sexual situations, especially during the “gender intensification” years of late adolescence and early teens when young people are most likely to buy in to primitive gender codes and most vulnerable to peer pressure to live up to them.

## AT-RISK YOUTH

The impact of narrow gender norms can be most harmful in disinvested and under-resourced communities, where codes for masculinity and femininity are apt to be particularly narrow, and penalties for transgressing them especially harsh (“*Why We Can’t Wait*,” Ford Foundation, 2005)

## YOUNG MEN

For instance, research shows that young men who internalize ideals of traditional masculinity as defined by strength, toughness, sexual prowess, and aggression have earlier sex, more sexual partners, and lower condom use. They are more likely to believe in sex as adversarial, that women are responsible for preventing conception, and that pregnancy validates manhood (Pleck, et al., 1993).



## A Gender Dictionary

“Gender” is used in multiple contexts. Here’s a quick guide.

**Gender Transformative**  
A term coined by leading reproductive health authority Geeta Rao Gupta and the WHO—refers to approaches that highlight, challenge and ultimately change harmful gender norms and beliefs.

### Gender Norms

Socially-constructed ideals, scripts, expectations for how to be a woman or a man; in sex—as in partner violence—they determine who does what, to whom, when, and how.

### Gender Expression

How we express feeling feminine and masculine through dress, hair and adornment .

### Gender Traits

Physical or personal characteristics commonly considered feminine or masculine (e.g., hairy chest or hourglass figure)

### Gender Roles

Social and behavioral norms for how men and women are expected to act: being a doctor or nurse, being martial or maternal.

### Gender Identity

An inner sense of being male or female, useful when discussing transgender individuals who feel a conflict between their sex and gender identity.

## INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

In addition, they are more likely to view violence against an insubordinate female partner as justified, and to engage in sexual coercion either through physical or psychological abuse.

Taken together, this collection of behaviors and beliefs is almost a perfect prescription for lower reproductive health outcomes.

## MSM

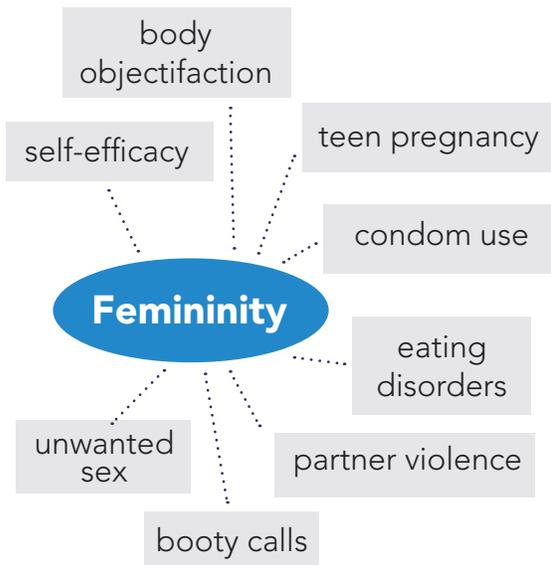
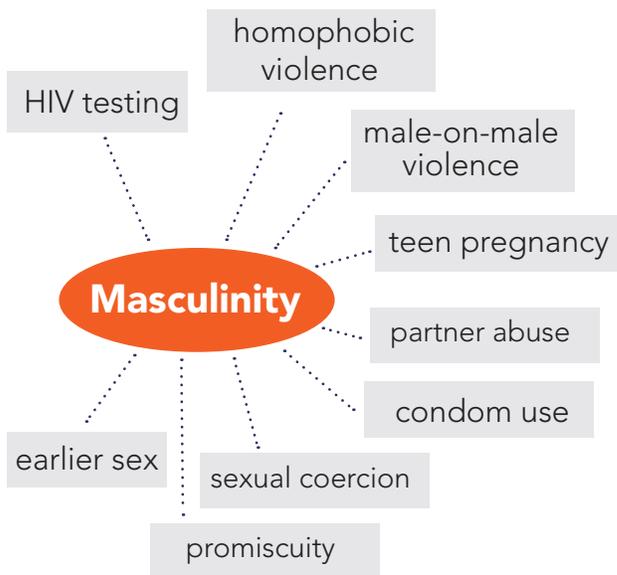
The effects are not limited to heterosexuals—young gay men internalize many of the same masculine norms, and may strive all the harder to emulate them. For instance, studies show that narrow codes of masculinity among young men who sleep with men (MSM) are tied to *down-low* behavior, avoiding HIV testing, “bare-backing,” excessive promiscuity, and eschewing safer behaviors during sex, like caressing and touching, that do not prioritize penetration but do involve emotional vulnerability.

## YOUNG WOMEN

Women are affected as well. For years researchers have known that internalizing narrow codes of femininity which place a premium on passivity, obedience, docility, conflict avoidance, and physical beauty is strongly linked to lower sexual self-efficacy, condom use and safer sex negotiation among young women as well as higher rates of body objectification, acceptance of male infidelity, and tolerance for sexual coercion or violence (Tolman & Porche, 2000; Tolman, et al., 2003).



## Gateway Belief System



### AT-RISK WOMEN

Gender codes can be especially harmful for women in at-risk communities. For instance, *machista* codes of femininity that prioritize passivity, obedience, purity, motherhood, and deference discourage young Latinas from learning about or discussing sex, and from carrying or using condoms, while simultaneously encouraging them to become mothers early, tolerate sexual coercion or violence, and defer to male sexual prerogatives (Gomez and Marin, 1996). Combined with male codes of *machismo*, such traditional norms can decrease gender equity and disempower young Latinas.

### GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE

Findings like these have created an increased focus on and commitment to what leading authority Geeta Gupta called “gender transformative” programs and policies. Approaches which are *gender transformative* highlight, challenge and ultimately change belief in harmful norms of femininity and masculinity.

### INTERNATIONAL

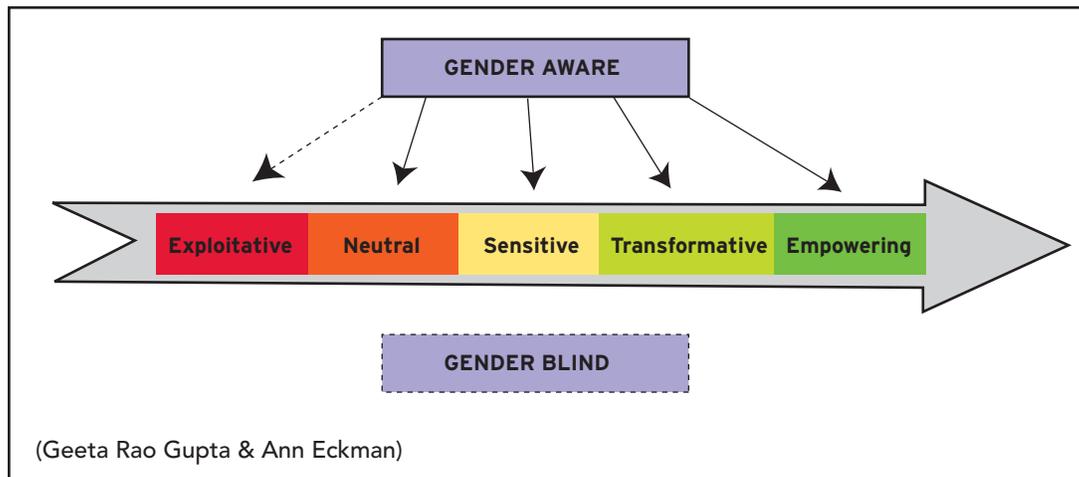
International agencies like UNAIDS, UNFPA, PEPFAR and WHO have already implemented gender transformative approaches that are more effective at increasing gender equity and improving life outcomes for young women.

USAID no longer funds new programs that lack a strong gender analysis—including gender norms—and it launched a website ([www.IGWG.org](http://www.IGWG.org)) just to coordinate information on gender sensitive initiatives. WHO developed an in-depth report to document the increased effectiveness of gender transformative work with women and girls (“*The ‘So What’ Report: A Look at Whether Integrating a Gender Focus in Programmes Make a Difference in Outcomes.*”).

### THE U.S.

Yet the US still lags behind. In 1995 Hortensia Amaro, a leading expert on young women of color, wrote in one of the most often-cited reproductive health papers ever that the US still pursues improved reproductive health outcomes and gender equity for at-risk women “in a gender vacuum.” That remains true today (“*Love, Sex, Power: Considering Women’s Realities in Preventing HIV,*” 1995).

## Gender Integration Continuum



### The “Man Box”

“We’re in this box, and in order to be in that box, you have to be **strong**, you have to be **tough**, you have to have **lots of girls**, you gotta **have money**, you have to be a **player or a pimp**, you gotta to be **in control**, you have to **dominate other men**, and if you are not any of those things, then people call you soft or weak or a p\*ssy or a chump or a f\*ggot and nobody wants to be any of those things. **So everybody stays inside the box.**”

–Byron Hurt  
Beyond Beats and Rhymes



### DISCONNECT

There is a wide and growing disconnect between research and actual practice. For instance, the CDC’s two dozen Evidence-Based Programs lack a strong, specific focus on gender norms, and *Emerging Answers*, the Bible of teen pregnancy policy, mentions gender norms specifically only in a footnote.

### COMING CHANGE

But that is all starting to change. Gender transformative approaches are quietly gaining wider domestic acceptance.

- For instance, our recent convening at the Ford Foundation to explore launching a National Council on Gender drew affirmative replies from 47 researchers, funders, policy-makers and NGOs.
- A growing roster of international-facing US groups like Population Council, EngenderHealth, and International Planned Parenthood are launching gender transformative efforts of their own.
- And the White House recently invited us to brief them on gender transformative approaches to improving reproductive health outcomes for at-risk youth.

### OUR WORK

This is what a new discourse starting to catch looks like. Research shows that addressing gender norms is a key to improving reproductive health outcomes for young women and men. TrueChild is dedicated to leading and partnering in that effort.