

9.1 Activity: Myths about sexual violence against men and boys

Objective

- Address and discuss common myths about sexual violence against men and boys
- Support participants to explore and reflect on their own personal beliefs, views and attitudes towards survivors of sexual violence against men and boys

Time:

30 minutes

Resources required

- Print out to read from or power point of common myths and beliefs
- A piece of masking tape or string to separate the room, a piece of paper with a True or Agree and a second piece of paper with False or Disagree
- A large room or enough space for participants to move around

Preparation for the facilitator:

This can be a difficult activity and reveal many harmful beliefs and attitudes. The aim of this activity is not to change attitudes and correct all myths, misconceptions, beliefs, assumptions about sexual violence. This is a slow process that takes months and years, not one 2 hour activity. The aim of this activity is to address what the myths and beliefs are, start a conversation about them, open dialogue and discussion among and between national staff. The facilitator should not tell people what to think, tell people what is absolutely right or wrong or lecture, but instead the facilitator's aim is to ask questions, probe and prompt further, facilitate discussion, summarize interesting points, ask national staff why they have a certain belief and to explain their attitude. The facilitator should identify and find allies, people with supportive attitudes and ask them to explain their supportive attitudes. It is often better for people to hear different attitudes and opinions from a colleague within their own local context and culture, and have that person explain in a way that is appropriate, acceptable and relevant to them.

When facilitating difficult conversation, always try to bring the conversation back to how our own attitudes and beliefs might impact a survivor of sexual violence and whether it will stop them from seeking medical care or help them to seek medical care.

Read the statements below, adapt the statements as needed to the local context and culture, add or remove statements as needed. It can be helpful to review with a national staff to learn what statements they think are most acceptable, appropriate and relevant.

Facilitators instructions

- Explain that you will read common beliefs about sexual violence
- Read out the statements and ask the participants to stand on either side of the tape or string, or close to the sign "Agree/True" or "Disagree/False". Add an "unsure" or "I don't know" option for those who may not want to share their beliefs with the group.
- After each statement ask participants from either side why they chose that side, what their belief or opinion is, and facilitate a discussion about each statement. Summarize the key points and provide the answer. Sometimes the group may agree to disagree.
- Reinforce how each statement might impact whether or not survivors of sexual violence seek medical care.

Myth or reality?

Men are not really raped, men are strong and can defend themselves. If men say they were raped, they were lying and really wanted to have sex: MYTH

FACT: Men can and are raped. Men may be raped due to another person physically overpowering them, using physical force or a weapon to rape. Men may be raped due to force, pressure or coercion, due to a threat of violence or death. Men may be raped during torture or interrogation in prison. Men can also be forced or coerced into non-consensual sexual acts.

Boys make up stories or lie about sexual abuse; we can't always believe them: MYTH

FACT: Children, including boys, rarely lie or make up stories about being sexually abused. Statistics show that the majority of reports of child sexual abuse are true. Children make up stories about other things using their developing imagination; however, they rarely lie about sexual abuse. It's often adults who cannot accept or won't believe the child.

Men can fight off an attack, men are strong: MYTH

FACT: Some men are physically stronger than other men, some perpetrators may use weapons or threats, some men may freeze in fear and shock or be under the influence of drugs or alcohol, some men are sexually assaulted by people in positions of power and authority – by police or in detention—or are coerced into sex by intimate partners. Not all men can or do fight off an attack or sexual violence.

Men enjoy sex, so they must enjoy being raped: MYTH

FACT: Rape can be a traumatic event, humiliating, shameful, embarrassing, alter someone's sense of trust, safety and security. No one – not even men – enjoy being raped. If a man, or any survivor of sexual violence, has a normal, involuntary physiological response—like an erection or ejaculation—during the sexual violence, this does not indicate or show that he consented.

Boys who are sexually abused by men or other boys may become gay or homosexuals: MYTH

FACT: Sexual abuse does not affect a person's sexual orientation. An experience of sexual abuse is not part of someone's sexuality because it was not a consensual experience. Nor does it take away "manliness" or change a man into a woman or a boy into a girl. Rape is rape, regardless of the survivor's sex, presumed or real gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Note: This particular statement can often generate a lot of discussion because it is deeply connected with norms about masculinity and sexuality. It is important to emphasize that an experience of sexual abuse is not part of someone's sexuality: it is one person (the perpetrator) having sex. The victim is not "having sex", they have been forced or coerced into the situation. It is important that participants understand this is true even for female survivors.

Men and boys can have physical reactions, erection or ejaculation in response to sexual violence: REALITY

FACT: When subjected to sexual violence, men and boys can have an involuntary physical response that is not related to sexuality. Erection and ejaculation are physiological responses to stress and physical stimulation; they are not related to an individual's sexuality. Men often feel ashamed by an involuntary physical response to an assault. A physical reaction can occur regardless of someone's sexual orientation and does not indicate a person's sexual orientation. Perpetrators of sexual violence may blame victims of violence who have an erection or ejaculation by saying "See, you wanted it?" or "You know you liked it", and to force them to stay silent. Perpetrators may use these physiological responses to try to emasculate survivors or treat them not "real" men to show their power over them.

A man cannot be raped or sexually assaulted by a woman

MYTH

FACT: Men can be sexually assaulted or raped by women, women may be in positions of power, trust or authority or use physical violence or weapons to overpower and force a man to have sex against his will. Men may experience an erection even when they do not consent to sex, this can be the bodies normal response to stimulation even if the man does not consent. For example, in the war in Liberia, female soldiers raped men to shame and humiliate them.

Summarize

There are many harmful myths that contribute to shame, stigma and silence towards male survivors of sexual violence and prevent male survivors from seeking help. It is important to be aware and reflect on the myths that exist in our communities and that we may have, and to work to address these myths or biases to show support to male survivors of sexual violence.

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