



Editorial

Gender Norm Transformative Programing: Where Are We Now? Where Do We Need to Be?



The very interesting and well-executed study by Gupta and Santhya published in this month's Journal raises both complex and challenging questions [1]. What they have shown is that when the same school-based gender transformative programming is delivered to younger (aged 13–14 years) and older (aged 15–19 years) boys, the impact of the program appears to be significantly greater for those who are younger. Specifically, the authors found that attitudinal change was greater for the younger group, as it relates to gender egalitarian attitudes, such as the rejection of men's controlling behaviors and the perpetration of wife beating. Likewise, they reported that the younger adolescents believe peers would respect them more for their egalitarian attitudes than did the older cohort. There was one significant finding, however, that suggested that behaviorally, older boys were more influenced by the intervention: they reported greater likelihood than the younger group to intervene if they witnessed violence or bullying. This is interesting: the study indicated that *attitudinal change* is greater among the younger group, whereas at least along with one indicator, *behavioral change*, was greater for older boys.

The findings regarding attitudinal change are consistent with the gender intensification hypothesis and, likewise, are consistent with previous research. Essentially, the gender solidification hypothesis suggests that there is greater opportunity for achieving gender equal attitudes among younger adolescents. By about the age of 16 years, gender attitudes, norms, roles, and behaviors become more fixed and thus are harder to change [2,3]. This hypothesis has spawned a generation of gender norm change interventions, and the prevailing research supports its validity. Therefore, although the hypothesis appears to be true, it is not clear why. In the limitations section of their article, Gupta and Santhya suggest that perhaps holding the intervention sessions conjointly with younger and older adolescents might have limited its impact on older teens [1]. Likewise, providing the same curriculum to boys aged 13 and 19 years might have limited its impact on the older adolescents.

But there are other plausible explanations for these findings as well. In their evaluation of the *Choices* program—a gender transformative program for young adolescents aged 10–14 years in Nepal—Lundgren et al.'s [4] preliminary research suggested

that interventions inclusive of both girls and boys had more impact than focusing uniquely on boys. This may be applicable to the present intervention as well. In addition, Lundgren et al. note that early adolescence is a developmental stage where, among other things, empathy and perspective taking increase. As a consequence, boys may be more likely to take the perspectives of girls and empathize with the impacts of discriminatory norms on them. This is consistent with the neuroscience that shows that in early adolescence, empathic skills increase and with them come perspective taking [5,6].

In studying the declining impact of antibullying programs across the adolescent years, Yeager et al. [7] suggest a number of potential mechanisms that might be applicable to the current research, as well. First, the prevalence of certain behaviors is less common among older adolescents; this is true, for example, for bullying. Second, the drivers of discriminatory behaviors may be different for older than for younger adolescents; this may also be true, for example, in need for peer adulation derived from certain behaviors or attitudes. Third, the authors note self-regulatory capacity is generally greater among older compared with younger adolescents. This too is consistent with neurodevelopmental research. In addition, motivations and reward systems of older adolescents differ from those of younger peers.

Whatever the developmental and social factors, Gupta and Santhya's study reaffirms the value of early interventions with young adolescents to obtain attitudinal change [1]. But what about behavioral change? Consistent with Prochaska's *Trans-theoretical Model of Behavior Change*, those developing gender norm change interventions have worked under the assumption that readiness for behavioral change first requires a mindset attitude change [8]. But what if that is not the case? What if the factors that drive behavior change do not first require attitudinal change? What if the drivers of behavioral change are economic incentives or legal constraints or other factors? We see this, for example, in the U.S., with the changes that occurred in the late 1990s and again in the first decade of the current century regarding driving, drinking, and graduated driver's licenses for adolescents. Such approaches used policy and laws circumventing attitudinal change to achieve behavior change with an

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associated reduction of vehicular deaths among adolescents by approximately 40% [9].

The Gupta and Santhya's article adds to the body of literature that shows unequivocally that attitudinal change in favor of greater gender equality is feasible. In addition, as the Gupta and Santhya's article indicates, early adolescence is an optimal time to initiate programming aimed at gender norm change attitudes. But to focus on attitudinal change with the assumption that it will subsequently translate to behavior change is risky.

Although not rejecting gender norm change interventions, we also need to develop programs that aim at behavior change among young adolescents. There is a small but emerging body of literature showing that such behavioral change is feasible. One example is *Ujamaa*. Using Empowerment Transformation Training, this school-based program aims to reduce gender-based violence and in doing so improve school retention, reduce unintended pregnancy, and increase male engagement in preventing sexual violence. The program is intended for adolescents aged 10–16 years, and it has been tested in slum communities of Nairobi as well as Malawi and now in South Sudan. Using randomized controlled studies, the researchers have seen impressive changes in Kenya over a 1-year period, including a decrease by half in sexual assault when compared with control schools (baseline prevalence: 7.3%); boy intervention when witnessing verbal, physical, and sexual harassment; and pregnancy reduction, from 3.9% prevalence at baseline to 2.1% in the intervention group a year later [10–12]. So too, in Malawi, the results are equally impressive reductions in sexual assault prevalence for both primary and secondary school age adolescents [13]. There are a number of other examples as well, where the focus is predominantly on behavior change. Whether interventions aim to change attitudes or not, the central question is not whether they think differently, but whether they behave differently as a consequence.

From the *Young Lives* study in India comes a cautionary tale about attitudes in early adolescence. Ravi, a poor rural boy, was forced to leave school at the age of 9 years to help pay the family's debt for educating his brother. He was first interviewed at the age of 12 years when he reported that he had repeatedly witnessed his father beating his mother. He said that it was wrong and would never beat his wife. Interviewed again a year later, he described how he was beaten both by the overseer at the quarry where he worked and at home. At the age of 16 years, he described how he tried to intervene when he saw his brother beating his wife only to be told by his sister-in-law to mind his own business. Interviewed at the age of 20 years, Ravi reported that he married a year earlier and that his wife was 4 months pregnant. Now he described how, when his wife "tells lies," he would beat her: "She gets a beating... I hit her when she tells

anything..." [14]. Here again, we see evidence that attitudes in adolescence can be overcome through behavioral change throughout adolescence but to destructive and ultimately familiar ends.

Robert W. Blum, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H.
 Department of Population
 Family and Reproductive Health
 Bloomberg School of Public Health
 Johns Hopkins University
 Baltimore, Maryland

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