

A distinct contrast to this emerged in my action research with a small group of male students. In one of our frank conversations about the causes of domestic violence, participants spoke openly about their objectification of female peers and females generally in their boy-to-boy conversations, both online and in person. For instance, one participant reflected how “It [objectification] sounds like dialogue between me and my mates”, while another admitted to hearing and even taking part in discussions, especially online, about girls that were “inappropriate” – to use his wording – in how they focussed on “appearance and stuff”. I can only imagine... White Ribbon focuses on establishing violence against women as a “men’s issue” that “enables men and boys to lead...social change”, which by all accounts seems perfectly logical considering the sexism that remains a continuity in my meso world and undoubtedly beyond. Where one types ‘White Ribbon’ into an Internet search, such phrases as ‘men’s issue’ or ‘men speaking to men’ readily follow. At my own White Ribbon school assemblies for the past 3 years, the teacher and student speakers have always been mostly or exclusively male. As Hamad questions, however, does this not allow for a rather backward continuity in the age-old “patriarchal mindset that routinely and unconsciously assigns more value to the work and words of men”? Although well intentioned, does this not risk re-asserting the kind of culture that allows violence against women to exist in the first place?

In my initial questionnaire, almost 50% of respondents indicated that domestic violence should be ‘addressed by men and women together’, as opposed to men talking to men. Although this does not necessarily mean that my peers agree, they clearly see a ‘better way’ of creating change. Given that 40% of respondents indicated the need for women to ‘be seen and heard’, whereas the remaining 10% selected an option preferring the need for men to bring about change, there is clearly a reasonably large consensus amongst my Generation Z peers – from both sexes – that social change regarding domestic violence cannot primarily amount to ‘men’s business’. What became clear through the early stages of my action research, is the power of male-to-female conversations in triggering equivalent “cognitive moral conflicts”, to use the above-mentioned notion from Kohlberg’s theory, related to how we treat each other as well, and specifically how boys and men perceive and talk about girls and women.

It became abundantly clear that for some of the male participants, the initial action research sessions were the first time that they had thought critically about how “you see it [objectification] in typical conversations”. Little did they know that our dialogues were as much a learning experience for me as they hopefully were for them. One 16-year-old participant, for example, spoke about how he and his male friends often refer to girls in their meso world in derogatory ways. He stated, “You refer to them as ‘that bitch’, and stuff like that”.