"What the hell is positive masculinity?": An Ethnographic Study of Marketing 'Men and Feminism' in Canada

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Abstract

This thesis takes Next Gen Men (NGM), a Canadian social enterprise as a case study to explore how "positive masculinity" is conceptualised as a strategy for gender-based violence prevention. Employing an ethnographic approach, I conducted video interviews, discourse analysis and participant observation of three of NGM's activities: a 7-day youth 'rite of passage' summer camp, an online chat room and a community education event. "Positive masculinity" was most concretely described as an individual's agentic choices and behaviours. These findings echo previous research which suggests that the terms "toxic" and "positive" masculinity are personalisations which represent a neoliberal discourse that locates the individual as the cause and solution for society's problems. I claim that social enterprises see opportunity in this discourse and use it as a strategy to "market" feminism to men and boys.

Broadening "what fits" within the category of masculinity was seen as a strategy to work with people's current knowledge about gender. However, holding onto some kind of (broadened) category of masculinity inevitably reinforced "men" and "boys" as discursively separate social categories, demonstrating that efforts to dismantle gender as a system can ironically work to reproduce gender. This research suggests there is a tendency for masculinities programming to focus only on *internal hegemony* (Christensen & Jensen, 2014), the pressure men and boys feel amongst themselves to prove their masculinity to each other. I argue that gender-based violence prevention efforts taking this as their sole focus are only responding to half of the problem. I suggest that this work must happen alongside initiatives which address masculine domination of "the feminine" and build respect between women and men, boys and girls and non-binary people, not just respect amongst boys and men. This study explores the possibilities as well as limits of a social enterprise operating in a neoliberal society for generating social change. I argue that the potential remains limited when "positive masculinity" remains hinged on the maintenance of heteronormative, binary gender order.

Acknowledgements

Signed Declaration

This thesis contains only original, previously unpublished work.

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Introduction

This thesis is situated within the broader topic of gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and theorising about change in masculinities. I have a specific interest in strategies and interventions that aim to engage men and boys in feminism. One of the main strategies for working with men and boys for gender-based violence prevention involves encouraging the adoption of non-violent, caring, "positive", "healthy", or "inclusive" masculinities and reflecting on how masculinity is constructed. At present there are various campaigns and organisations around the world that encourage men to develop "healthy" or "positive" versions of masculinity. Their aim is to empower individual men and boys to reconstruct alternative forms of masculinity which reject systems of oppression and unequal power relations. There are varying opinions regarding the "best practice" approaches to engaging men and boys in gender-based violence prevention. I have chosen to explore the work of one organisation, Next Gen Men (NGM), as a case study and I hope that this ethnography will contribute to furthering the discussion about the challenges and complexities of this work.

I came to be interested in Next Gen Men's work through my broader interest in worldwide "healthy masculinity" initiatives. Having worked as a gender-based violence prevention practitioner in Australia, I already had an interest in the "engaging men and boys'" field. Furthermore, prior to this experience, I had worked with a provincial health service in Canada for two years in a health promotion and prevention role. This already established connection to Canada encouraged me to pursue NGM-a Canadian social enterprise- as the site of study. In addition, having observed some of the "healthy masculinities" work happening in Australia, I was curious to explore how other countries were doing this work. My decision to approach NGM was spurred by a cursory glance of their website. I was surprised to see words such as "patriarchy", "women" and "gender-based violence" when reading their mission. The terms jumped out to me as until then, I had not noticed this language being used on other apparently similar Australian social enterprises' websites. On Australian enterprise websites, key words such as "mental health" and "emotional intelligence" were front and centre. What was behind NGM's decision to connect work with men, boys, and masculinity with a seemingly feminist critique of gender-based violence? I knew for myself that these issues were inexplicably linked, but why did they see them as such? I was

intrigued and wanted to learn more and so I set out to understand this "small but mighty" organisation, how they were reimagining masculinity for a better future for all.

Next Gen Men (NGM) came into existence in 2014 when three male friends, Jake, Jermal and Jason received a two-year grant provided by the Movember Foundation. Their first initiative, an after-school program for boys, stemmed from their own experiences and struggles with their relationship to masculinity. Nowadays Next Gen Men delivers fee-for-service workshops, training, and outdoor camps as well as free public events designed to foster a dialogue about positive masculinities for men, boys and masculine identifying people. Next Gen Men is one of many organisations that is part of larger global movement to promote men and boys' mental health and to prevent gender-based violence. In more recent years the gender-based violence prevention sector has begun to consider how men and boys can be more actively engaged in addressing the problem of male violence. As a result, the global North has seen an emergence of social enterprises with this specific focus. I therefore consider it timely to investigate how such social enterprises understand masculinity and frame their work in response to this understanding. Specifically, I am interested to understand how these enterprises define concepts such as "healthy" or "positive" masculinity and the implications of their definitions for bringing about changes to the social organisation of gender relations in society.

Beyond being interested in this work at a professional level, there is no denying my personal connection to the topic. Being assigned female at birth and subsequently socialised as a girl and then a woman, I have been raised on one side of the gender binary. I have been socialised as a person who intimately understands what it means to live up to Western narratives of femininity and how to embody as well as challenge these narratives in my interactions with the world and the male socialised people within it. This experience of my gender provides me with an inherent curiosity to want to understand other gender subjectivities. It also makes me motivated to find solutions so that, at least on the grounds of gender, nobody must suffer.

It is important to locate this study and the operations of NGM in its geographical and socio-political context. This thesis explores one of the many stories[1] of masculinity that were being told as of July 2023 in English Canadian Canada, namely in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. This story is one of entrepreneurialism stemming from a neoliberal capitalist era which saw a steady trend towards providing more privatised social services and government policies pushing a 'free market' mentality as the solution for social issues. This story emerged from a socio-political landscape which generates endless headlines, blogs, video commentaries and podcasts proclaiming the importance of mental health and self-care. Finally, but by no means less significantly, this ethnography must be placed against a backdrop of changing gender relations. It should be chronologically located in a post *#Me-Too* period where individual men and boys are labelled as "toxic" and "broken" by the media and where strong anti-feminist backlash exists which proclaims the need to return to "traditional" ideals of masculinity.

Why is this topic important to research?

While there has been some scholarship evaluating "promising approaches" of social enterprises that promote "positive masculinity", this scholarship has remained limited in its potential to offer a critical perspective[2]. There does not appear to be any literature which has analysed the emergence of social enterprises promoting "positive masculinity" and their co-existence with neoliberal government policies and ideology. Therefore, I see a critical analysis of the workings of such enterprises as a necessary contribution. Furthermore, I believe it is important to study how real-world interventions, like those delivered by NGM, understand and apply academic concepts. How concepts such as masculinity, patriarchy and feminism are interpreted has implications in terms of worsening, leaving unchanged or dismantling gender relations (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002).

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[1] A story of masculinity' is an idiom I credit to German Villegas who used it in an interview as a heuristic tool to explain how masculinity can be conceptualized.

[2] The studies that I found were evaluation reports (Elliot et al., 2022) which sought to assess "promising practices". Their research question: "what works in gender transformative programs aiming to foster healthy masculinities with men and boys?" begins from the premise that the enterprise is indeed offering gender transformative programming and that there are some successful elements which should be replicated. Studies appear to be commissioned either by enterprises themselves or by government agencies who fund the programming and are therefore obligated to 'demonstrate' effectiveness.

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Chapter 1: Situating The Research

1.1 Academic and Activist Responses to the "Crisis of Masculinity"

Different approaches have existed in academia for studying men and masculinities. Critical studies of men and masculinity (CSMM), also referred to as Pro-Feminist Men's Studies, since its inception in the 1960s has tended to align with the prevailing feminist perspective of masculinity at the time. However, Beasley (2015) notes an increasing theoretical divergence between Feminist and Sexuality Studies and CSMM. The key difference being that since the second wave of feminism, Feminist and Sexuality Studies has shifted towards disrupting and destabilising gender identities and understanding masculinity as discursively produced and not something that can only be associated with male "sexed" bodies. Yet despite the widespread uptake of postmodern feminist theorizing, which emphasises gender fluidity and the abolition of distinct gender categories of "male" and "female", CSMM scholars have appeared to maintain usage of gender identity categories (p. 569). Understanding how academic communities theorise and talk about men and masculinities is important. As McCook (2022, p. 40) explains, what is theorized in the field of CSMM informs at least some of the policy and practice work of engaging men and boys in gender-based violence prevention.

The field of CSMM as well as previous men's activism and movements can be seen as a response to a broader and ongoing "masculinity-in-crisis" narrative. According to Roberts, this narrative has a long history and emerged at various moments in time well before the onset of the "post-industrial" age during the 1980s (Ravn & Roberts, 2020, p. 185). While history is not always linear and is subject to interpretation, it can be argued that at least in the global North, the Men's Liberation movement of the 1970s was perhaps one of the first moments when men collectively began to think critically about gender roles and specifically the "male sex role". This was spurred by consciousness raising activities associated with the second wave of feminism which included both liberal and radical feminist thought in the US (Carrigan et al., 1985, p. 574). The Men's Liberation Movement, albeit small in scale and debated as to whether it can be called a "movement" cf. (Carrigan et al., 1985) undoubtably influenced various men's movements which have appeared since the 1970s. The different ways

that the "crisis -in- masculinity" was understood in the 1970s continues to permeate how issues of masculinity are confronted today (Kimmel, 2014).

Just as in academic spaces, activist responses also have seen a split in conceptualising masculinity. Although initially the Men's Liberation Movement aligned itself with pro-feminist ideas in terms of agreeing on the social construction of gender, as the movement evolved, its radical roots began to fade. Instead, the movement went in the direction of advocating for therapeutic and self-improvement type interventions for men (Carrigan et al., 1985, p. 574). The movement has also been criticised, along with the liberal feminist movement of the 1960s onwards, for its lack of race and class analysis with the majority of the movement's leaders being middle-upper class, white men (Villegas, n.d.). Multiple fractures have occurred since the beginning of the Men's Liberation Movement and new branches of activism have emerged. The Mythopoetic men's movement established in the US in the 1980s and 1990s framed "masculinity-in-crisis" as being a result of the over feminisation of boys and men as caused by second-wave feminism, claiming that it had rendered men and boys as soft and detached from their essential masculine identity (Tosh, 1993). Rites of Passage or male initiation activities and ceremonies were seen as an antidote as they enabled men and boys to reconnect with their "lost" sense of masculinity. The concept of rites of passage continues to be used today however there are some adaptations, as will be discussed in chapter three. Evidently, current approaches and men's movements can all be connected in some way to previous movements, many of which continue to recycle the same causes and solutions for the "male malaise", some being more productive for gender-justice than others.

1.2 Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Equality

Since the 1990's, violence prevention work has experienced a gradual shift towards focusing on the role that men can play in ending violence against women (Jewkes, Flood, et al., 2015, p. 3). Whilst some feminists, such as Black feminists and African feminists have long acknowledged and practiced the importance of working together with men (Roberts & Elliott, 2020, p. 91), this has not necessarily been the case amongst all mainstream White Western feminists (Eisenstein, 1977; Nnaemeka, 2004). In the past two decades, work with men and boys has received more emphasis and funding and masculinity programs have become increasingly popular in the

Australian context (Flood, 2023; King et al., 2021). Previously research and programming for gender-based violence mainly focused on men as perpetrators (Peretz & Vidmar, 2021, p. 4). Flood (2019b) reflects that public health interventions have begun to focus more explicitly on men and boys and there now exist efforts to engage men and boys in gender justice programming, although this programming is nascent and often insufficiently gender-transformational (p. 2287). There appear to be several social enterprises in Australia, the UK and Canada that have been established in the last decade that offer "healthy masculinity" workshops and programs for schools and community settings. The surfacing of social enterprises with this specific focus could perhaps be understood as a practical response to the public discourse on men, masculinities, and gender-based violence. There are two main framings which these enterprises use, either approaching the topic of masculinity from the angle of mental health and suicide prevention or from one of gender-based violence prevention. The former is most prominent with Australian enterprises.

The literature demonstrates that there is an overemphasis on the "programs for problems" approach, or individual-level behavioural change type interventions (Wells & Fotheringham, 2022). Flood (2019a) explains that the Australian public health models of violence prevention tend to emphasize individual responsibility and behaviour change, and neglects the role and responsibility of state actors, such as the Government, in creating and maintaining structural violence and inequality (p.48). As Salter (2019) argues, governments and funding bodies often prefer to fund initiatives which address social norms and individual attitudes. This is because it defers attention away from the structural issues of gender inequality for which governments are responsible (p.41). A review of governmental violence prevention plans in the global North revealed that engaging men and boys as allies, leaders and advocates for gender justice is still in its infancy with the majority of plans referring to men and boys only as perpetrators of violence. Where men and boys were represented as agents of change, most of the initiatives planned has an exclusive focus on individual behaviour change (Wells & Fotheringham, 2022).

A criticism voiced by women, pro-feminist men and queer people working in the field is that many programs and initiatives lack alignment with or accountability to feminist principles. As Burrell & Flood (2019) describe, while this notion of accountability is important, in practice it can be complicated. This is because there are many strands

of feminism that work with men can align to. Organisations can fall into the trap of claiming that they are accountable to feminism, yet their understanding or definition is vague and as a result their work is less effective (p.239). Some researchers and practitioners have drawn attention to the Anglo-centric nature of initiatives and question their appropriateness for other racial or class groups beyond White, middle-upper class males (Myska, 2021). Obviously, a one-size fits all approach is not suitable and anti-violence work with men must consider and adapt to different social locations, levels of power and privilege and social norms that exist globally. Many mainstream organisations working with men have failed to apply intersectionality to their work (Peretz, 2018). Moreover, there are criticisms that "healthy masculinity" initiatives blindside the issue of violence towards women by means of only promoting men's own health and wellbeing gains. And initiatives with their focus on empowering men and boys to be "champions for change" reinforce patriarchal structures and further exclude women and queer people (McCook, 2022, p. 39). Ramazanoğlu & Holland (2002) have shared concerns that programs or interventions focused on men and boys can reinforce gender inequality or perpetuate male dominance and power if they are not significantly gender transformative and challenge normative ideas of gender. Finally, current approaches have tended to be heteronormative and cis-normative (Our Watch, 2019, p. 20) and seek to engage men as a heterogenous and monolithic group. These are only some of the major tensions within the field.

1.3 Public Health Models for Gender-Based Violence Prevention

In many countries, gender-based violence prevention is framed from a public health and health promotion perspective (Flood, 2019a). In Australia and Canada, the Social-Ecological Model is one of the main theoretical concepts which underpins national approaches to gender-based violence prevention. It is used to ensure that prevention efforts encompass a broad spectrum of levels of intervention ranging from efforts focused on the individual level through to community and societal levels (Lee et al., 2007; Our Watch, 2019). Despite awareness of the need to direct prevention initiatives at all levels, there has been a tendency to focus most frequently on changing attitudes and beliefs at the individual level. This is counter to research which has shown that attitudinal change does not regularly translate into behavioural change. Instead, social norms appear to be more powerful at influencing behaviour (Dozois, & Wells, 2020, p.

32). Pease & Flood (2008) highlight how violence prevention work almost exclusively focuses on changing individual men's attitudes and as a result, campaigns end up neglecting the structural dimensions of violence against women. Paterson & Scala (2015) offer a critique of health promotion models stating that they have a tendency to focus on the individual's responsibility for behaviour change without taking into consideration the wider structural forces at play in people's lives. Likewise, they can be viewed as propagating neoliberal ideology by attributing the concept of risk to individuals and presenting deeply entrenched societal-level issues as challenges for individuals to solve (Dworkin et al., 2015a, p. 132). The notion is that, with the appropriate skills, individuals can effectively address and overcome these challenge (Brown et al., 2013).

A dichotomy of "toxic" and "healthy" masculinity is commonly used in public health model inspired prevention programs. Despite the popularity of this dichotomy, it is not without critique. Kimmel & Wade (2018) state that it doesn't resonate with many men as it can be seen as attacking (p. 237). Perhaps more importantly, toxic masculinity as a concept individualises the problem down to it being a character trait of some men (Harrington, 2021, p. 350), it pathologizes and decontextualises and risks racializing the concept further (de Boise, 2019, p. 149). Ultimately, it fails to situate masculinity in the broader social context in which it is created. McCook (2022) also discusses concerns with race and class intersections and how these categorisations reinforce a narrative of false distinctions between "good" and "bad" men. Others have expressed that the term doesn't direct attention to the material inequalities which produce or promote dysfunctional performances of masculinity (Harrington, 2021, p. 347; Salter, 2019). Jewkes et al (2015) underscore the importance of avoiding portraying healthy or positive masculinity as yet another form of ideal masculinity which is simplistic and homogeneous (p.12).

Perhaps one of the key critiques is that in reconstructing masculinities, binary gender identities are reinforced, even though they may be more "positive" or "healthy" identities. This approach does not encourage men's disinvestment in gendered identities or the removal of gender boundaries (Flood, 2018) and continues to reinforce that only expressions which fall under the category of masculinity are legitimate or valid expressions thus continuing to reinforce the inferior status of femininity (Waling, 2019, p. 363). McCook (2022) similarly claims that reconstructing positive notions of

masculinity leads to the reinforcement of gender norms to sexed bodies. Waling (2019) suggests that the solution lies in neither of these terms but in a post-structuralist understanding of de-gendering traits and moving towards non-binary gender expressions. The plausibility of this idea needs to be considered in relation to the current public understandings of gender: this is discussed in chapter four. This thesis highlights that academic communities are not the only voices contributing to theoretical debates pertaining to masculinity and gender-based violence prevention. Taking NGM as a case study, I aim to further contribute to the conversation by offering a perspective which represents some of the realities and practical implications of engaging men and boys in gender-based violence prevention.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Underpinnings

Theories about masculinity

Masculinity is not a fixed, unified, unchanging sentient being (Martino & Greig, 2012). Thinking about masculinity as an empty category (Monterescu, 2007, p. 195) suggests that masculinity does not exist in a concrete sense but rather it is constructed by discourse. We fill the "empty" category of masculinity with the narratives and language of the world around us. German Villegas, one of the interviewees in this study referred to masculinity as an ever-changing story and a means through which people can present a narrative about themselves and others. I found this conceptualisation very helpful in understanding masculinity and therefore have decided to include it in my theoretical framework. While masculinities can be understood as a collective set of practices (Dworkin et al., 2015b, p. 132) attempting to agree on a universal set of characteristics or traits is futile. This is because ideas about masculinity are shaped by economic, political and social contexts. Masculinities are therefore not a bunch of norms at the individual level, rather they are narratives and performances which people use to position themselves against a backdrop of their own unique political, economic, social, and cultural environments.

There are an enormous number of theories which aim to conceptualize and understand masculinity, I have therefore chosen to outline the theories which have resonated the most with me in my learning journey towards making sense of masculinity. I approach masculinity from a post structural feminist perspective drawing on Western gender theorists such as Butler (1993), West & Zimmerman (1987) and Halberstam (1998). I therefore conceptualise masculinity as being the result of a series of repeated discursive acts which pair male "sexed" bodies with narratives of masculinity. In this sense certain traits, performances, and bodies become labelled as "masculine" and "men" and "boys" are pronounced the social carriers of the category of masculinity. I use the past participle "sexed" to indicate that the process of assigning sex, in this case maleness- is passive and happens onto the body at the time of birth. I do this to demonstrate that both biological sex (male, female) and gender (man, woman) are social constructs. To this point we must ask, who decided that a penis is equivalent with "male" and a vulva with "female"? It could easily have been that another

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physical characteristic was chosen to represent "male", thus highlighting the arbitrariness of bodies and the social categories they hold. This is not to deny that biological differences exist amongst bodies. Indeed, bodies differ in their sex characteristics, and this becomes especially obvious at the time of sexual maturation (puberty). For example, bodies vary in their muscle to fat distribution ratios, their amount of body hair and their ability to menstruate. What is necessary to recognise is that although bodies have differences, these differences only come to have meaning in a world which ascribes valuations to such differences (Ortner, 1974, p. 71).

Halberstam's theory of Female Masculinity (1998) that is, masculine performances performed by bodies assigned female at birth, demonstrates that masculinity can be detached from male bodies thus exposing the "doing" of masculinity (West & Zimmerman, 1987) as a "practice" rather than an innate or biological state of being. Masculinity here is understood as the means through which the butch body (a female body that performs masculinity) becomes gendered and comes into being (Nguyen, 2008, p. 672). In sociology, masculinity can refer to homosocial enactments which encompass the calculated ways men relate to other men and seek validation and enforcement of their non-femaleness (Ralph, 2023, p. 5). Homosocial enactments reiterate again that masculinity is not a biological given, rather it is a sociological phenomenon which asserts that male bodies must constantly "prove" their masculinity to the self, to other men and women.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity (1987) expands on this by demonstrating that masculinity is relational and that proving the status of masculinity relies on distinguishing certain narratives of masculinity from subordinate or "lesser" narratives of masculinities such as effeminate or homosexual masculinities as well as femininities (Connell, 1987). In Connell's original theory, hegemony was described as encompassing some men's power over other men as well as men's power over women. Christensen & Jensen (2014) suggest taking Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity and separating it into two distinct forms 1) external hegemony: men's patriarchal dominance over women and 2) internal hegemony: the hierarchy that exists among men. I find this breakdown of hegemonic masculinity useful and use it to distinguish the different sociological phenomena that needs to be addressed in GBV prevention work.

Connell's theory specifies that men have differential access to power based on their ranking in this sociological masculine hierarchy and therefore masculinity is not only about men dominating women but equally about men dominating other men. This highlights that inequalities exist not only between men and women but also amongst men as a group (McCook, 2022, p. 40). Connell stressed the need to consider masculinity in the plural, *masculinities,* thus explaining that masculinity manifests differently both within and between groups of men. We only need to look to the military as an example wherein masculinities are constructed and performed differently between white-collar engineers and front-line combat fighters. As such, there is no one fixed notion of masculinity, rather there are multiple, often competing narratives which attempt to portray the societal "ideal" of manhood. Connell's original theory described hegemonic masculinity as the most legitimate, revered, or acclaimed version of manhood (Jewkes, Flood, et al., 2015, p. 5). Often this idea of the "most celebrated or idolized version of manhood" or the prevailing norm of masculinity is reduced to a "static character type" of individual men and their practices (Connell (2008, p. 224) as cited in (2015, p. 571). This is despite Connell's emphasis on the dynamic nature of masculinity. Referring to hegemonic masculinity as a character trait of some men ignores how masculinity and male dominance are embedded and reproduced by our world's systems, not just by individual men.

Instead of focusing on masculine performances or various masculinities, hegemonic or otherwise, I work with the idea of the *hegemony of men* (Hearn, 2004). This approach to understanding men's power suggests that "men" are both a social category and an individual identity with specific gender practices. These notions are taken for granted in society and therefore appear as natural, when in fact there is nothing natural about them. They are key components to patriarchy or a system in which certain men dominate other men as well as other genders. By drawing on the concept of the *hegemony of men* I wish to demonstrate that hegemony is not so much about the reproduction of hegemonic forms of masculinity or the most admired ways of "being a man", rather hegemony is the seemingly subtle ways in which both the category of men and men's distinct individual practices are reproduced and legitimated in society (Hearn, 2004, p. 60). Put simply, hegemony can be understood as "taking one way of seeing things and convincing people that this way of seeing things is natural, that "it's just the way things are" (Surman, 1994 as cited in Hearn, 2004, p.

61). *Hegemony of men* therefore refers to the overall unquestionable dominance of masculinist ideology as an organizing principle of society. Hegemony is sustained through coercion and (violent) force, influence, and ideology. It also relies on the active participation of subordinated groups and their willingness to consent or be complicit in the system. Hegemony uses its power to control political and cultural spheres which then shape societal norms, values, and practices. Hearn suggests critical studies on men and masculinity scholars should focus more on the hegemony or the often-overlooked social processes which create men as a social category. Therefore, I aim to shed light on some of these taken for granted processes which contribute to the reproduction of "men" and "boys" as distinct social categories that are separate from "women", "girls" and other genders and as such sustain the hegemony of men. I explore the persistence of hegemonic ideas and practices and am not concerned with detailing specific forms or performances of individual men's masculinity per se.

The terms "men" and "boys" in this thesis refer to 1) male "sexed" people who are socialised as boys and men (cis-gender males) and 2) female "sexed" people who were not necessarily socialized as male but embody social practices coded as "masculine" (i.e trans men). Both classifications are used to speak about people who are both part of a dominant social category and are individual agents who embody social practices coded as "masculine". "Masculine identifying" is used to describe masculine leaning non-binary people whose bodies may or may not have been "sexed" as male but who embody masculine coded social practices. When I use the terms men and boys, I do so with the knowledge that these categories must be unsettled however I use them in practice as it allows for the use of a universalized group identity which makes discussion easier (Beasley, 2015, p. 575).

Theories about Masculinities and Neoliberalism
Beyond being influenced by other systems like classism, racism, ableism, narratives of masculinity are also influenced by economic, cultural, social and political changes (Martino & Greig, 2012, p. 3). Next Gen Men's operation is influenced by multiple cultural, political, and historical contexts as well as broader global narratives of masculinity. I am unable to discuss the influence of all these facets and therefore have chosen to focus on the cultural and political contexts of North America. I argue that the political context of Canada at the time of writing was based on neoliberal principles. Neoliberalism in Canada has been on the rise since in the 1980s. Social enterprises

have emerged over this time in response. I was interested to explore how social enterprises, being organisations which stem from neoliberal thinking, deliver gender-based violence prevention initiatives, particularly those which centre boys and men. As such, I draw on the idea of neoliberal capitalism and relate it to the operations of NGM.

Neoliberalism is a form of capitalism and a way of governing populations (Savage, 2018, p. 147) which can be understood as both an economic system as well as a political ideology. In economic terms it is characterized by de-regulation and privatization of markets to increase efficiency and competition with the government providing only minimal welfare or social services. While discussion of neoliberal capitalism as an economic concept is relevant for understanding NGM as a revenue generating social enterprise, more attention will be given to the workings of neoliberalism as a form of political ideology. Neoliberal ideology involves applying the idea of market rationalities onto individuals in society (Davies & Chisholm, 2018, p. 278). When neoliberalism as a concept is carried over to social relations it requires that people behave in a certain way. People must be competitive, self-sufficient, an "entrepreneur of the self" (Davies & Chisholm, 2018, p. 278). Perhaps the most concerning element of neoliberalism is that the individual and their "chosen" behaviours is seen as both the cause and solution for societal or structural level problems. I use this understanding of neoliberalism as a framework to explore NGM's work and to make connections between the characteristics of neoliberalism and their approach to gender justice.

Expanding onto ideas of neoliberal governance, I employ Foucault's Theory of Governmentality that argues "technologies", which are techniques and procedures, are used to direct or guide people to conduct themselves in a particular manner (Cohen, 2016, p. 45). Foucault's theory posits that the Government plays a central role in dictating how people behave however, additional actors such as non-government organisations (NGO) are also involved in governing (Lemke, 2016). NGOs gain their authority through their application of expertise (Prügl, 2011, p. 76). Based on this theory, I argue that the political and economic context of neoliberalism which NGM is situated in has led to the commodification of personal "expertise". Once commodified it is used as a technology for guiding the creation of ideal neoliberal citizens, that is, people who takes responsibility for their own problems and solutions.

Taking the frameworks outlined in this section, I approach this study with the following research question: How is masculinity reimagined and reconstructed by Next Gen Men?

2.2 Multiple Ethnographic Methods

Choice of research site

Increasingly there are a number of different actors involved in work to promote positive masculinities. These actors range from supranational organisations to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as local level activist groups and government initiatives. I was interested in researching social enterprises as they are a unique actor in this work given their organisational model enables them to approach social issues with a view to create change and generate revenue. This combination of social and financial goals was intriguing and prompted my interest in exploring them as a research site. Furthermore, I had noticed that most, if not all social enterprises with a "positive masculinity" remit have been founded, owned, and operated by White, cis-gender, heterosexual men. I was curious to learn more about how men from a dominant group promote "positive masculinities" and how their social capital, power, and influence may play a role in the enterprise's approach. I defined the research site as anywhere where NGM was coordinating or undertaking their programs and activities, and this included virtual spaces. The participant observation proportion of the research was undertaken exclusively in Alberta, Canada although NGM's programming operates across other Canadian provinces.

Methods

Following Davis & Craven's (2011) suggestion that research should be disseminated in meaningful ways for both academic and non-academic audiences (p.199), I began this project with the intention of producing a documentary film to ensure that more people would have the opportunity to engage with the topic. I was committed to this idea as I believe it is important to improve communication between people working "on the ground" and people working in academia. The process of producing a documentary film allowed me, as a researcher, to give something back to NGM by sharing the footage I captured during my research as well as using their work as a case study. This may help to spread awareness both for their work but also the larger cause they are working towards.

One of the key distinctions of feminist research which sets it apart from other types of research is the explicit discussion of the researcher's positionality and its influence (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Being assigned female at birth and having continued to identify with this assignment throughout my life means that my socialisation experience is different to most of the participants in my research who have been socialised as boys and men. My lived experience of my gender provided an interesting research perspective and influenced the research process. Having spent my life moving through-out the world as a White, middle class, able-bodied, cis-gender girl then woman undoubtedly effected the kinds of questions I asked and how I interpreted responses (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Similarly, my professional work experience and recent academic "training" also influenced the research process. I am aware of the power and authority I gained by presenting as a (student) researcher and filmmaker. My role as the "filmmaker" enabled me access which might otherwise have been denied if I were to present solely as a gender studies researcher. My age rather than gender appeared to be a more significant factor in determining how people related to me. I was at least twenty years older than the youngest youth on the camp and they therefore saw me as an adult figure and interacted with me accordingly. With the older youth (15- and 16-year-olds), I felt there was more of a sense of camaraderie between us. The CEO and Co-Founder of NGM was the same age as me and this also enabled ease in conversation in terms of generational lingo and references and removed the age hierarchy. Given that the camp consisted of masculine identifying youth only, it was difficult to observe gender power relations beyond those which I experienced myself as a female identifying researcher. It was also difficult to comment on the gender power relations between my female self and the masculine identifying youth as my age amongst other variables (researcher, filmmaker) was also a factor altering the dynamic.

Unlike a positivist researcher, I did not try to minimize these factors nor aim for any sort of detached objectivity (Behar, 1996; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Instead, my feminist methodological approach made use of this positionality by acknowledging my standpoint and using it as a tool for understanding. I believe my research is feminist as it seeks to promote social justice and social change (Hesse-Biber, 2007) and aims to facilitate an understanding of the realities of gendered lives (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 19). My research standpoint is one which acknowledges that men

and boys suffer under patriarchy but that women, girls are non-binary people are disproportionally oppressed by its ideology. When writing the analytical chapters I was guided by Boellstorff et al's (2013) principle of "sympathetic depiction". A sympathetic and honest depiction did not mean I necessarily agreed with the beliefs or actions of NGM but rather that I tried to present my analysis in a way which sought to understand why NGM may have certain beliefs and "visions of their worlds" (p.149). Taking an ethnographic approach to my research certainly helped me to provide a sympathetic depiction as I was able to situate myself and the reader more deeply into the specific context of NGM's operations.

The methods chosen included informal and formal video interviews, participant observation and critical discourse analysis. My decision to employ multiple ethnographic methods stemmed from a desire to more thoroughly understand the research participants and their approaches and to prevent "ethnographic fallacy" (Duneier et al., 2001, p. 343) which occurs when the results from one research method are taken at face value without triangulation or testing the findings against other sources. Multiple methods were also used to help overcome the problem of receiving "staged answers" as would be the case if I only video recorded formal interviews. As Duneier (2001) notes, the positionality of the researcher can affect what kind of responses are received during interviews. By using participant observation, I was able to pick up on certain dynamics or details which wouldn't otherwise have been openly expressed to me or would not be expressed in a formal interview on camera. Practically speaking, participant observation and video interviews were also chosen as they were necessary components for the documentary production process. The research was approved by the Central European University (CEU) ethics committee, and I used consent forms for all participants (adults and children) to ensure informed consent for both the research and filmmaking.

I completed eight long form (1.5-3 hours) semi-structured video interviews with staff and volunteers from NGM and I interviewed one researcher of social work from the University of Calgary who works closely with NGM and other organisations in Canada on gender-based violence prevention. I also conducted 12 short (10 minute) interviews with volunteers and youth participants of NGM programs and activities. All interviews were video recorded, and transcripts were produced from the transcript generation function in Adobe Premiere Pro. I coded the interview transcripts using my own codes

in NVIVO. Filming for the documentary enabled me to be a more active participant whilst I was "observing". I found it gave me an excuse to ask questions and closely follow events and activities. The film making process appeared to legitimise and normalise my presence amongst staff and participants.

Most of my time in-person with NGM was spent participating in the Rite of Passage Expedition (ROPE), a weeklong hiking and camping trip. As such, observations from this activity contribute a significant proportion of my participant observation. The ROPE involved spending time both at a summer camp lodging facility in the Albertan countryside as well as three days hiking in the White Goat Wilderness area in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Participants attending the camp were masculine identifying youth aged between 12 and 16 years old. Most of the youth came from White, middle to upper class backgrounds from across Canada. The camp was facilitated by two men, one in his late twenties and the other mid to late thirties. One facilitator was the youth program manager from NGM, and the other was an unpaid volunteer and supporter of NGM who attended the camp with his son. Beyond the ROPE I also participated in a NGM circle event, a free community education and discussion event held in Calgary.

I also observed intermittently the online chat room / Discord Server "NGM Boys+ Club" coordinated by NGM as a safe space for youth to connect virtually. My participation in the server was limited as Jonathon and I agreed that for the sake of observation, there was no need to provide me with interacting rights for the entire platform. I was therefore added as a "ghost" user. Jonathon announced to the server that I was to be added in this capacity and explained what my research was about [3]. Jonathon provided me with access to the "Support Channel" where I mostly observed: this channel was especially

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[3] Notification posted in general announcements channel to all users:
Just a heads up that we're being joined by @Claire, an Australian researcher who joined the @ROPE Project 2023 trip in Alberta. She's exploring how rites of passage and positive masculinity intersect, and since the Discord server is a big part of the relationships that define the summer trips, she asked to do some observation of what this space looks like as well. For those of you who haven't met her yet, she is fun, thoughtful, down-to-earth and curious about the wellbeing of adolescent boys. Her role on the server, though, is to silently observe, not actually communicate at this time. Any observations she make will inform her analysis related to youth from ROPE Alberta who already signed the consent form—the rest of you aren't technically part of her research so you don't need to worry about anything you say being used elsewhere. She's just a fly on the wall for those who are already part of her research project. Let me know if you have any questions!

created for youth to share particularly sensitive or personal topics or questions. Any youth could join but they had to request access, it was not automatically available. My observations of the Discord Server were done approximately eight months after I had completed the in-person participant observation. I found that observing the Discord server and reading some of the comments from the youth I'd met on the trip reconnected me to the people I'd met. I noticed that after reading through their comments I felt reminded that these are people and not just "research subjects". I found it humanized both my understanding of my research participants and highlighted the detached nature of research, despite my best intentions to avoid positivist approaches.

I included critical discourse analysis as a method to analyse how NGM presented their work to the public. This was necessary to ensure I reflected on the multiple strategies NGM used to communicate about masculinity and gender-based violence. I used critical discourse analysis as opposed to a pure linguistic analysis as it highlights how language reflects and creates social meaning (Tonkiss, 2004). I used NIVO software to code the analysis, creating codes using both a deductive and inductive approach. I began creating some codes based on the theoretical frameworks guiding my thesis, including theories of neoliberal ideology and theories of masculinity. Where new concepts emerged or did not fit into existing codes, I created new ones. Therefore, while my approach was initially driven by some specific theories, I was open to deviations from these theories and did not dismiss them if they did not fit.

The texts I analysed included NGM's website pages, PDFs of program materials (NGM Manual Facilitator Guide, ROPE reflection journal document, NGM blog posts and written Instagram content). I listened to some episodes from NGM's podcast network including episodes from the podcast series *Breaking the Boy Code* and *Modern Manhood*. I also watched two different recordings of webinar presentations about the role of rites of passage in cultivating positive masculinity. To better contextualise NGM's work I analysed Canadian federal government policies including gender-based violence strategies and action plans from between 2017 to the most recent in 2021 (Government of Canada, 2018, 2022; Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2019). I also analysed multiple strategy documents and reports produced by Shift: the project to end domestic violence, a research collaborative unit at the University of Calgary (Dozois, & Wells, 2020; Government of Canada, 2018; Lee et al., 2023).

This study is not without limitations. Following Connell's (2014) provocation that we must rethink how we understand the making of masculinities and apply a world centered approach to this process, I intended to include the historical context of colonisation in Canada and how it might be shaping current discourse on "positive" masculinity, specifically looking at the making of both colonizer and colonized masculinities. However, given the size limit of an MA thesis I was unable to deeply situate NGM within the broader cultural, historical, and global context in which they were established and operate and therefore this study lacks many of the nuances which such contextual details would have offered.

Chapter 3: Making Sense of Masculinity

How does NGM talk about "masculinity"? The purpose of this chapter is to present the various understandings and interpretations staff and volunteers had when it came to conceptualising masculinity. I also explore how they applied these understanding in their work. I draw on interview material, website content and vignettes from my time participating in NGM's activities. The second half of this chapter explores NGM's articulation of the "problem". Here I present the narratives of masculinity that NGM are trying to challenge or change.

3.1 Conceptualising Masculinity

As discussed in chapter one, a key tension in men and masculinities work comes from differing perspectives on how to understand masculinity: is it something that occurs naturally only in male bodies or is it socially constructed? Reflective of diverging theories, it is of little surprise that great diversity exists when it comes to "masculinity" programming (Connell, 2000, p. 150). Some organisations work with men and boys supporting them to reconnect with a deep masculine psyche such as those inspired by the mythopoetic era men's movements. There is a consensus at least among programs designed from the perspective of gender-based violence (GBV) prevention that masculinity is a process of gender socialization. Therefore, it was not surprising to hear that NGM staff and volunteers described masculinity as an outcome of socialisation. After all, if masculinity was something innate or unchangeable then there would be little point to NGM's programming which is focused on igniting a reimagination of masculinity. However, it is not uncommon that organisations involved in "reimagining masculinity" simultaneously work with the idea that some masculine coded traits are biologically ingrained.

I met Jonathon, NGM's Youth Program Manager in the car park of the Red Arrow bus station in Edmonton, Alberta. It was a Monday morning and the beginning of the 7-day Rites of Passage Expedition (ROPE). ROPE was a summer camp program designed for masculine identifying youth aged between 12-16 to learn about positive masculinity as they experience an adventure during their transition from boyhood to adulthood. Jonathon was energetic, self-assured, and patient and the instigator behind the rites of passage expedition programming we were all about to partake in. He is a big

believer in the idea that, with supportive environments, boys can unlearn the harmful and damaging parts of their gender socialization and embrace a non-violent way of showing up in the world. Jonathon has a strong belief in the wisdom of boys and saw relationships and relationship-based experiences as the most valuable, above academic theories. Although he felt academic theories were less pertinent than interpersonal relationships, Jonathon did appear to be guided by feminist theorising as was evident in his rejection of gender essentialism. Jonathon explained why he tended to avoid gender essentialism in his work:

> The problem with essentialism, in my opinion, is that you end up, whether you mean to or not with a "boys will be boys" kind of narrative that if boys, for example, are innately more aggressive or innately more physical or innately less emotionally expressive, you end up ultimately undermining their capability because you expect less from them.

Despite being aware that NGM's programming was guided by feminist principles, I was still sceptical about the feasibility of combining such principles with a rite of passage type framework. Because of this scepticism, I was somewhat surprised when Jonathon outright rejected biological essentialism. This was because it challenged my assumption that rite of passage type programs, historically associated with men and movements endorsing biological essentialism, always must subscribe to such beliefs to a certain extent, yet as Jonathon was indicating, this was not always the case. In my interviews with staff and volunteers I found that staff tended to speak in a way that avoided any overt possibilities of inferring biological essentialism, the idea that gender performances such as masculinity are biologically determined or innate and therefore unchangeable. This rejection of biological essentialism can be explained by NGM's desire to distinguish themselves from what they see as the "less credible" masculinity programming that exists. As discussed previously, many programs work with the idea that men and masculinity are a product of nature not nurture. Organisations or programs working with this understanding of masculinity tend to be viewed by professionals and academics in the engaging men and boys' field as "less credible" due to their rejection of feminist concepts such as social constructionism. Partnerships with academia and NGM's founders' education and commitment to feminist thought has likely also contributed to the organisation's outright rejection of biological essentialism.

Some staff noted that physiological differences exist between males and females, but that they did not believe they lead to different behaviours. Staff emphasized that masculinity comes about through a process of socialization wherein men and boys are taught or trained, explicitly or implicitly, to behave or perform their gender by living up to the expectations which are placed upon them, role-modelled and reinforced by peers, pop culture and society in general. The concept of socialization was also apparent in NGM's online course *Raising Next Gen Men* which has been designed for parents, educators, coaches, youth workers and the like to answer questions such as "how do boys learn to be boys?" as well as learning to "unpack what the socialization journey usually looks like for boys growing up"[4].

Summarising responses from one-on-one interviews with NGM staff and volunteers, masculinity was defined as the collective beliefs, values, characteristics, expectations, and traits that society has put on or "nurtured" in men or which men and boys are taught to identify with. No interviewee used concrete examples of specific traits and characteristics as a way describe masculinity as a concept. However specific traits and characteristics were mentioned when staff and volunteers explained to me what constitutes "toxic masculinity" as we will read about in the next section. Although staff spoke of these collective traits of men, some staff mentioned that masculinity was not necessarily reliant on male bodies, emphasizing that anyone or anybody (any gender) can perform masculinity. Nevada, NGM Calgary's lead volunteer told me "I don't think masculinity in itself means man". He explained that other people can "echo" masculine ways of behaving and often it is defined as masculine rather than feminine even though a woman is embodying the traits, for example "a woman's strength". German, NGM board member and creator of the Modern Manhood educative podcast, shared a post-structuralist understanding of masculinity:

> Masculinity is fluid…I always go to the multiple masculinities theory...that men can be masculine if they want to be masculine, if they say that they're men and that's the case, then whatever it is that they want, that they are expressing themselves to be, is to me masculine.

German was well read. His curiosity for gender theory has led him to possess a comprehensive knowledge of canonical scholars of critical studies on men and

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[4] https://www.nextgenmen.ca/raising-next-gen-men

masculinities and queer theory. In our three-hour long interview, he made several references to key theorists such Raewyn Connell, C.J Pascoe, Judith Butler, and Michael Kimmel, to name a few. In German's answer he referred to the Multiple Masculinities theory described by Joseph Gelfer in the 5 Stages of Masculinity theory (2016). Multiple Masculinities is stage 4 of this theory and is inspired by queer theory understandings of gender that argue that anybody can embody masculinity, not just male "sexed" bodies. Queer theory's interpretations of masculinity agree with and build on critical feminist understandings of masculinity by arguing that masculinity is a method of regulating people under patriarchy and hegemony and as such by troubling the category of masculinity, we can subvert its regulative power (Gelfer, 2016, p. 278). It is increasingly common to hear GBV prevention practitioners speak about masculinit*es* in the plural as a way of emphasising that "there is more than one way to be a man". Alex demonstrates this tendency and similarly shared German's queer theory perspective of masculinity:

> Like there's many ways that men can just be and any way that a man wants to be and again be that a cisgender man, a transgender man, maybe it's a non-binary person who leans masculine, whatever, any way that they want to be is going to be masculinity, a version of version of masculinity. So and we can try to focus on ways that are positive. And so that's us sort of like riding the line between saying, like gender still matters and maybe it should and right, that's us going, "Hey, there's actually like multiple ways of being a man, so we don't need to fit into one version".

German's and Alex's usage of the term "multiple masculinities" appears to be inspired by queer theory as argued above. However, the phrase "multiple masculinities" originates from Connell's critical feminist theory of the existence of multiple masculinities- hegemonic, subordinate, complicit and marginalized (Connell, 2020, p. 76). It seems that the term has taken on a new meaning which is now aligned with a post structuralist or queer feminist account of gender which uses "multiple masculinities" as way of troubling a normative or fixed category of masculinity, not as a theory for describing power relations been men.

Another instance of alternatively interpreting gender theories can be seen in the way staff and volunteers understood masculinity in a performative sense. Staff and volunteers spoke of masculinity as a performance but not necessarily in Butler's original sense (2006) which they describe as the repeated discursive acts which culminate in the construction of gender. Instead, staff and volunteers described gender

performativity in the sense that people perform their gender as if it were a mask they put on every day. Nevada visualises this idea in his interview:

> I think it's something that we almost put on our masculinity face mask or our cape every day when we leave the house…. You know, again, [whether] we're male, female and non-binary. I think we all have these feminine and masculine characteristics that we perform

Applying this interpretation of gender performance, staff indicated that masculinity was an act which men and women put on to fit into different spaces in society, be it personal relationships, workplaces or meeting the expectations of family and friends. This performative side was especially obvious to Azra, NGM volunteer and mother of two young boys. She reflected on how her children feel pressure to behave a certain way to fit in and avoid being made fun of. This was especially the case when playing with or befriending other boys. Masculinity in this instance could be understood as part of a homosocial enactment which boys and men use to relate to other boys and men. Stephen, a NGM volunteer also reflected on his own experience of growing up in rural Alberta to describe how masculinity worked as a kind of system that rewarded men and boys with social acceptance or social payoff. The more men and boys align themselves with the ideals of masculinity, "the more doors open for us" he shared. Staff and volunteers' interpretation of Butler's theory of gender performativity has potential implications. Namely, when gender is understood as a conscious personal performance rather than as a product of institutions designed with the intention of upholding a gender binary, the political dimensions of gender are obscured in favour of a rhetoric of personal choice.

German acknowledged the complexity of masculinity, highlighting that an awareness of intersectional systems of oppression are important when trying to understand different ways masculinities manifest. He alluded to another tension in work with men and masculinities, the un-interrogated category of men (Flood & Greig, 2020). This concern points to the common assumption that men are one-dimensional or "all the same" thus ignoring the multiple realities of being a man and the differing levels of men's power. Some staff expressed an appreciation of the temporal and geographical variance of masculinities and that masculinities can mean many different things in different societies.

German told me he had given some thought to the interview questions which I had supplied to him in advance. This was evident in his many considered and creative answers he shared in our interview together. German's conceptualization of masculinity echoes the idea of masculinity as an empty category (Monterescu, 2007, p. 195). To German, masculinity was a story which is constantly being changed depending on time and place, "a story we tell ourselves about how things should be in terms of manhood". He also described it as "a specific calculation that men do in working out who they are as men". Beyond theoretical discussions of how to conceptualize masculinity, he and other staff also identified masculinity as encompassing what are commonly thought of as traditional notions of manhood which exist in specific geographical and temporal contexts. Other staff understood masculinity to mean the "invisible default" (Jason), a social construct that has harmful as well as positive aspects in its different forms. Masculinity was understood as patriarchal culture, with notions of masculinity being merely another system of categorizing human traits along culturally constructed gender lines.

The question "what is your understanding of masculinity?" undoubtably prompted many uncomfortable reactions as staff and volunteers attempted to collect their thoughts on such an enigmatic concept. Some staff prefaced their answer with a wishful desire for there to exist no such category of masculinity, others responded incredulously towards the idea of gender distinctions:

> I don't know…. Masculinity for me right now is like, it's a mix and I hope eventually we just don't really even use those words anymore because they don't really make sense. Like people would be like, "oh, that's very masculine" and someone would be like, "what do you mean…?" (*Alex, NGM staff member*)

> I know in a lot of these groups and discussions we have at NGM [we're] talking about like whether having a masculinity at all, you know, would be beneficial. (*Blake, NGM volunteer*)

Next Gen Men staff were unanimous in their opinion that masculinity is produced through the process of socialization. While socialization theory helps us to understand how masculine performances come to be embodied (Walby, 1989, p. 93) it doesn't tell us why these performances, traits, characteristics, and embodiments are placed in a dialectical relationship with femininity. To understand this relationship, it is necessary to consider the concept of patriarchy, a term used to label the system of social structures and practices in which men dominate women (Walby, 1989, p. 20).

Domination occurs when greater power is afforded to men. A system which provides men with greater power over women establishes an environment where oppression and exploitation are more likely. Patriarchy is not a term that NGM necessarily shy away from, although they are considerate about its potential to deter people, especially those they are most keen to engage. Alex, a NGM staff member, worked with a team of volunteers to design and facilitate the NGM circle events which typically involve a lecture followed by a discussion. Alex's down to earth and friendly approach created a relaxed atmosphere, as did the on-tap beer at the Free House Craft Brewery, the location of the summer NGM table discussion event I joined in Calgary. This event differed from the usual NGM circle format in that the entire session was dedicated to group discussions. Water glasses with cut out pieces of paper stood on each table in the cosy, private room that had been booked especially for this meet up. Written on these pieces of paper were questions/conversation starters taken from NGM's card deck resources, "cards for masculinity" designed for use with youth and "cards for equity" designed for workplaces as well as some new questions written by Alex herself. Each prompt covered the topics NGM are known for: gender equity, positive masculinity, mental wellness, and healthy relationships.

The small room was brimming with what appeared at least outwardly to be working professionals in their 30s to 50s, some worked in the oil and gas sector, others in technology. Most could be classified as white Canadian however there were a few exceptions. It was encouraging to see that that "men" or male identifying people were in the majority. This perhaps speaks to the success of NGM's tailored marketing techniques, for although the event flyers preface "everyone is welcome", there were only four female identifying "women" present. There are varying opinions about whether mixed gender or single gender groups are "best practice" in gender-based violence prevention work (Keddie et al., 2023). Seeing the interactions between the men and women in this room provided food for thought. How can men and women be expected to build respect for each other if they are not able to learn of each other's experiences? This question is pertinent and one that I will return to in the conclusion.

By way of introduction, Alex gave a brief overview of NGM's origin story, stating that NGM exist to engage men and boys in gender-based violence prevention and gender equity work. Alex emphasised that men's mental health and gender-based violence are often treated as separate issues but that they are connected to the same thing

which is "patriarchy at the root". It is not Alex who had issues with the term patriarchy, as evidenced by the books that were resting on the coffee table during our interview at her home. Patriarchy is a likely vernacular appearing in these texts written by feminist scholars and activists such as Angela Y Davis, Diana L Rosenfeld, bell hooks and Alok Vaid-Menon.

At times masculinity was used as a stand-in word in place of patriarchy. In describing the various topics of past NGM circle events such as *Masculinity and Online Dating*, *Masculinity and Porn, Masculinity and Depression* Alex reflected: "really, like, if I were to rename them [the events] I'd rename them patriarchy and depression [etc]". Walking this tightrope, this fine line between engaging and disengaging men is something which Alex grappled with regularly and is a broader concern for those working from a pro-feminist perspective in the field:

> Naming things can be tricky for us because we ride this weird line between like wanting to cast a wide net and also wanting to be specific with our language. I want to name patriarchy as much as possible. I want to get people used to that word. I want them to know what it means. I want them to hear it used and have it explained to them. Right? But if you put patriarchy in the title of something, is it going to turn away people who either don't know what it means or don't think it applies to them, or who think that, you know, you're a bunch of feminists and I don't wanna listen to you.

Walby (1989) states that "the keys to patriarchal relations in culture are the differentiation of the discourses of femininities and masculinities, and the valuation of masculinity above those of femininity" (p. 104). NGM were working to reimagine masculinity outside of patriarchal gender relations, yet they must use these relations for their work to be perceived as legitimate. A sense of pragmatism abounded in their approach.

Understanding how NGM comprehend masculinity is the first step in understanding how they approach the subject matter. As this section has shown, masculinity proves to be an enigmatic concept with staff and volunteers sharing a plethora of understandings of masculinity. Agreement was found in the belief that masculinity is a product of socialization and that the concept itself is socially constituted. This belief appears to be in line with poststructuralist perspective which sees gender as a something which is learnt and enacted daily (Jewkes, Morrell, et al., 2015, p. 12). Staff understood masculinity as a varied but collective identity as well as an act performed

by people of any gender but predominantly male bodies. For some there was a distinct connection between masculinity and tradition or past narratives of masculinity. For others, masculinity and patriarchy were considered synonymous. The very need for such a category was questioned, for when there are categories, there are distinctions. This begs the thought that perhaps such distinctions should be dissolved if gender justice is to be achieved. The natural next step in learning about the work of NGM involves locating the issue they seek to resolve-the problem at hand.

3.2 Describing Toxic and Patriarchal Masculinity

Next Gen Men's work was based on the premise that there are some narratives of masculinity and masculine performances which are harmful to the self and to others. The guiding line of thought was that when men and boys discover alternative ways to "be a man" they perpetrate less violence towards themselves and others. The following section summarises the current narratives and performances of masculinity NGM believed needed to change if the future of masculinity is to be non-violent.

Broadly speaking, staff identified in interviews "toxic" or "patriarchal" masculinity as the masculine coded traits, characteristics and behaviours that are harmful, selfish, or self-serving and that have a negative impact on men and society. Alex explained that she preferred to use the term patriarchy instead of toxic masculinity. This was because it acknowledged that everyone, not just men, play a part in upholding the system. In her opinion, the term toxic masculinity has tended to be used to point out men's "bad" or anti-social behaviour and was therefore less useful for exposing the systemic forces behind such behaviours. German's perspective echoed a similar awareness of the systemic framework which implicates all genders as being responsible for sustaining or transforming cultures of toxic masculinity: "toxic masculinity is a community problem which requires a community solution". Toxic masculinity was further described at the systemic level by Lana Wells, professor of social work at the University of Calgary who created Shift: the project to end domestic violence. Lana has worked closely with NGM to develop the engaging men and boys movement across Canada. She explained that it can be encapsulated as society's role in reinforcing and celebrating violence, inequitable and discriminatory behaviour, sexism, discrimination, racism, and homophobia. Toxic masculinity was also described by Blake, a NGM volunteer, as

being embodied by far-right actors in the "right wing engine" such as the "manosphere", as these actors often propel patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs.

Staff preferred to talk of toxic masculinity as an issue of systems or culture rather than one of individual bad behaviours. This was because it prevented a sole focus on individual traits which are often picked up by the media and public discourse to normatively label "good" and "bad" men. However, as we will see shortly, it appeared easier for staff to precisely locate the problematic narratives of masculinity when they were connected to individualized discourses. Toxic masculinity was also equated with "the path of least resistance" or "the status quo". In these descriptions, enactments of toxic masculinity as a behaviour were portrayed as accepting the current situation and not actively participating to make a change, the assumption being that if you are not contributing to a change then you could indeed be making things worse. This is similar to the idea of complicit masculinities which suggests that although many men do not fully endorse cultures of hegemonic masculinity, they do reap the benefits or patriarchal dividends that the system provides (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Referring to cultural narratives of masculinity was another way of describing the problem at hand. These cultural narratives were said to inform masculinity by presenting a specific set of ideas about masculinity which are harmful to the self and others. German explained that "toxic" masculinity is one potential narrative of masculinity; he described it as a story which is told by society which suggests that "guys are potentially misogynistic, potentially dangerous, potentially people that might turn into being murderers and killers". The emphasis here was on the narrative or "story" element. In this way, "toxic" masculinity was seen as a fictional story we tell rather than something that is intrinsic to the way men behave. "Toxic" masculinity was therefore about adhering to set of ideas or a certain way of living but not an identity or character flaw of some men.

Staff recognised that the phrase "toxic masculinity" is often interpreted as a personal attack on men's individual identities. Cognisant of this, staff avoided describing individual men and boys as suffering from a supposed "character deficit". Instead "toxic masculinity" was used as a term to refer to the "toxic" cultures in which men and boys feel they need to prove themselves constantly or perform their masculinity to impress other boys and men. This included exaggerating about sex and drugs, drinking, or

pushing ideas of heterosexual relationships in which men dominate women. Cultures of competition, bullying to socialize and constant one upmanship were also mentioned. Staff described these rules or ways of living as following or holding onto stereotypical or "traditional" narratives of masculinity. These narratives emphasise homophobia, misogyny, and men as an authoritative provider thus relinquishing the need for women to exercise their rights. According to these cultural expectations, if a man doesn't fit into one certain ideal then he is deemed a failure. These ideals are presented in pop culture and then reinforced by peers in terms of social acceptance and success. Some staff also used synonyms such as hegemonic, dominant, and precarious in the way Jonathon did:

> You've probably heard of phrases like toxic masculinity, you know, another one in the world of academia is hegemonic masculinity….I really like the phrase precarious masculinity, which comes from a few different researchers who studied the idea that to be a man means you have to prove yourself a lot of the time that your status or your identity as a man can be called into question at any time.

The terms Dominant and Hegemonic masculinity were also used interchangeably by German when describing how societal critiques tend to normatively label masculinity as "positive" and "toxic" masculinity:

> There's these big correlations of suicide, you know these big correlations of mass shooting, there's this very misogynistic behaviour…and so that's a really big critique of what hegemonic masculinity is, or the dominant version of masculinity.

Despite not wanting to describe individual men and boys as "toxic" staff did describe a number of specific masculine coded characteristics, traits and behaviours that were seen to be detrimental for men and boys as well as others. The following list of characteristics and traits were collected from my analysis of staff and volunteer interviews as well as based on my observations of the ROPE.

Characteristics of "toxic masculinity" included:

- Aggression
- Toughness
- Hardness
- Strength
- Resiliency
- Perseverance
- Unyieldingness including not taking no for an answer
- Stoicism

- Competitiveness

- One-upmanship

- Dominance

- Power

- Control

- Supposed invulnerability

- Workaholism

- Self-reliance and self-sufficiency

- Reluctance to ask for help,

- Fixed mindset

- Guarded

- Downplaying emotions and expressiveness

- Adherence to rigid gender roles and regressive views

- Shallow relationships

- A win-at-all-costs mentality

- Success/achievement driven motivation

- fear of rejection or refusal

- A need to live up to the expectation of having expertise and authority

Staff ranged in their opinions about the worthiness of masculine coded traits and characteristics. Some staff felt that certain masculine performances were redemptive or necessary depending on the context, whereas other staff felt less optimistic about masculine coded traits. Masculine coded traits like power, control and greed were described as traits that any gender can embody but that these traits are often embodied by men as they feel it's a requirement for them "as men". This idea was further discussed by Jonathon when he referred to the theory of precarious masculinity (Vandello et al., 2008) to describe how manhood can be called into question at any time and therefore men are subjected to a constant state of needing to prove their identity and status. Jonathon saw it as unlikely that change is possible in terms of dismantling the system in which men and boys feel the need to prove themselves and their masculinity. Instead, Jonathon put more faith in the idea that men and boys can learn new ways to prove themselves which are not harmful to the self and others. However, as Chu (2018) highlights, this constant need to prove is part of the problem of the sociological arrangement of masculinity.

The relationship between bodies and gender classification is important to reflect on here. Traits like perseverance, stoicism, self-assurance, and risk taking would likely be encouraged in bodies that have been socialized as girls. This is because they would be embodying socially valued, masculine coded characteristic. But when these traits

are coupled with male "sexed" bodies they become problematic from the perspective of GBV prevention when they are perceived as extreme or practiced in a way that hurts others, in particular women. Putting male gender aside, these traits are not necessarily "masculine" and can be embodied by other genders. Yet NGM's work is focused specifically on these traits when paired with male bodies and masculine identifying bodies, not in female identifying bodies. Next Gen Men may see the site of masculinity as located in male identifying bodies however this didn't mean that female "sexed" bodies, women and female identifying people were excluded from all NGM's activities. As described earlier in this chapter, female identifying people were welcomed and did attend the circle event.

Reflecting on how ideas of masculinity change depending on who is embodying them, i.e female or male bodies, raises a broader question about whether it is possible to reinvent masculine subjectivities which are not patriarchal. It can be argued that butch masculinity, as expressed in female bodies, subverts patriarchy by demonstrating that masculinity is not the exclusive domain of people with male bodies (Nguyen, 2008, p. 674). It is interesting to note that NGM did accept masculine identifying youth into their otherwise cis-gender boys only programming. Jonathon reflects on incorporating nonbinary youth into his ROPE programming:

> Working with nonbinary youth is kind of interesting because, I mean, the awkward thing is we end up with basically our programming is just open to everybody who's not a cis-gender girl, which is kind of weird… a weird way to like frame a program. It is what it is.

This comment indicates an awareness that patriarchal notions of masculinity can be embodied by non-male "sexed" bodies, as with the case of trans boys and non-binary youth, however cis-gender girls, who also have non-male "sexed" bodies were excluded from this categorisation. This suggests that the site for transformation was cis-gender male bodies, male "sexed" non-binary bodies and female "sexed" bodies whose gender performance leans "masculine" (trans boys). Leaving only female "sexed" bodies whose gender performance leans "feminine", as outside the remit of the program. This exclusion implies that people with female "sexed" bodies who are socialized as girls and women, do not embody notions of patriarchal masculinity in their gender performances and are therefore not part of the target group.

Patriarchal masculinity is used as a term to describe masculine subjectivities that are made for and by men with the aim of dominating women and "the feminine". It is based on notions of male dominance and male-centeredness (Walby, 1989). It can also be understood as masculine subjectivities that enjoy the privilege of being identified with the dominant group (Pease, 2014, p. 21). Patriarchal masculinity comprises socially constructed traits associated with masculinity such aggression, competitiveness, arrogance, and dominance, that involve the maintenance of women's subordinate position (Nguyen, 2008). Although patriarchal and hegemonic masculinity are terms that are often used interchangeably, Christensen & Jensen (2014) argue that hegemonic masculinity doesn't have to be a performance of masculinity that dominates women, although it often is. According to Connell who coined the term hegemonic masculinity, it refers to "the most socially valued expression of being a man which includes displays of strength, toughness, aggression, and emotional stoicism" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Arguably, many of the masculine coded traits that are included under theoretical definitions of patriarchal masculinity are necessary and what really must be reconsidered is the context in which they are deployed. There were multiple occasions during the rite of passage expedition where Jonathon spoke of his previous life experiences in which he was ill prepared or exhausted but continued with his activity regardless of the risks. Jonathon used his personal stories to highlight that some masculine coded characteristics for example, perseverance, risk taking, bravery and stoicism can be harmful. By sharing his own experiences, he encouraged the youth to reflect on reforming their own masculine performances in preparation for future situations. Jonathon did not suggest that the youth give up these performances entirely, as this suggestion would have likely been met with some form of resistance. Instead, he suggested that they become more aware of the potential for harm and encouraged them to reflect critically about when certain characteristics would be valuable or not. This is in line with Flood's (2019a) and Chu's (2018) perspective that not all masculine coded qualities are bad *all the time* and that what is important is to recognise the right occasions to enact such characteristics. Recognising that qualities such as independence and toughness are important, but overemphasising these qualities and acting them out in harmful ways can become problematic.

3.3 Toxic Masculinity and Transitions from Boyhood to Manhood

At the time of my study of NGM, rite of passage expeditions were offered as part of their youth programming. Most of my time observing NGM's work was spent participating in the July 2023 rite of passage expedition in Alberta. Next Gen Men began working with the idea of rite of passage expeditions somewhat recently, the first camp was held in 2022. Jake, NGM Co-Founder and Executive Director explained that the idea came about because Jonathon ceased working in his role at NGM every summer to facilitate a traditional summer camp program. Jake suggested Jonathon combine his passion for outdoor wilderness travel with his passion for engaging boys in positive masculinity. Through this merging of interests, the Rite of Passage Expedition (ROPE) was created. NGM use rite of passage as a structure to cultivate "positive masculinity". Next Gen Men's ROPE is designed to support masculine identifying youth in their transition from "boy psychology "(Rubinstein & Biddulph, 2013) towards as Jonathon explained "being confident, self-aware, connected to others and capable of overcoming challenges…through interdependence" The concept of rite of passage that NGM use in their programming is based on the work of Dr Arne Rubinstein, a medical practitioner. In Rubinstein's book *The Making of Men (2013)* he suggests that boys need some kind of rite of passage to become men. Like Rubenstein, Jonathon similarly believed rites of passage were an integral experience which was helpful for marking the transition from boyhood to manhood.

On multiple occasions on the ROPE itself, during online webinars about the role of rites of passage in cultivating positive masculinity as well as in a one-on-one interview, Jonathon explained that rites of passage previously had a larger role in many societies around the world and that their prominence in modern society is waning, if not already non-existent. According to Jonathon, fewer occasions exist nowadays that properly and safely mark the transition from boyhood to manhood. While some modern-day rites of passage, such as getting a driver's license and graduating from high school exist, they are not genuinely meaningful in helping boys navigate the pathway to manhood. This lack of meaningful transitions leads boys to make their own rites of passage, sometimes with risky behaviours and devastating outcomes such as violence towards the self and others. Part of "building boys up" as Jonathon liked to say, was about cultivating experiences and moments through a rite of passage framework, so that boys can safely transition to become men. In Rubenstein's chapter

specifically on rite of passage camps, he provides a vignette to introduce the concept of rites of passage in the twenty-first century:

> This has been one of the strangest days of their lives. When they first arrived at camp they had to hand in their mobile phones, watches, portable gaming devices and any other electronic equipment. They spent the rest of the day with their mums, chatting and laughing and hearing stories about when they were young. Finally, they had to say goodbye. Their mums told them how much they loved them. Some of them cried as they spoke. At dusk a group of men arrived and led them away.

This vignette describes the first of three main components of a "boy to man rite of passage", that is, *separation*. Much of NGM's ROPE appears to follow the *separation*, *transition*, *return* model set out in Rubinstein's book. However, where the approaches diverge is with NGM's female and non-binary facilitation. As demonstrated in the above quote, Rubinstein advocates that only men are those who are capable of leading boys on their pathway to manhood. Next Gen Men's approach does use the idea of separation however it is described as a departure from the familiar, an opportunity to get youth outside of their everyday context. It is not presented as an explicit separation from women or mothers as per Rubinstein's approach. Rubinstein's belief echoes a common cultural assumption that boys need a ritual to mark their passage into manhood and their separation from mothers, whereas girls just "naturally" become women. Manhood is thus seen as an achievement, but womanhood simply a natural occurrence (Gilmore, 1990). The belief that only men are capable or allowed to initiate boys into manhood has been critiqued by pro-feminist scholars (Jablonka & Bracher, 2022; Kimmel, 1995). Jablonka explains that historically, the biological monopoly women had over reproduction was seen as a source of feminine power. To undermine this power, male-only initiation became a way to challenge this power and instil the idea that "men come from men, not from women" (Jablonka & Bracher, 2022, p. 56).

Where NGM's ROPE does have an explicit separation from women is in the sense that the program is only open to masculine identifying youth. While the majority of NGM programming is open to people of all genders, there are two exceptions, the Book Club and the ROP. The Book Club, facilitated by Jake is a "gender-specific

offering for those that identify as men"[5]. The Book Club was designed as a place for men to connect with other men who are on a similar learning journey. Hafiz, a NGM board member explained to me that the Book Club is a male-only initiative as they wanted to provide a safe space for men to grow their understanding by asking questions without feeling judged by those who may have more knowledge. The ROPE is the other all-male and masculine-identifying offering. A reason for the ROPE's exclusively masculine-identifying cohort can be traced back to NGM's first ever offering, an afterschool program funded by the Movember Foundation, which was designed for masculine identifying youth. Jake explained the logic of single gender youth programming at NGM:

> And the thought behind that is that ahh…like if "Bobby likes Suzy he's going to act differently when Suzy's around" And so like we wanted to create a space where they can be authentically themselves and quite frankly, the biggest risk for them not being themselves is the performance they put on for others… in that space they can work through it together with a mutual understanding of how they've been socialized as boys. But then you add in other genders and it's just complicates it that much further of like how others are socialized as well too. And so, like, they almost need this like training grounds themselves to figure that out.

Jake's response suggests a heteronormative assumption that boys will be sexually distracted by girls and does not consider the potential for homosexual attraction amongst boys. It also negates theories of the homosocial aspect of masculinity which suggest that masculinity is often a performance by men for other men. The logic behind NGM's decision to offer male-only expeditions is based on the idea that it is important to group people who share a similar socialization experience. Any diversions from this shared experience may create a literal distraction (boys being sexually or romantically distracted by girls) as well as a distraction away from the topic of "masculinity". It also suggests that it is easier to deconstruct a socialization experience with others who share the same experience. However, this was not necessarily the logic I observed in the NGM mixed-gender circle event, where men and women were encouraged to reflect together on their differing socialization experiences.

The ROPE was also open to trans and non-binary youth if they had a "past, present, or future relationship with masculinity". By combining people who have a relationship

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[5] https://shop.nextgenmen.ca/products/book-club

with masculinity it provides "a little bit of a grounding of like identity and shared socialization" according to Jake. In trying to rationalize the idea of male-only activities for gender-based violence prevention, I began to understand where NGM were coming from with this approach. According to their logic, some kind of relationship to the masculine socialization experience is a requirement for participation. In reflecting on why this is the case I realised that perhaps it is important to group people who share the same sociological experience of "needing to prove their masculinity" or who have experienced the feeling of needing to earn their membership into the boys club (Chamberlin, 2019; Kivel, 1999). Women and other genders are not the target group here as they do not experience this constant need to prove their masculinity.

Although women and other genders may not experience masculine gender role stress (Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015), in dominant, liberal, Western contexts women are subject to a double bind. They must adhere to masculine norms to gain respect and credibility while simultaneously upholding narratives of femininity that legitimize them as women and prevent breaching the gender binary status quo (Bordo, 2015). Reflecting on my time participating in the ROPE, I too felt the need to adapt to more masculine coded behaviours to gain respect from the youth and camp leaders. This involved active decisions to avoid wearing overly feminine styles or colours in my clothing choices. I also felt, at least initially, that I needed to prove myself as a capable female hiker who was not unfamiliar with backcountry camping and could manage carrying a decent sized pack. This of course was not demanded of me by any of the participants or the camp leaders, but none-the-less, I did feel pressure to push forward more of my own masculinised performances. This indicates that all genders can potentially experience at least some form of pressure connected with narratives of masculinity. Suggesting that people of all genders could benefit from being involved in programming which discusses and aims to dismantle the sociological systems which create these pressures, even if we do experience these pressures differently. Staff acknowledged there are pros and cons to both single and mixed gender programming scenarios. For the present moment it seems like youth programming will remain accessible only to masculine-identifying youth.

Even though NGM ROPE is open to masculine identifying youth only, this logic does not extend to the camp facilitators. Jonathon told me that they have employed female and non-binary facilitators on previous camps. When I asked if he thought that their

presence changed the way the camp was facilitated, he told me he didn't think it made as much of a difference as one might expect. This is because the behaviours and standards Jonathon role models and expects from the youth are very similar, he imagines, as to what a female or non-binary facilitator might expect. There is no consensus in the literature regarding which genders are best placed to facilitate gender transformative interventions with men and boys (Flood et al., 2024). Lana from the Shift project reiterated that the evidence is mixed and, in her opinion, its more about individual skill sets and competencies, than gender.

In this chapter, I have provided an in-depth account of NGM's conceptualisations of masculinity and their definitions of the "problem" i.e what NGM articulates are the problematic narratives of masculinity. The following chapter will build on these observations and introduce the workings of NGM as a "socially enterprising non-profit". I describe what NGM considers are counter-narratives and how, as a social enterprise, they market these new narratives to their target audience.

Chapter 4: Marketing 'Men and Feminism'

Masculinities are multiple and temporal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and therefore cultural ideals of masculinity change over time and place. In the case of Canada and the global North, new narratives of masculinity are being reconfigured in response to social pressure for more "progressive masculinities". Next Gen Men was established and continues to work in this era of the new "progressive masculine ideals" and they offer products and services which respond to these new narratives. As mentioned in the introduction, my interest in NGM began based on a brief look at their website. Beyond noticing key feminist terminology, I also noticed that the phrase "positive masculinity" appeared in multiple places yet nowhere was there a definition of what this meant. I wondered if this was an intentional strategy used to sell their programs and services-by leaving the tenants of "positive masculinity" undisclosed, potential customers would have to sign up to their programs and services to find out. As we will see in this chapter, NGM had their reasons for both using the terminology as well as refraining from defining what exactly it means. In this chapter, I draw on both interviews and participant observation to illustrate the proposed solution to stopping the problematic narratives of masculinity discussed in the previous chapter, or what NGM labels "positive masculinity". I discuss what these new narratives are and how NGM markets them.

4.1 Next Gen Men as a Socially Enterprising Non-Profit

As discussed in the introduction, my interest in this topic came about by observing a proliferation of social enterprises promoting "positive masculinity" which have been appearing around the world but particularly in Australia and North America. Since the late 1980's, Canada along with other Western nations such as Australia and the UK has followed a neoliberal approach to government policy (Redden et al., 2020, p. 63). The social enterprise model has developed out of this new form of capitalism. Social enterprise is a common term in Australia however the term is used less frequently in Canada since it was tarnished by the Canadian charity "WE" and their political scandal[6]. The social enterprise model involves the merging of private sector business

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[6] For details of the political scandal see: https://www.canadaland.com/?s=we+charity & https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/we-charity-student-grant-justin-trudeau-testimony-1.5666676

models with third sector organisations such as non-profit and charitable organisations. The result is a business with primarily social objectives. The business is motivated to increase profits, not with the aim of maximising shareholder dividends but rather to increase social impact. This is because the profits that generated are reinvested directly back into the business (Hackett, 2012, p. 31; Roy & Hackett, 2017, p. 97). Social enterprises are usually established by social entrepreneurs- individuals who "use their business expertise (or capital) to address community concerns in 'business-savvy' ways (Hackett, 2012, p. 29). Jake fits this description. I spoke with Jake, NGM Co-Founder and Executive Director at the very end of my research period. We met online, Jake calling from his *We Work* co-working office space in Vancouver. With staff scattered across Canada and the US, virtual meetings were the norm. By way of introduction, I asked Jake if he could share some details about his personal background. He shared that he arrived in Canada as a refugee from what was at the time called Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s. He studied economics and global development and had a background in sales and marketing and was working at a startup at the time when he pitched the idea of founding NGM with two other friends. Our zoom call felt more like a conversation than an interview and I used it as an opportunity to get some answers to some lingering questions I had after interviewing the rest of the NGM team last summer. Jake described the role of NGM as a social enterprise using a well-rehearsed analogy:

> I think social change is a three-legged stool, you need activists, academics and activators. Activists are the ones who make you look at things that you don't want to see. They make you uncomfortable. We don't have a lot of gratitude for them. Academics are the people who study the origins, changes over time, [who] the key influencers are… Activators are inspired by activists, informed by academics, and they do the knowledge translation…. taking it all and mobilizing it. I often joke that we're trying to be the marketing arm of 'men and feminism'.

An original hypothesis I had when embarking on this research project was that social enterprises like NGM result from charities or non-profits attempting to liberate themselves from the burdensome, "outputs" based evaluation criteria expected by government funding bodies. As many working in GBV prevention have communicated, social change is slow and difficult to measure (Keddie, 2021). Jake also shared this sentiment:

> It's really impossible to do this work because…through a prevention lens…you can't measure what didn't happen. You know Next Gen Men has been around

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for almost a decade. I can't tell you how many sexual assaults we've prevented or how many suicides or those such things because it's measuring in a negative, right.

However, despite lamenting about the impossibility of measurement, my original hypothesis was debunked when Jake told me that they've had a good experience meeting evaluation and reporting criteria with their current funders, Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE). As I learnt, it was not issues with demonstrating impact or "evaluation strain" that caused them to consider a social enterprise model, rather it was inconsistent funding. Jake recalled the first year of NGM's operations, their initial program was funded by a two-year grant by the Movember Foundation. While this helped to get NGM started, he joked, "they left us with a two-year old", implying the funders left them high and dry at a crucial moment. It appears that limited grant durations as well as the overall precarity of securing any kind of short- or long-term funding, are motivating factors in deploying a social enterprise model. At the time of my research, the social enterprise model NGM employed involved a commercial arm and a non-profit arm. Jake explained "a good chunk of our revenue is earned revenue" which came from NGM's commercial arm "Equity Leaders", a fee-for service enterprise offering diversity and inclusion training with male dominated industries:

> We're working with clients like Shell, KPMG, Inter Pipeline and BestBuy like, you know, just these big companies that are male dominant and are looking to change some of their culture and supporting them in that.

They also generated some revenue though offering fee-for service professional development training to teachers, educators, coaches and youth workers. Jake felt that charging at least a nominal amount for their services meant that people value it more:

> I think there's a lot of, like, charitable work that is free and like people sign up, but then they don't show up or they don't, you know, engage with it, but when someone has to invest in something, they take it more seriously.

Other revenue streams included some grant funding and contribution agreements with WAGE. Private foundations would also provide more possibilities for external funding since a new bill was soon to be passed which allowed charities and foundations to provide money to "donees" if it furthered their charitable mandate. However, as Jake mentioned, relying on external funding was restrictive, it made it impossible to plan for long term activities or worse yet, there weren't many suitable grants available to apply

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for. As it currently stands in Canada and Australia, much of the funding that is available is based on the idea of funding "at risk", marginalised or disadvantaged populations. Jake explained "if you truly believe in primary prevention, you have to have funding to work with the dominant group". As will be discussed shortly, Jake saw NGM's target audience as those men and boys who make up the dominant group, that is to say, men and boys who hold positions of power and influence in our capitalist, white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal world. Jake explained that "funding hasn't caught up". There were limited grants available to fund work with boys and men who hold power and influence as the funding system has labelled them as a privileged group. This points to a key dilemma in gender-based violence prevention funding. When funders have a mindset of only funding the "disadvantaged", they not only perpetuate disempowering narratives, but they also miss out on opportunities to do work with the most powerful groups. As is the case with feminist research, while it is important to research and centre the voices of non-dominant groups, it is equally as necessary to understand sites of power and dominance (Edstrom, 2014, p.121).

Beyond restrictive "needs based" criteria, Jake highlighted other issues with relying on external funding. In the case of government funding, Jake recalled how the change from a liberal to conservative provincial government in Alberta negatively affected their funding to the point where they currently received no funding from the Government of Alberta. Jake expressed his concern that this could happen at the federal level. Although WAGE is a main funder presently, he felt that this was likely to change as the government moves to a predicted conservative federal government in 2025. He reiterated "that's kind of why I keep pushing us to, like, not be reliant on these spaces because you know, we just don't know". Research has shown that governments almost exclusively encourage stand-alone, individual-level behaviour change programs in their national gender-based violence prevention plans and strategies and as a result there is an overemphasis of these types of approaches (Wells & Fotheringham, 2022). This is despite evidence that suggests that men are unlikely to participate in conventional violence prevention programs (Hansen & Wells, 2018). To innovate away from government dictated approaches, Jake saw the social enterprise model as a viable solution as it allowed the organisation to have more freedom and longevity with their work.

Jake's academic background in commerce meant that he could tackle issues of gender-based violence and mental health without adhering to the "traditional non-profit" way. Freedom in their work was a key theme that came through in my interview with Jake:

> I don't want to have to ask for someone's permission to do the good work that we need to do. Like, I want to be in the spaces that we see the best opportunity to make change.

Jake went on to explain that NGM's more innovative projects such as the Boys + Club Discord server was only made possible because they had revenue generated by Equity Leaders and their fee-for service products. The initiative remained unfunded for the first couple of years as it was impossible to find a suitable grant that would cover a non-programmatic approach with a "privileged" group. The initiative only recently received funding from WAGE under a "promising practices" grant. The Discord Server was defined a non-programmatic because it was delivered over a more sustained period rather than a timebound program model with a distinct number of sessions. The innovations grant, as well as the in-house revenue made this type of intervention possible.

While it makes sense to create independent revenue streams, especially when other forms of funding are scarce or restrictive, it does raise questions about the implications associated with such freedoms. Just as the government's role in regulating economic markets decreases under neoliberal capitalism, so too does the government's role in ensuring "evidence-based practice" in public policy and welfare provision. If there is no government regulation, is there more risk of "doing harm"? However, this question assumes that "evidence-based practice" is unproblematic. We must also question why governments laud some interventions over others and what purpose it serves to do so. As Jake's reflection on the lack of grants for "non-disadvantaged" groups shows, governments also play a role deciding which men and boys "require" funding and interventions and which do not.

While for the time being, privately generated revenue offers NGM the ability to test innovative interventions, Jake informed me that the income currently generated through their private arm would not be sufficient for achieving their goal of "scaling up" and impacting more men and boys across Canada and the US. To reach this scale,

Jake explained that impact partnerships with brands would be necessary. Jake mentioned that they had tried to forge partnerships with outdoor equipment brands to no avail, however they had recently had conversations with multinational consumer goods company, Unilever. Unilever has a vast portfolio of brands including Dove, Axe (Lynx) and Rexona, to name a few. This need to partner with multinational corporations is reflective of the constraints created by the neoliberal capitalist system in which NGM currently operates. It can also be seen as a potential dilemma that is in contradiction with their mission. Such implications will be discussed in more detail in the conclusion.

4.2 "Of The Boys", Locating Next Gen Men's Target Group

When it comes to promoting "positive masculinity", there is a specific category of boy and man that NGM have in mind. These boys and men are those who embody what Jake referred to as more "traditionally masculine" qualities. He used the phrase "of the boys"[7] to explain that there are men who are part of the "boy's club", those who embody the dominant narratives of masculinity and there are other men who embody different positions of masculinity outside this dominant narrative. Jake referred to Connell's theory of multiple masculinities, citing hegemonic and subordinate masculinities to explain this. Jake described what he imagined success would look like for NGM. It would involve more "traditionally masculine men" realising there is something wrong with the current arrangement of masculinity and being motivated to be involved in making changes to this arrangement. It seemed that "traditionally masculine men" in Jakes eyes were those that hold positions of power in mainstream Canadian society:

> I find a lot of masculinity critiques are from the space outside "of the boys", right? Like I'm not "of the boys" so therefore I'm going to critique because I'm on the outside of it. And what I would want is, like those of us who are "of the boys", to look around and be like, "this doesn't work. Like, let's change this"… How would the world look if it wasn't only through trauma or the transition into fatherhood where we start thinking about these things.?.. if we don't work with boys who look like me [White, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class] those boys inherit white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia…

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[7] A phrase which Jake attributed to Dr. Michael Kehler, Research Professor of Masculinities in Education at the University of Calgary, Canada.

According to Coleman (2008) and Ferber (1998) as cited in Martino & Greig (2012) "to be an appropriate Canadian man remains intimately tied to being white" (p. 123). Writing in 1998, Ferber explained that people who occupy the upper echelons of the Canadian social hierarchy are men who are noticeably white, able-bodied, and heterosexual. It seems that NGM consider these identifiers as still relevant today and therefore see much potential for change if they can reach this audience.

I also got a sense of NGM's target group through my interview with Alex. Alex told me that she used gendered language to attract certain people, namely those who identify with terms like "men" and "manhood". She also explained that these same people are often the least willing to let go of gender categories, compared to non-binary people for example.

> People are not ready to let go of gender. I think most people are not ready to let go of gender. Non-binary people are ready to let go of gender. But I don't think a lot of men are. So if we're trying to say like, "Hey, this is for you specifically, you men". Giving a label, that makes sense, right? Say like it's about masculinity, it's about manhood and they're like, "Oh yeah, that's about me". And then it's like, okay, yes, it is about you, there's a way to say like this is for you and that's by generally using like something that's gendered.

Stephen, a NGM volunteer who designed and delivered some of the formal lectures as part of NGM's circle events felt that there was value in using the term "positive masculinity" to engage certain people. These "certain people" Stephen referred to are those individuals who become defensive when narratives of masculinity are criticized or individuals who are invested in embodying some narratives of masculinity. As he put it:

> I do think it is helpful for people who are averse to directly confronting the negative aspects of dominance-based masculinity or toxic masculinity or for people who become… who can't help but feel defensive when they hear those terms….[The term positive/healthy masculinity is useful] for people who are invested in embodying some masculinity, it doesn't apply to people who are not concerned with masculinity specifically or who are just really interested in being people and [are] willing to leave their ideas about masculinity behind.

While there is some logic to focusing efforts on men and boys who hold dominant positions, Roberts & Elliott (2020) criticise that too often privileged boys are heralded as the "paragons of progressive change" (p.87). It assumes that marginalized boys are regressive and patriarchal when in fact they may be more likely to engage in

practical egalitarianism than middle-class men who merely speak about or endorse its importance. Asante, a NGM volunteer and mental health advocate, explained to me in an interview after we had concluded the ROPE together that he would like to see programs like the ROPE become available to other youth beyond the White, middle-upper class youth who currently participate:

> I'm someone who very much values diversity and I really think that we live in a world that sometimes keeps certain opportunities for certain people. So I would love to see Next Gen Men kind of expand or to see more programs like this accessing different communities, you know, Canada is an increasingly diverse place.

Although NGM's target group consists of men from the dominant group, women and female-identifying people are also welcome in most of NGM's programming. I noticed at the NGM circle event I attended in Calgary that a key strategy used for fostering "positive masculinity" involved exposing the male socialization experience by contrasting it with the female socialization experience. This was made possible by the presence of female socialized people both facilitating and participating in the event. For example, there was a question which prompted people to reflect on their friendships with people of the opposite gender. I refer to my fieldnotes to describe what one of the men on my table shared:

> The guy answered that one of his best friends is a female and she offers him "the female perspective" on things; helps him to be vulnerable and she actually asks him "how are you feeling?" which his guy friends don't ask that, they don't go deep like that.

This idea of reflecting on opposite gender experiences was used in another question which encouraged participants to think about how their gender and their sibling's gender influenced the household chores they undertook as a child. For some men it appeared that this question wasn't helpful as they didn't have any sisters with whom they could contrast their experience to. This indicated that it was hard for these men to understand their socialization experience if they did not have something to contrast it with. Contrasting experiences with a sister's experience was seen as a useful way of highlighting gender socialization differences. In these examples, a female-male friendship and a brother-sister comparison were used to help expose both the advantages and disadvantages of male socialization. I also observed that women's participation in the discussions meant that men had the chance to put into practice

gender-equitable behaviours such as actively listening to women's experiences and respecting their knowledge and perspectives. While NGM may target men from the dominant group they encourage women and female-identifying people's participation in some activities as it helps men to uncover their masculine socialization experience and practice gender-equitable behaviours.

4.3 "Undefining Masculinity": Troubling the Category of Masculinity

As we saw in chapter one, in many cases it was easier for staff and volunteers to articulate the problematic narratives of masculinity than to speak of their vision of the alternatives. I too experienced difficulties attempting to articulate what exactly the phrase "positive masculinity" referred to when explaining my thesis topic to family and friends. The term may be ubiquitous in public discourse, but the concept itself remains ill-defined and vague (McCook, 2022, p. 45; Waling, 2019, p. 368). When we shift towards imagining new narratives of masculinity, it is inevitable that we arrive at a place of questioning; if positive masculinity involves what were previously coded as feminine traits and qualities, aren't we just talking about more feminine coded traits becoming legitimate gender performance for male bodies? What does this change in performance mean for how we understand narratives of masculinity and their connection to "sexed" bodies? If masculinity is to be expanded into other gender territories, what is the purpose of such borders? Verbs abound when it comes to work with men and boys for gender equality. It is common to see work with men and masculinities framed using verbs such as "reinventing", "redefining" or "reimagining" masculinity. Next Gen Men staff were considerate of the different connotations and reflected on how their own usage of such verbs had changed:

> When Next Gen Men started, one of the sort of the catch phrases was "redefining" masculinity, and I don't worry too much about that, because of the potential for pushback. We're always trying to engage people right, and not polarize them or turn them away. And so the idea of redefining masculinity can sometimes be read as like tearing everything apart and so, I mean, if I was to choose, a different verb [it] would be expanding. So there's room for all you know, you can be strong and be gentle and you can be tough and be compassionate. Those aren't mutually exclusive. …. that expansion is really what we're trying to do. *(Jonathon, Youth Programs Manager)*

> Early on in Next Gen Men, we used to say we're "redefining masculinity" and people were like, "Oh great, like, what's the new definition"? And we're like ahh [hesitant noise] you know, like, we don't want to swap one for a new one, right?

So, it's really more about *undefining masculinity. (Jake, Co-Founder and Executive Officer)*

Alex echoed the idea of undefining masculinity. She discussed the contradiction of creating prescriptive "gender boxes", even if they were more progressive than previous narratives of masculinity. Alex felt that a lot of people (read: men) were not ready to "let go of gender" and therefore the next best thing was to speak about positive masculinit*es* in the plural form to avoid one prescriptive notion:

>…Trying to define healthy masculinity…. I'm almost like, who are we to do that? You know what I mean? So us saying *positive masculinities* is we're able to kind of go, okay, that could be defined in many different ways by many different people, how do you define it…? and then keep asking the questions…what makes that positive or what makes that healthy?... I have kind of avoided saying healthy masculinity for a long time because I think that's sort of like saying we're going to move from one box to another and I'm still somehow defining it for you.

As previously discussed, "going beyond gender" seemed too radical for the current moment, instead NGM worked with the idea of troubling the category of masculinity by expanding what it means in Canadian society. This expansion involved removing the rigidity, narrowness, and inflexibility of dominant narratives of masculinity. Jake used a current case of the US footballer Caleb Williams[8] to describe the goal NGM were striving towards.

>If I think about what a beautiful future would be, is like, he [Caleb Williams] can be this amazing athlete and paint his nails and nobody bats an eye. Right. Because, like… what they need is the talent. He's got the talent. We're not going to judge him. So I want football players to be able to, like, break the boundaries in whatever they want… I also want like male ballet dancers to be like, considered masculine and, you know, so like, that would be the future for me of just like… if you identify as a man, your masculinity is just a given and it's what you choose it, what you want it to be, and get rid of that rigidity.

Reflecting on this comment, I am puzzled as to how there exists both a recognition of the need to remove gender boundaries and expand what is considered masculine, but at the same time there appears to exist a determined desire to hold onto some kind of category of masculinity. Put simply, if masculinity is just a given, if it's whatever you want it to be, then why continue to call it masculinity? Gelfer (2016) echoes a similar

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[8] Caleb Williams, a University of Southern California (USC) quarterback caused public controversy for playing with painted fingernails. https://www.sportingnews.com/us/ncaa-football/news/caleb-williams-fingernails-paint-nsfw-messages/gm8yucz1tza4xr1kxnzbjb1c

thought "if masculinity can mean anything you want it to mean, does it have any meaning at all?" (Gelfer, 2016, p. 279). I sensed a feeling of reluctance amongst staff to remove gender distinctions of masculinity and femininity entirely. For example, Jonathon found in his work with masculine identifying youth that reinterpreting what were deemed "traditional notions" of masculinity and manhood in the English Canadian context was a useful strategy for "expanding masculinity". Jonathon explained how there was still some value to be seen in traditional notions of manhood, they just required a little bit of reinterpretation:

> The idea of masculinity and manhood does still mean something to me…thinking about the traditional notions of what it means to be a man…things like strength, protectiveness…and then sort of bringing alongside that a re-imagination of what that means. For example, strength, I don't imagine that I'm actually strong enough to withstand every single thing that the world throws at me. And so, I kind of re-imagine strength actually as resilience… And similarly, protectiveness, I don't imagine I can protect every single person from every single thing that will ever happened to them, so I reimagine that idea of being a shield for others as more so being a safety net…the word there, for example, could be dependability.

This broadening, expanding, or undoing of what masculine identity entails didn't seem to involve the use of the label "femininity". Narratives of masculinity became undefined but at the same time they remained gendered as "masculinity", despite these characteristics or traits reflecting culturally coded ideals of femininity. Again, I saw the same concern reflected, that it is currently unimaginable or practically impossible to remove gender distinctions and therefore, as a compromise, we should just broaden them out so far that they become meaningless as Jake, Co-Founder and Executive Officer explained:

> I think there's a lot of, you know, men's groups and men's work out there really trying to bring the feminine into the masculine, right…for me that's just a little bit "woo woo". Like for me, like you can be caring and that can be considered masculine and you can be, you know, soft and that be masculine like...We don't need to recodify it as feminine either… Like I would rather we just do away with masculinity and femininity altogether. But if we can't actually do away with it, then let's just broaden it as far as we possibly can.

Jake's comment about "doing away with masculinity and femininity altogether" reflects an awareness of the problematic nature of gender identity categories as expressed in contemporary feminist theorising (Beasley, 2015, p. 50). The concept of "broadening" here can be seen as a way of reconciling with postmodernist notions of the fluidity of

gender while acknowledging that most people are not familiar with understanding gender in this way.

Although there was a clear resistance to using femininity as a label, a key part of expanding narratives of masculinity did appear to involve legitimizing engagement in "the feminine". German mentioned skirt wearing, make up usage, pedicures, manicures, therapy, and self-help as examples of ways that men were beginning to "break the hegemony", with these activities becoming more acceptable and common. In this sense, narratives of masculinity were expanded to include feminine coded qualities. German explained that promoting "positive masculinities" often came down to dismantling hegemonic masculinities:

> I think anybody who is going against the hegemony, especially around masculinity, are going to be labelled as feminine...People do need to kind of show what it's like to be against the hegemony and sometimes that might look feminine.... breaking this idea of hegemonic masculinity [does have] something [to do with] quote unquote "feminine" but I also don't think that's a bad thing.

There are indeed instances where we have seen NGM negotiate the incorporation of "the feminine" in their promotion of "positive masculinity". Negotiation can be seen by the way staff talked about expanding masculinity or making it incrementally more inclusive of other (feminine) characteristics. Scholars and practitioners have questioned whether the adoption of "feminine" practices into heterosexual masculine performances challenges gender inequality (Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 1993). Indeed, broadening masculinity to include feminine practices and characteristics, while still calling it masculinity (albeit positive masculinity) may not have much influence on challenging homophobia and the universal devaluation of femininity, the kind of devaluation which is embodied in colloquial phrases like "I'd rather die than be called a girl". As Waling (2019) convincingly argues, healthy masculinity terminology continues to set up masculinity as the only expression of gender that men and boys can legitimately engage in. NGM's work is rooted in the idea of achieving gender equality but can gender equality realistically be achieved if narratives of femininity continue to be devalued?

4.4 "Positive Masculinity": A Discursive Technique to Market 'Men and Feminism'

In our conversation, Jake shared his belief that past feminist influencers and activists have struggled to get men on board because they vilified men and claimed they were the upholders of patriarchy. In his view, these activists have failed to articulate compellingly that patriarchy affects men in equally painful ways as it affects women. As Segal (1987), cited in Connell (2000, p. 144), describes it, the 'public face of feminism' has been unsympathetic and homogenizing of men's experiences under patriarchy. Communicating the "papercuts of patriarchy", what Jakes referred to as the countless moments in men and boys' lives where they are harmed by the status quo, is key to engaging men and boys… "you need to show them how they're losing in order to bring them onside". With a sales and marketing background, Jake enjoyed using marketing analogies to present his ideas:

> If you put it in a product marketing sense, you don't sell someone a cleaning product because of the outcome of it being clean, you sell them a cleaning product because it's fucking dirty. And that's the problem they have, right... We want to sell painkillers, not vitamins, because a vitamin is a nice to have, the painkillers [are] the need to have and so let's find the pain point and stick them in it and make them say "ouch", because that's when they're highly motivated to do something about it.

Next Gen Men's logic is based on the idea that to effectively engage men who embody a dominant position in patriarchal society, we must make them realise there is something wrong and painful about their current existence. Once they've come to this realization, they will be more willing to buy into the solution, which in NGM's case is "positive masculinity" or more directly speaking, becoming involved in dismantling patriarchal systems and ideologies. Next Gen Men are not the first group to have followed this line of thought, indeed the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1990s encouraged (White) men to connect with their trauma and heal from their "father wounds". Where NGM differs is in their feminist analysis of the problem and solution. On the topic of terminology, Jake explained to me that there is a difference between marketing and reality. He told me that he almost never uses the term "toxic masculinity" in conversations with people, but NGM did use it on their website for search engine optimization:

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What the hell is positive masculinity…I don't know…we'll say it but it's because the opposite is toxic masculinity…so people are like okay, I don't want this…what do I want?...okay here's positive masculinity…and so the marketing is designed to get people…that's why I say…we're the marketing arm of men and feminism.

This comment, which inspired the title of this thesis, is central to understanding how NGM sees their role in gender-based violence prevention. Terms like "toxic" and "positive" Masculinity are merely terms used to market feminist theory and activism to a group of people who are (assumed) otherwise unfamiliar or resistant to such lines of thought. "Positive" masculinity terminology was used as it encompassed a "strengths-based approach" wherein emphasis is given to imagining how men could behave rather than focusing on the problems or deficits with their current behaviour. A "strengths-based" approach is common in positive masculinity programming (Flood et al., 2024). Jonathon told me in an interview "it's always easier to positively validate something that someone has done than critique them for something they haven't". He felt that the language of "positive masculinity" was a tool for opening conversations with young people:

Positive masculinity for me provides language for engaging in these conversations, talking about courage, compassion, respect, you know, resilience, toughness, like finding out what all those mean and I think that, yeah, I think positive masculinity has a little bit more to it and it doesn't necessarily carry the same baggage as, you know, as labelling something as toxic or not. So yeah, so I vibe with that one a little bit more, I work with that a little bit more.

The term "positive masculinity" also presented as a method for speaking directly to people who would identify as men and boys to engage them in perhaps taboo, feminized, or feminist topics. Next Gen Men recognized and optimised their potential impact by drawing on the social currency that terms like "masculinity" hold. Nevada, a NGM volunteer and Circle event facilitator explained to me how the idea of the NGM Hike event "Masculinity + Self-Care[9]" came into being:

We were talking about a topic that might potentially be seen a little bit more as feminine, right? Self-care…I would also say [is] a bit of a taboo topic when it comes to men. It was how do we engage men in self-care while still engaging men in activities that they'll want to be a part of? And so that's really how the hike was born.

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[9] https://www.nextgenmen.ca/events/ngmc-hike

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At the circle event I attended, one of the discussion prompts was: "NGM is focused on healthy relationships, mental health, gender equity and positive masculinities…which of these terms is resonating most with you right now". Of those who answered, they both agreed mental health was what resonated. It is debated as to whether terms like positive or healthy masculinity are counterproductive to the aims of anti-patriarchal work with men and boys (McCook, 2022; Waling, 2019). This debate, while perhaps not occurring openly among NGM staff, certainly came through in our one-on-one interviews. For some staff, a sense of pragmatism accompanied their usage of phrases such as "positive masculinity" or simply the word "masculinity". This gendered language was viewed as a necessary evil, a way to reach and invite men into their programming and to get them one step closer to reflecting critically on gender labels and potentially removing such labels. Often in gender-based violence prevention guidelines, using inclusive, expansive, non-binary language is emphasised as necessary for building a world "beyond gender" (Gupta, 2000; Our Watch, 2021). However, in practice it seems that "activators" feel there is a long way to go before they could cease using binary language and wholeheartedly promote the idea of a "gender free" world. Alex explained that NGM used gendered language because they felt that society in general, and men as a collective group, were not ready to move beyond it:

> *sighs* Like, I think it's hard because I would love to just be like, "Yeah, we're done with gender, we're over it, we're not doing it anymore... we're leaving it behind!" But I think you lose a lot of people. So, I don't know, like, I don't know if it's still reinforcing [gender hierarchies]. I think the thing always with Next Gen Men is just trying to get people in the door to even think about it in the first place… I don't know if it's a good starting point all the time, but I think when you keep asking questions, I think people can come there themselves.

Alex's comment demonstrates the challenge of applying postmodernist feminist theory, which emphasizes multiplicity and fluidity of gender, into real world contexts. This is a tension in work with men and masculinities, the need to balance appealing to or attracting men by using terms like "men" and "masculinity" while concurrently trying to challenge the idea of fixed gender categories. There appear to be very real concerns amongst practitioners that men are not ready to let go of gender and that if we did take such a radical step, we would risk alienating our key audiences, hence, the existence of positive masculinity programs for men and boys but not positive femininity programs for women. However, these fears are not necessarily based on evidence. Lana from

the Shift project explained that in her work with male dominated industries she found that terms like "positive masculinity" don't carry much meaning to the men involved:

> When I'm actually in the work with systems or groups of people or individuals, we don't really talk about masculinities…we're talking about healthy, equitable behaviors, we're talking about pro-social behaviors, we're talking about communication, we're talking about how to receive and give feedback…

Although The Shift project and NGM have worked together, they appear to be employing different approaches when it comes to language, yet both are seeking to engage men and boys in critical conversations. It seemed that NGM used the language of "positive masculinity" as a marketing strategy to entice men into discussing feminist ideas in a non-confrontational way. This same approach, albeit less discursively, occurred in my observations of the ROPE. Jonathon faced challenges in his attempts to balance appealing to masculine identifying youth while avoiding leaving dominant discourses of masculinity unquestioned.

It was the day after the ROPE had ended and Jonathon and I went to a wooded ravine on the outskirts of Edmonton to film his interview. During the interview we reflected on some of the moments of the trip where I felt that masculine narratives potentially linked to violence and domination were being performed by the youth. Jonathon was aware that all the youth have had some interactions with patriarchal ideology because of the cultures they're immersed in. Working with this knowledge and attempting to de-program this was no easy task. He explained that a lot of the banter, sex jokes and inappropriate comments heard on ROPE usually are directed to each other and there is little, if any conversation about girls or women. I found this to be true based on my experience, it wasn't degrading language pertaining to women and girls directly that was used for jokes but rather a recurrent theme of homophobic comments and jokes. Jonathon recalled a moment when one of the youth played a homophobic song and explained his method for responding to "imperfection from teenage boys", as he labelled it:

> A song is not make or break for the kind of young man that a boy is going to be. And if a boy feels comfortable enough to joke, be himself, cross a couple of lines and still feel respected and honoured by me, that means I can have bigger conversations that are about something much more important than song lyrics. And they can be about like emotions and relationships and grappling with the messages that are not just in songs, but everywhere in society… The song is I

CEU eTD Collection

think that's a great example of yeah, of being willing to walk that balance and see the bigger picture in working towards gender justice.

Building solid relationships with the youth was prioritized over addressing homophobic language. In gender justice work, challenging homophobia is an important step towards dismantling oppressive systems which legitimate hegemonic masculinity (Our Watch, 2021). As Connell's (2020, p. 76) theory of multiple masculinities demonstrates, homosexual men are subordinated due to their apparent proximity to femininity. Thus, challenging homophobia is a necessary action for challenging hegemonic masculinity and ultimately challenging systems which legitimate gender-based violence.

The current gender regime that NGM are both subject to and must work with is one that favours "the masculine" over "the feminine". As such, Jonathon is faced with a quandary in his work with masculine identifying youth. He must find a way to appeal to the youth without reinforcing gender stereotypes and dominant narratives of masculinity. There were multiple times throughout the trip where Jonathon connected with the youth by drawing on his own stories of transitioning from boyhood to manhood and the lessons he had learnt about pushing himself too hard. The following quote is taken from the morning when the group decided to leave the hike a day early and Jonathon was talking through some of the reasons why people might choose to persevere or not:

> I'll say for myself, a lot of you know that I bicycled 15,000 kilometres across the country. [At] the end of that I was exhausted, I was burnt out, I was weary and I stayed for pride because I felt like a failure and I didn't want to feel like more of one and I got so burnt out I basically couldn't do anything for more than half a year, I mean I could do stuff but I couldn't get through a lot of the stuff that I typically would have. I stayed for pride; I don't necessarily regret that.

Jonathon also shared stories of his time trekking the Laugavegur River trail in Iceland and how he passed the grave of a man who died as he was ill-prepared for the trek. He also spoke on multiple occasions about his own rite of passage which he described as being the year he spent studying abroad in France at age 17. He recounted how he hadn't been ready for that experience but returning home afterwards to the people who knew him and cared about him was part of how he grew into a man. These personal narratives could be considered a homosocial enactment of masculinity wherein Jonathon described his own masculinity (or a past version of it) as a

mechanism for relating to the masculine identifying youth, echoing the idea that men perform masculinity for other men (Ralph, 2023). Men and boys' homosocial enactments are based on the need to be validated by other men and boys (Ralph, 2023). For Jonathon, achieving respect and credibility in the eyes of the youth was likely a necessary requirement for effective facilitation. Through sharing his personal experiences of challenge and the key lessons he learnt, he communicate his youthfulness, physical fitness, able-bodiedness and confidence in outdoor pursuits, all characteristics which would likely increase his appeal as a leader and mentor (Gray, 2018).The youth he cared for and guided through his rite of passage expedition were living in a moment in time where masculine coded traits such as stoicism, competitiveness and self-sufficiency were exalted by society and encouraged in both boys and girls, much more so than feminine coded characteristics such as vulnerability, weakness, and dependency. Therefore, using homosocial enactments was seen as one potential way of legitimising these unexalted feminine coded traits and qualities.

Part of marketing feminism to boys involved providing spaces where they could voice their opinions without the risk of being "cancelled", or having their ideas disavowed if they were perceived as being offensive. During the months I observed the Support Channel of the Boys + Club Discord Server, I noticed some consistent behaviour from Jonathon and the other staff moderators[10]. There was almost always an effort to try and understand where the youth were coming from and to respect their personal circumstances and feelings. 'Calling-in'[11] approaches appeared to form part of NGM's toolkit for cultivating "positive masculinity" in the Server. By calling-in men and boys, Next Gen Men hoped that they will be more receptive and will learn from conversations as opposed to calling-out approaches which can lead to men and boys becoming defensive and less likely to engage.

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[10] During the time I was completing my research, NGM employed two new staff members and one practicum student to help operate the Discord server. The two of the three staff members were female identifying.

[11] The 'calling-in' approach is defined as "a practice of inviting people or organizations who are causing or have caused harm into a conversation in which learning and growth are the goals" (Pascoe & Wells, 2022, p. 5).

To illustrate an example of 'calling-in', I reflect on one conversation I observed in the support channel. One youth posted about changes the provincial government had made to gender affirming care and how these changes were affecting them personally. Another youth supported this person's comment and added "they are literally taking human rights away from lgbtq+". Another youth commented "[I'm] gonna have to move to Alberta then (joking don't kill me)" implying that they would like to live in a place where LGBTQIA+ people have no rights. A moderator replied sarcastically "ur banned, CANCELED". The way the moderator chose to respond to this comment by mocking cancel culture highlights that a "calling-out" approach is not used by the moderators on the server. The youth who started the conversation thread added a further comment reiterating how the proposed new laws were to affect them. Another youth responded "I think that's reasonable [in response to raising the legal age to access gender affirmative care]. You should be a full grown adult before making a huge decision, which if you later regret will have fucked up your body forever". The conversation progressed to debating the age of gender affirming and the effects of "irreversible" HRT as well as the effects of gender dysphoria.

Jonathon and another youth in the server then shared information about the current situation of gender affirming care in Canada as well as their own perspectives and personal experiences of attempting to access gender affirming care either for themselves or for others. Both Jonathon and the youth took a process of information sharing and engaging in dialogue with the youth and provided counterpoints instead of threatening to expel him for his apparent anti-trans sentiments. The youth who felt it was reasonable to limit the legal age continued to be annoyed as he felt the conversation had been one sided and that others were not respecting his opinion; however, he did close off the conversation by saying "I've actually learned a lot about this stuff because of you two". Staff in this virtual conversation showed a commitment to supporting trans rights. They also refrained from "cancelling" the youth and his opinions. This suggests that "positive masculinity" is connected to pro-trans and anti-cancel culture narratives.

Chapter 5: Cultivating "Positive Masculinity" in a Neoliberal Era

In this chapter I explain the connection between ideas of "positive masculinity" and individualising discourses resulting from neoliberal ideology. Of the limited work happening globally to engage men and boys in gender equality, initiatives have typically involved a focus on challenging harmful narratives about masculinity, this is often done through attempts to change social norms at the population level (Pease & Flood, 2008). Initiatives tend to focus almost exclusively on urging men and boys to "step up" and change their behaviours as well as to "call out" the behaviour of their male friends (Flood et al., 2024). This turn towards focusing exclusively on social norms and accounts of men's behaviours has been at the expense of looking at the political conditions which dictate how societies function (Flood & Greig, 2020). As Roy & Hackett (2017) advise, social enterprises function within broader political contexts, therefore it is important for researchers to "uncover the various ways that neoliberalism attempts to steer the direction of social enterprise, in discourse and practice" (p.104).

Governments in collaboration with private enterprise, are primarily responsible for embedding neoliberal ideology in societies. The neoliberal discourse present in NGM's work could be explained as a result of needing to adhere to government funding requirements or may simply be a matter of mirroring the language used in National Canadian GBV prevention plans[12]. Despite being almost free, financially speaking, from the tentacles of a neoliberal government, as a social enterprise, NGM are still operating within a society that upholds these values and as such, the ideology dominates. To succeed as a social enterprise, NGM must therefore market and sell what they think people want, and at least for some of the population, what people are looking for are antidotes to the "crisis of masculinity".

Beynon (2002) and Greig (2009) have argued that a focus on masculine identity and the "crisis of masculinity" has been recurrent over the years and is used as a method for diverting attention away from class struggles and other structural inequalities

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[12] In the Canadian Federal Government's National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence (2022), work with men and boys is described as follows: "engage men and boys to challenge and change norms, attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender inequality, to become positive role models, and to understand and take action against GBV".

created by neoliberalism (Beynon, 2002, p. 93). By gendering the issue, it avoids drawing attention to the other intersecting, and politically upheld systems involved. Furthermore, it is common practice under neoliberalism to pathologize deviance. According to Cohen (2016), labelling or pathologizing feelings and emotions is correlated with a three-decade strong spate of neoliberal economic reforms. Cohen explains that labels are used to define problems or deficiencies in contrast to a norm which reflects neoliberalism's obsession with "efficiency, productivity, and consumption" (Cohen, 2016, p. 40). Next Gen Men's products and services are influenced by the current neoliberal paradigm[13] alive in Canada and globally. One outcome of this is that people look for suitable solutions which will enable themselves, their children, their employees to develop and support themselves to succeed in a neoliberal world. Teachers are looking for professional development to help them respond to the "crisis in masculinity" which then supports them to meet their metrics-based educational outcome requirements. Concerned parents are looking for personal development summer camp programs to inoculate their child against "toxic masculinity" and support them to grow up "happy, healthy and successful[14]". Big corporations are willing to purchase Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) training to ensure a more productive workforce with minimal sexual harassment complaints. With this socio-political backdrop in mind, I turn now to exploring the different tendencies NGM staff and volunteers showed when conceptualising "positive masculinity".

5.1 Toward Self-Actualisation and Gender Liberation

Gender transformative work in gender-based violence prevention has often focused on freedom from gender stereotypes and freedom of self-expression as a means for reaching gender equality (VicHealth, 2020). In an interview, Jonathon highlighted that to him, a big part of positive masculinity work involved helping youth to reflect on the kind of person they want to be:

> I think positive masculinity is about having thought about what masculinity means to you and figured out how to make choices that respect yourself and

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[13] In neoliberal societies such as Canada, responsibility is placed on the individual to take care of themself and their family, with no or limited reliance on the State. People who do not follow the paradigm of self-sufficiency, productivity, and efficiency are labelled as "lazy", "weak" and "a drain on the system".
[14] The name of Dr. Arne Rubenstein's book which has inspired some of NGM's youth programming is "The Making of Men: Raising Boys to be Happy, Healthy and Successful".

the people around you…I can say what it means for me personally, [but] I can't say what it means for every other boy that I'm working with because part of my role is to help him engage in those questions, to uncover what masculinity means to him.

During webinars[15], Jonathon explained that "positive masculinity" may be found within a certain commitment to one's own values" and that it involved an "orientation towards an authentic self…orienting yourself towards sincerity, knowing your own values and what you believe in and who you want to become as a young man". German, NGM board member, youth worker and producer of *Modern Manhood* Podcast similarly spoke about encouraging men and boys to honour their authentic selves:

> I want guys to be as free as possible, to express themselves as free as possible. And through that expression also comes questions of who they are. I see a lot of guys as well that think of themselves as not hegemonic masculine so they will say, well, I'm queer instead…I don't have an issue with that. But there's also all these questions of being like…well, if we're not in this box, then we have to be another type of identity…. [but] that's never going to free men, masculinity in general …the rule to me is a self-actualisation, less so these cultural identifiers.

German saw gender liberation as central to "positive masculinities" work. He believed that men should be able to express their identity in a way that is meaningful to them without getting caught up in restrictive ideas of separate, contained identities. Azra, a NGM volunteer avoided prescriptive notions in responding to what "positive masculinity" meant to her. Emphasis was given to rejecting societal expectations and gender stereotypes and imagining a new self which was authentic and not bound by gender:

> The healthy form of masculinity today is to question what is being regarded as masculinity by everyone… A friend of mine recently was like saying... "what are you trying to get to"? "How do you think I need to be"? [I said] like you just need to be yourself! Do what you like, not what you're supposed to like based on having to be a man…To be able to see that [gender norms] and to step out of that, even if you're alone

These quotes demonstrate that for some interviewees, there was a tendency to conceptualise "positive masculinity" as an individual's identity and their agentic

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[15] Jonathon delivered two webinars: one to parents who were interested in sending their child on a ROPE and one to camp professional interested in using a "positive masculinity" framework in their outdoor camps.

decisions to construct their own identity. There is a logic in these arguments that suggests that if people were able to honour their authentic selves, then gender categories would cease to exist and thus gender inequality would absolve. It is implied that in a gender equal or post-gender world, less violence would occur. Yet as intersectional feminist scholars have argued, it is not just the system of gender alone which creates inequalities and the conditions for violence. Other interacting and mutually constituting systems such as racism, classism, ableism and so on, all contribute to violence in society and would persist even in the absence of gender hierarchization (Christoffersen & Emejulu, 2023; Connell, 2014; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2004).

Individual men and boys "taking responsibility" to disrupt cultures of harmful masculinity or in this case, having the courage to go against the norms of their gender, is a prevailing approach in men and masculinities work (Greig, 2011). The language of "positive masculinity" can be seen as a personalisation or domestication and appears to materialise in depictions of identity and personal choices. This tendency can also be seen in some of the responses from staff and volunteers:

> Healthy or positive masculinity is really just this, this idea that the ways in which we show up with the traits that are identified as masculine, show up in ways that are positive, that are meant with a growth mindset, that are really doing the world a service, you know, rather than a disservice in, in the ways that we show up in the workplace, that we show up in the home and the ways in which we make these spaces bigger and safer for everyone…. *(Nevada, NGM Volunteer)*

> For me things that matter [include] being dependable for other people, being courageous, being compassionate…[it's] about not just aligning yourself with the status quo because that's the easiest thing to do, but taking the time to think about the kind of young man that you want to be and the kind of qualities that matter to you *(Jonathon, Youth Program Manager)*

> To me, healthy masculinity or a positive masculinity boils down to being true to yourself as a person and interacting with people of any gender or interacting with anyone in a way that is honest and forthcoming and not done in a way that's reinforcing dominance based masculinity… *(Stephen, NGM Volunteer)*

As these quotes demonstrate, conceptualising "positive masculinity" by articulating it as *who* a person is and what they *do*, was not an exceptional narrative. Although some staff and volunteers talked about the dual role of both system and personal change, all staff and volunteers imagined the individual to be a site of transformation. This idea of personal choice in masculinities reflects Connell's concern that "alternative

masculinities" are portrayed as if it were a marketplace of masculinities to choose from. This emphasis on choice ignores that these so-called choices are strongly structured by relations of power (Connell, 2008, p. 137). In the face of social structures, choice is often more complicated than just being a matter of will. Furthermore, Gutmann (2014) claims, there is no such thing as "alternative masculinities" rather only alternative circumstances and situations which provide men the opportunity to do something unusual[16]. As we will see in the next section, there are reasons behind this focus on developing "alternative masculinities" rather than alternative circumstances.

5.2 Enrolling in Self Transformation

Operating as a social enterprise makes it difficult for NGM to avoid an individualising discourse. It seems that individualism or connecting with people on an individual level is required for successful marketing of 'men and feminism'. Jonathon, German and Jake all felt that the way to really get men and boys to connect in this work was to show them what's in it for them, Jake explains:

> It's been a huge piece for Next Gen Men to try to create revenue streams that enrol people in their own transformation and that then we can take excess revenues [and use them for something else].

According to Jonathon, activities that help people to explore their own identity are seen as the most effective for reaching men and boys and ensuring they stay engaged:

> One of the things that we experienced in working with young people is most young people are genuinely interested in themselves, right? They are interested in being asked questions about who they are and what their experiences have been...so anchoring our programs with an exploration of their own identity is a pretty easy way to grab their interest.

Next Gen Men's youth programming, namely the ROPE sees the individual or the Self as the site for change and transformation. In separate interviews, Jonathon and Jake emphasized that the ROPE was both an individual and a collective journey. Jonathon

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[16] For example, many men are no longer the sole breadwinners in the US as women now also contribute to household income. This does not automatically mean that these men who are no longer the sole-breadwinners are exhibiting "alternative masculinities", they are simply in alternative circumstances (Gutmann, 2014, p. 57).

explained that individual transformation only takes place when the individual is held in relationship with others both during and after the challenge:

> What I would hope for them is that they're understanding we didn't do this alone. We did it together. We couldn't have done it alone… And I've kind of talked about that sense of being held in… going through a rite of passage, not individually, but as someone who is held and cared for by their peers, is what they take away. That you… the only way you get through something hard is to do it together.

Although there was an emphasis on building supportive relationships and inter-connectedness, the *individual* "challenge" was seen as a necessary component of the ROPE. Jonathon explained that personal challenges forced the youth to show their true self, the bravado of masculinity gets "stripped away" and youth can no longer hide behind their mask of supposed invulnerability. Jonathon emphasized that while the youth do go through a challenge, it is a contained challenge which is undertaken in a supportive environment. This idea corresponds to principles of outdoor education which suggest that personal development such as self-confidence and resilience results from "safe" risk taking and by overcoming physical challenges (Mitten, 2018, p. 122). Both Jake and Jonathon reiterated to me that NGM's camp differed from mainstream camps because it rejects the idea of "rugged individualism" enacted by camps purporting "we're going to make a man out of you" [17]. In a webinar to interested parents, Jonathon spelt-out "we're not a boot camp". Jonathon believed the ROPE was about "nurturing boys into being their best selves".

On the final days of the trip, I set up the camera in the wooded area surrounding the Change Center. It was mid-afternoon, dappled afternoon sunlight lit the forest, there were many mosquitos. As I waited for the first youth to arrive, I watched a squirrel in a nearby tree, enjoying a moment of reflection to myself after being around the constant chatter of the youth for the past week. I didn't know which youth were going to walk down the path towards my interview set up as we'd left it up to them to decide if they wanted to be interviewed. My only request was that they come by themselves.

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[17] Jake informed me that NGM had attempted to promote their concept of "cultivating positive masculinity through camps" at multiple camp conferences but that their applications were rejected. They had also delivered professional development sessions on the topic to other camp providers and facilitators in the hope that more camps would try to challenge the masculine norms of the field.

As each youth arrived, I offered them insect repellent: some gladly used it, others rejected the offer. I asked them to sit on a log and we began the short interviews lasting around 10 minutes each. It was interesting to see which youth felt comfortable to be interviewed, to my surprise most of the youth turned up. I asked the youth the same questions, but I also included some individualised questions based on what I had observed about particular youths' experience throughout the week. Some of the youth expressed that they learnt that they had supports available to them and that others were going through similar situations and that there was solidarity and comfort to be found in that:

> Um, [I learnt] definitely how persistent and stubborn I can be like the rest of my family. Like, just wanting to go through with that bag and stuff. And maybe I need to maybe sometimes ask for a bit of help some more so I can improve my experience. So, yeah, I think I've learned a bit about myself about that yeah. *(Anderson, age 15)*

> Like everything you need to do as an adult. But there are always people you can ask for help, I would say. Like asking for help when you don't know is something you're going to need to do. It would be my answer. (*Ben, age 16)*

Many of the youth on the trip discovered a newfound sense of self efficacy. Feelings of resiliency, perseverance, capability, self-belief, personal success and accomplishment were shared by the youth I interviewed. Although the wording of my question: what is one thing you learnt about *yourself*? instead of just one thing you learnt, likely directed the youth to answer from the perspective of the Self, most of the youth talked about discovering their own individual capacity to withstand discomfort or a challenge:

> Definitely carrying the bag all the way up the mountain…. carrying it to both the camps, so first day and second day….that was definitely really hard. … I kind of wish I switched bags to begin with, but I think it was good to like keep going and, you know, keep persisting *(Anderson, age 15)*

> [I learnt about myself] that I could push through. Like, I really felt down and not motivated at all. It was like not feeling good for me at all, but I found out that I can really push through and persevere through anything, even if I'm you know, injured, cold, feeling sick. (*Isiah, age 14)*

> I really learned to what extent I can persevere because I knew I could persevere somethin'… I did not know that I would be… that I was capable of like staying warm in that kind of temperature*. (Jonas, age 14)*

> I think I learned that I can just…. I can push through even some of the hardest moments, and I can manage to make it through. And also that once I do, it feels better afterwards. And I feel very, like, happy and accomplished that I was able to. *Levi, 15*

> I think that, like, *pauses* I learned that I... I'll never really, like, give up. Like, I'll always sort of get to the top and keep going. (*Philip, age 16*)

Despite NGM's attempts to challenge "rugged individualism" narratives in outdoor experiences, many of the youth's comments reflect a "pushing" narrative (Kennedy & Parker, 2023), which can be described as a discourse of "getting through" and "toughing it out". These narratives are unsurprising as the name of the camp 'Rite of Passage *Expedition*' suggests, outdoor camps are imagined to have the potential to evoke popular narratives of "pushing" and perseverance due to their connection to White, hegemonic collective memory of explorer, frontiersman, and tropes of "conquering" (Kennedy & Parker, 2023). This "pushing" discourse has its roots in the Puritan origins of American managerial culture in Anglo-North America (Hopper & Hopper, 2009) which proports that true success comes from persistence, working hard and overcoming personal challenges, no matter how insurmountable and no matter one's position in the social hierarchy. The ROPE had intended to avoid "rugged individualism", yet in some ways the camp did induce this narrative by suggesting that self-development comes from overcoming a personal challenge. The self-development framing of the ROPE is indicative of neoliberalism where enrolling people in their own transformation appears to be a preferred method for engaging people.

5.3 Building Personal Skills: Encouraging Help-Seeking and Critical Thinking

Imagining the individual as a site for transformation was further demonstrated by way the ROPE encouraged the development of specific personal skills. The youth participated in activities that encouraged them to reflect critically on how norms of masculinity influenced their lives and how they could develop personal skills to resist the negative parts of their gender socialisation. In one activity, for example, the youth were encouraged to develop their critical thinking skills by reflecting on the question "according to society, a man knows he's become a man when…". The youth were encouraged to answer from the perspective of what "society" would expect of them. In

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another activity they were taught the importance of distinguishing between when to persist alone and when to ask for help.

In both activities, situating the youths' socialisation experience into a broader political and economic context was missing. The conversation may have helped the youth to articulate the personal pressures they felt or supported them in learning how to ask for help, but it did not make the connection between the construction of gender relations and how it is necessary for the functioning of the economy or other political projects. Taking "help-seeking" as an example, teaching the youth to ask for help implied that there was support available, if only they would ask. Encouraging individual help-seeking behaviour only does good if systematic support is available. However, in neoliberal societies, systematic support is scarce and in particular social groups, even stigmatized and often only provided by family and personal networks. In this sense these critical discussions on gender were depoliticized and kept consciousness contained within the personal realm.

5.4 Developing Emotional Vulnerability

Neoliberalism's paradigm of "self-help" and personal resiliency was equally prominent in the ROPE activities designed to cultivate emotional vulnerability. A key assumption in gender-based violence prevention work is that the male socialisation experience creates men and boys who are emotionally stunted and incapable of expressing a full range of emotions, as such, their relationships suffer. Improving their personal emotional literacy is therefore seen as an important strategy for men and boys' mental health which is imagined to flow "naturally" on to affecting their personal relationships with women and girls.

On the final afternoon of the trip when the group was back at the Change Center the youth participated in the final formal activity of the week, the "affirmations circle". In an interview Jonathon explained that the premise was "to really see yourself, you have to be seen by others". This statement rests on the assumption that personal or individual growth results from interacting in relationship with others. Jonathon described the purpose and rules for the activity. The youth were to sit in a semicircle with one chair facing away from the group, symbolically facing the mountains and the journey they'd just undertaken. Jonathon placed laminated A4 pieces of paper on the ground which

had adjectives[18] and positive affirmations such as "I am supportive. I am there for the people around me. I catch them when they fall and uplift them to be their best selves". The youth could choose to use the adjective cards to help inspire them or support them in finding words to communicate how they saw each other and themselves on the trip. Some youth used the cards for prompts, others didn't. Jonathon mentioned that he and his colleague designed this card deck titled "Boys will be…" a few years ago and that the deck includes "qualities that represent different elements that make us who we are…and that it's a play on the phrase 'boys will be boys'". Twelve-year-old Conner commented "oh yeah, my mum bought me this".

With tender, instrumental music selected by one of the youths playing softly in the background, the youth took it in turns to sit in the chair while the others individually approached them, whispering in their ear a message of affirmation. Jonathon explained that whispering was used to anonymise who was speaking and to keep the message between the message sharer and recipient. Jonathon explained "you can share a memory, a few words of gratitude…share something you noticed about this person". He described it as an opportunity to "genuinely, authentically and privately celebrate who they were and who they've been in particular to you on the trip". There was no time limit for this activity and Jonathon was happy for it to go on for as long as needed, it ended up lasting over an hour. As the activity progressed, some youth started to get emotional and two youth shed some tears, some comforted others with hugs. I was surprised by the attention and focus the youth maintained throughout the activity and how emotional it became for some of them. It certainly felt like the activity was the most impactful in the sense that it engaged the youth on a deeper level. There is no doubt that the youth on this trip grew their relationships with one another. The fact that many of them would continue to be in contact via the Boys + Club on the Discord Server meant that these strong relationships would hopefully be sustained despite the geographical distance between many of them.

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[18] Adjectives: focused, expressive, enough, accepting, gentle, humble, magic, sensitive, generous, grounded, curious, resourceful, forgiving, genuine, patient, open minded, grateful, resilient, confident, enthusiastic, dependable, hopeful, compassionate, empathetic, strong, trusting, brave, determined, loving, fair, creative, decisive, fun, present, capable, flexible, trustworthy, honest, thoughtful, introspective and loyal.

Further strategies for cultivating emotional vulnerability on the ROPE involved Jonathon, the camp leader making a concerted effort to normalise being physically affectionate and using loving language with the youth. Every evening Jonathon would go around to all the youth as they were either getting into bed or were already in bed and ask them how they would like to say goodnight to him. He gave them choices, to either get a pat on the back or receive a hug. He also asked them to think of one thing they were grateful for. An adult male hugging boys at bedtime may come across to some readers as inappropriate, however this is indicative of a homophobic gender bias that misconstrues male hugging as homosexual behaviour (Forsell & Åström, 2012, p. 3). There were times where I had to check my own bias and assumptions during the trip. Having been raised in an Anglo-Saxon culture where male affection was limited to intimate partner heterosexual relationships, I felt at times uncomfortable with the amount of hugging between Jonathon and some of the youth. I had to remind myself that there was nothing wrong with physical affection if it was consensual, which it was. I also had to remind myself that this behaviour would be seen as normal in an all-girls trip. I was startled the first few times I saw some of the youth brushing each other's hair, hugging or clinging on to each other and sitting on each other's laps. My first thoughts went to assuming that they youth must be homosexual however as the week progressed, I became more used to seeing this behaviour until by the end of the week it seemed almost entirely normal.

One of the goals of the ROPE was to provide youth with what Jonathon called "islands" and "spaces for solace", where they could take a break from the "real world" in which they constantly felt the need to prove their heterosexual masculinity. In this sense the ROPE helped to break the circuit of the cultures of violence the youth are usually immersed in. While these spaces may offer a reprieve from the pressures of needing to prove their masculinity, it's hard to know if there will be any kind of future impact or when exactly such an impact may start to take effect. Moreover, many youth will never get the opportunity to experience such spaces as they remain financially out of reach.[19] Perhaps the most pertinent point is that these types of spaces do not change the everyday conditions in which the youth live which are arguably the most influential

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[19] At the time of writing, the week-long camps cost between $649 to $899 Canadian dollars https://www.nextgenmen.ca/expeditions

in shaping masculinities. Once the camp is over, the youth return to their lives where very little, if anything has changed. Where the ROPE program's impact is strengthened is through its connection with the Boys+ Club Discord Server. Far from being a "one off" approach, the Boys+ Club Discord Server provides an accessible space where the youth can continue to strengthen the relationships they built on the camp. This pairing of activities therefore has the potential to impact the youths' everyday lives, at least through the level of interpersonal relationships.

While cultivating emotional vulnerability and building respectful relationships amongst masculine-identifying youth has a place in violence prevention work, these activities alone are not sufficient for challenging disrespect towards women, girls and "the feminine". Furthermore, building emotional vulnerability is a domesticised way of looking at the issue of men's violence and ignores the role of powerful institutions in structuring men's abilities to express emotions (Greig, 2011, p. 226). The activities and environments described in this chapter focused on improving the youth's personal skills and capabilities; be that building resiliency or encouraging critical thinking, help-seeking and emotional risk taking. Given that personal and structural change are inherently interlinked (Dozois, & Wells, 2020), a focus on personal skills is therefore warranted. However, we must reflect on what personal skills we are seeking to cultivate and why. Next Gen Men's decision to focus on depoliticised personal skills-based solutions demonstrates the influence of neoliberal ideology The emotional literacy, personal-skills angle enabled NGM to avoid appearing "radical" in the eyes of the government and the public and thus appeases the hegemony of neoliberalism.

As Swarts (2013, p. 6) explains, neoliberalism garners its dominance by presenting itself as an inescapable necessity. It ends up appearing as neutral, natural and thus the *only* plausible way of governing. Consequentially when there are attempts to question this "fact", or suggest alternatives, agitators are mocked and perceived as radical, extremist, even "communist". Given the long history of democracy and capitalism in Canada, it is no wonder that NGM were cautious about being perceived as "too political" by questioning neoliberal logics, especially given that their target audience includes men in positions of power who often benefit from this ideology to certain extents and youth and their parents who also potentially gain certain privileges under such a system. NGM's attempts to remain "politically neutral", at least to the public eye, is an example of how the organisation works within a neoliberal system.

Conclusion

This ethnography examined the workings of a Canadian social enterprise promoting "positive masculinity". Combining participant observation with interviews enabled me to *experience* the work of NGM, not just hear about it. Although I used multiple ethnographic methods to triangulate findings, this study is not without its limitations. Firstly, it was based on observations of three of NGM's programs and activities over a short period (three weeks). An ethnography of more forms of NGM's activities over at least one year or more would offer more thorough insights. Second, using video interviews which were to be included in a documentary likely had an impact on the responses people gave. Future studies could allow more anonymity and perhaps obtain different results. Third, I did not have space to include a discourse analysis of Canadian and global media and public commentary concerning men, masculinities and GBV and connect these discourses with those I found in my research. Situating the work of "positive masculinity" social enterprises into broader public and political commentary would be a useful future exercise to better understand the emergence and prevailing approaches of such enterprises. Finally, my positionality as a female-identifying researcher, who did not grow up in Canada meant that both my gender and my "outsider" status provided me with a unique standpoint. While not a limitation in and of itself, it is important to recognise the influence these factors may have had and how different conclusions could be drawn, if for example a male-identifying, Canadian researcher, were to undertake this study.

This study has provided insight into how gender theory is applied in real world interventions. Chapter one demonstrated that staff and volunteers worked with an understanding that masculinity was a social construction. Staff and volunteers recognised that masculinity could be performed by people of any gender however male "sexed" bodies that performed masculinity were seen as the predominate site for transformation. Perhaps the most paradoxical finding was that while staff and volunteers indicated the importance of moving beyond gender categories such as masculinity and femininity, there was a determined desire to hold onto some kind of category of masculinity, even if the category was expanded to the point where it may no longer be recognisable as "masculinity". For some, the desire to hold on to the category came from a belief in the inherent value of masculine coded traits and characteristics. For others, the desire was fuelled by a sense of pragmatism.

Broadening the concept of masculinity was seen as a way of increasing engagement with the target audience. It was also a strategy for meeting people where they were at in terms of their current knowledge about gender while also hinting at postmodernist ideas of gender fluidity. Immediately "going beyond gender" seemed too radical for the current moment and therefore the next best thing was to trouble the category of masculinity by expanding what it means in Canadian society. This finding speaks to the inherent challenges and potential contradictions of social change work with men and masculinities. In trying to balance reaching men as men, NGM inevitably reinforced some kind of category of "men" and "boys" or the hegemony of men, yet without doing this, NGM would be left without a target audience. This ethnography thus helps us to understand how gender itself is constructed. Next Gen Men's efforts to dismantle gender as a system ironically worked to reproduce gender. This is not a criticism but rather shows the pervasiveness of gender in and of itself, that even those who understand the need to move beyond such a system are trapped in its grip.

The language of "positive masculinity" was used to legitimise male bodies performing feminine coded traits and qualities. By using the term "positive masculinity", narratives of femininity remained discursively separate. The language of "positive masculinity" seemed to work as a strategy for upholding a binary distinction despite some interviewee's awareness of the need to work towards removing binary gender categories. "Positive masculinity" terminology was perceived as being helpful for reducing resistance amongst the target group, yet such discursive acts lead to bigger questions. Can gender equality realistically be achieved if narratives of femininity continue to be devalued to the point where they are called something else to legitimise them? Is it possible to have "separate but equal" gender categories? I concur with Greig (2011, p. 233) that "the project of a new masculinity for men remains deeply tied to the heteronormative gender binary, and thus to a central foundation of current hegemonies".

Despite sometimes using prescriptive labels of "toxic" and "positive" masculinity, staff did question the utility of such language. By using these terms, staff saw it as a way of working with the growing public discourse and consciousness of the topic. This language was used as a tool to help them further their end goal, which was not necessarily to promote prescriptive ideas of gender but rather to encourage gender liberation. Gender liberation or freedom to express your own unique gender identity

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was presented as a solution for gender-based violence prevention. However, as I argued, an exclusive focus on gender assumes that gender is the only oppressive system involved in perpetuating violence.

At times the word "masculinity" was used as a stand-in word in place of patriarchy despite these related concepts not sharing the same meaning. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005 as cited in Christensen & Jensen 2014, p. 63) express concern that mainstream research on men and masculinities has lost its focus on the patriarchal gender order or the role of masculinity in the oppression of women and "the feminine". Greig (2011) has similarly argued that "the emphasis given to masculinity as an explanatory framework for male violence has tended to mystify rather than clarify the relationship between violence and power" (p. 226). My research revealed that using masculinity as an explanatory framework in place of patriarchy is not unique to *research* on men and masculinities, it also appears to be occurring in men and masculinities *programming* as evidenced through the conflation of the two concepts. This conflation has implications because when the term masculinity is treated as a synonym for patriarchy it disguises the gender-power relations involved in masculine domination.

Next Gen Men's masculine-identifying-youth-only ROPE was an example of an initiative designed to address the *internal hegemony* or the hierarchy of masculinities (Christensen & Jensen, 2014) and was based on the idea that it was necessary to group people who share the same sociological experience of "needing to prove their masculinity" or who have experienced the feeling of needing to earn their membership into the boy's club. While addressing the internal hierarchy of masculinity is important, by responding exclusively to internal hegemony, NGM ROPE was only responding to half of the problem. As noted by Ravn & Roberts (2020, p. 187) in their critique of Inclusive Masculinities Theory, even though there is evidence to suggest that young masculinities are becoming more inclusive towards other men, this is not necessarily the case when it comes to inclusivity of women (Ravn & Roberts, 2020, p. 188). The ROPE program did not directly address external hegemony, or the masculine domination of women, girls and "the feminine". If NGM were to involve female "sexed" people and people socialized as girls in the ROPE, then their work would have the potential to address both internal and external hegemony. It could provide an

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environment where people of all genders can learn from each other about their experiences in a patriarchal gender order.

Staff and volunteers endeavoured to explain the issues with masculinity as problematic systems or cultures rather than speaking of individual "problematic" men and their "bad" behaviours. However, despite their efforts to place the problem at the systemic level, it did appear easier to describe problematic narratives of masculinity when they were connected to the individual through individualizing discourses. It is not surprising then that ideas pertaining to "positive masculinity" were also most clearly articulated when locating them at the site of the individual and their choices and behaviours. Following other scholars, I too argued that the language of "positive" and "toxic" masculinity was a personalised framing which has evolved in response to the "masculinity-in-crisis" narrative. This act of personaliszation was where I noticed a mismatch in NGM's logic. While NGM conceptualised masculinity as a social construction– something that happens to a person – when it came to talking about "positive masculinity", masculinity was predominately understood as what an individual chooses to do or be. Masculinity moved from being understood as a product of social construction to a personalised understanding which saw "positive masculinity" as pertaining to the individual and their agentic choices. I see this personalisation as an example of neoliberal discourse which holds the individual responsible for both causing and well as solving society's problems.

Having established that "positive masculinity" was an example of neoliberal discourse, it then became clear as to why NGM employed this terminology. Next Gen Men used this language because they knew that people were looking for antidotes to the "crisis-of-masculinity" narrative. This was not a dirty secret or unpleasant truth NGM wanted to hide, rather it was quite the opposite. Next Gen Men saw an opportunity in this individualising discourse and used it as a strategy to attempt to better connect or "market" feminism to men and boys. Next Gen Men saw themselves as promoting the feminist movement in a way that many feminists before them had not. By commodifying new narratives of masculinity, ones that they hoped would create a more gender equal world, they worked within a capitalist system to provide products and services which they believed had value and which people were willing to pay for.

As a social enterprise, NGM were innovative: they realised that some of the previous strategies employed by feminist movements were not connecting sufficiently with boys and men, and they sought new approaches. Instead of waiting for external funders to grant permission to innovate, social enterprises have the freedom to explore new ideas without having to rely solely on short term and scarce funding. In a democracy, their self-funded model can also offer stability in the face of changing government powers. However, this model is not without consequences. While de-regulated social enterprises may offer an opportunity to challenge governments' discursive powers they can also legitimise the roll back of the welfare state by offering privatised services that governments would have previously supplied as a public good. On the other hand, Roy & Hackett (2017, p. 99) highlight social enterprises' capacity to conceptualise a different form of economy that breaks conventional capitalist thinking.

This ethnography encourages us to consider whether social enterprises, despite supporting capitalism, can be deemed a legitimate feminist project. I initially questioned their credibility given that intersectional feminists argue that feminism must fight against all oppressive systems, including capitalism (Arruzza et al., 2019; Hartmann, 1981). However, as NGM's CEO told me, not all forms of capitalism are equally exploitative and practically speaking, NGM had to work within the system they were operating in. While there is indeed a need for further research which explores and reflects on this contradictory relationship, this ethnography has shown that there is potential for social enterprises working in capitalist societies to change the gender order but there are limitations as to how far they can go in this ambitious project.

Next Gen Men were at important cross-roads. Multiple staff mentioned the value of building community and relationships: Jonathon proudly told me "Relationship is the medium through which we do what we do" and "nothing happens without a direct connection". Yet these values seemed to exist alongside a desire to "scale up" their operations through impact partnerships with multinational conglomerates such as Unilever. While the focus may still be on the individual, it will be reaching individuals *en masse* and at the expense of small-scale, localised activities. Jake told me that he was stuck on a difficult decision: to continue to fund the Community Programs position responsible for coordinating and facilitating the circle events, despite its inability to generate revenue. In speaking about NGM's community circle events he said, "there's

a lot of warm fuzzies, but there's $0 generated and warm fuzzies[20] won't keep our operations going…". Yet the relationships Jonathon built in his work with youth on the ROPE and the relationships Alex cultivated in her facilitation of the circle events are arguably some of the most beneficial activities in terms of building a collective movement for social action. Next Gen Men currently provided a space to develop community and mobilise people and are therefore well placed to provide the scaffolding for this type of community activism to continue, but this will be dependent on their will and the demand to continue to fund such collective work.

The way that neoliberal ideology permeates work with men and masculinities has implications for gender justice. Operating under neoliberalism offers both promise for innovation and risk of perpetuating inequalities. The tendency to create cultures of competition is strong, so too is the tendency to depoliticise "critical" conversations and speak of personal problems as if they were detached from the systems which created them. Framing the solution for gender-based violence as grounded in changing individual behaviours, norms, beliefs, ethics, and values will only get us so far. As NGM continue to work with individuals to build skills and have conversations, it will be vital to reflect on the substance of the conversations they orchestrate and the purpose of the personal skills they seek to cultivate and how they contribute to ensuring justice and equality for all. To resist being wholeheartedly consumed by neoliberalism, NGM must constantly reflect on their dual role as both a cog in the machine and a wrench in the works.

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[20] Warm Fuzzies is a colloquialism to describe pleasant feelings and comfort.

Afterword: Where to from here

The practitioner in me could not resist providing some concrete steps for moving this work forward. As such, in this additional section I reiterate important ideas which other scholars and practitioners have shared which I feel require a re-centering in the current movement to engage men and boys in gender equality.

1. The engaging men and boys field frequently speaks of 'men' as a universal category which ignores the reality of men's complex positions in social hierarchies. In this sense 'men' are viewed as "all the same" or one-dimensional, thus failing to highlight how there are in-group differences and inequalities among men (Flood & Greig, 2020). To avoid intensifying inequalities, **we must acknowledge how men and boys' experiences vary and are shaped by political systems, the focus should not be on their "intersectional identities"** but **rather on how the world's systems** serve to **advantage and disadvantage individuals** based on how society has classified them.

2. Change to patriarchal systems requires more than simply men and boys "strengthening their emotional muscles". I concur with Grieg (2009) that we must support men and boys to understand "how their masculinities are being mobilised in the service of hegemony" As Keddie et al (2022, p. 160) remind us, "it is imperative that gender transformative work with boys and men recognizes how dimensions of economic, cultural and political injustice impact on them". Therefore, I suggest that **consciousness raising needs to get political (again).** In addition to helping people to articulate the personal pressures they feel, **we must also help them to make the connection between the construction of gender and how it is necessary for the functioning of the economy or other political projects**.

3. **Mobilise people into building a movement**. We must move towards encouraging people to consider how they can build community mindedness, collaboration and collectivist thinking. Part of this involves increasing public consciousness about the detrimental effects of neoliberalism and offer alternative, viable forms of political and economic governance. We must begin

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to imagine new systems which are based on fairness and equality, cf. *Free and Equal* (Chandler, 2023) and *The Four Pivots* (Ginwright, 2022).

4. If a focus on identity is seen as a productive "way in" to discussing gender, we must consider ways that we can **work with this identity focus** while encouraging individuals to think about themselves as both an individual and as part of a collective group. Using an identity angle may be productive if we can use it **to encourage people to reflect on how we must work together rather than individually**

5. **Work with capitalism while equally trying to resist its most exploitative forms**. There are potential advantages of innovation and the commodification of expertise that come from neoliberal capitalism. However, we must recognise that commodification is not the only viable solution and that there are some things which cannot or should not become commodified.

6. **There needs to be more flexible funding which allows for innovation.** When funders have a mindset of only funding the "disadvantaged", they not only perpetuate disempowering narratives, but they also miss out on opportunities to do work with the most powerful groups. External funding also enables enterprises to create initiatives which do not generate a profit, but which are equally important strategies.

7. **More independent research must be done**. Whilst there have been some evaluation reports produced regarding men and masculinity initiatives and programming, often these reports have been funded by national government or supra-government agencies such as the United Nations and therefore are limited in their ability to provide a critical analysis that situates this work into a broader political context. Often the researchers who are contracted are caught in a difficult power dynamic. Given there is already limited government support for this type of work, researchers are hesitant to provide critical evaluations of current approaches for fear that they may receive less funding or endorsement. Therefore, researchers are equally as implicated in the power relations of governments. Given this, **universities and research institutes need to fund**

independent research on this topic. Researchers also need to share "failures" so that new approaches can ensue.

8. We must address internal and external hegemony. We need to find out how we can **change the sociological arrangement of masculinity,** so men and boys don't feel this "pressure to prove". Work that aims to address the pressure men and boys feel amongst themselves to prove their masculinity to each other (internal hegemony) must occur alongside work which aims to change gender relations overall. **These activities should not be done in isolation** as they are inherently linked. We need to **change how men view women, girls, non-binary people and "the feminine".** We must work towards not only building respect between boys but also building respect between men and women, boys and girls and non-binary people.

9. **We need to change the structures of our society to enable better relationships** to be possible amongst us all. We need to **ensure** that families are better connected, communities are better connected and **that governments invest in the policies and programs which will enable this.**

10. Instead of focusing on people's individual behaviours and beliefs, we should spend more time exposing the patriarchal conditions which dictate how societies function. Ultimately work done in the name of gender justice must go beyond instilling ideas of self-responsibility. We need to **consider how we can create alternative circumstances or situations** (Gutmann, 2014) **rather than** trying to create **individual "alternative" attitudes and beliefs.**

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