

## Young Men Initiative

This pilot program developed by CARE Northwest Balkans empowers young men to challenge their prevailing attitudes and behaviors about gender and violence. This programmatic response to the findings of a Participatory Learning and Action Research project on masculinities and violence, carried out by CARE NW Balkans and ICRW in 2007, aims to transform problematic gender and violence norms in this post-conflict setting to create the next generation of men.

### Rationale

The Yugoslavian Wars of 1991–2001 were based on national and ethnic tensions that resulted in numerous cases of gender-based violence, including mass rapes of women and sexual abuse against men and boys in prison camps. Currently, an emerging culture of violence is visible in the Western Balkans and the consequences of violence within the family and the community severely affects the development and health of young men and young women. The consequence of violence in the family and in the community can severely affect the development and health of young men and young women.

Researchers and youth programmers around the world have started to recognize the importance of working with young men to cultivate gender-equitable attitudes and reduce violence. Yet youth service agencies in post-conflict countries in the Balkans did not yet address how constructs of masculinity and violence operate in young men's lives.

This program at CARE NW Balkans is essential to better understand pressures of masculinity and structural influences of violence. By working with these young men to discuss these issues, they can begin to understand these pressures and start constructing a healthier masculine image for their peers and community. CARE NW Balkans staff feel breaking down these societal pressures for men's violent behavior can begin to create more equitable and healthy relationships among youth.



**Q & A with John Crownover**  
**Social Development**  
**Program Advisor**  
**CARE NW Balkans**  
**[jcrownover@carenw.org](mailto:jcrownover@carenw.org)**



*Why did you choose to focus a program on young men and not young women?*

We fully recognize the importance of our work with girls and women, but we also recognized the vulnerabilities that young men had because of certain societal norms for males. We knew that if we wanted to have social change in the Balkans around gender equality, we could not continue excluding men and boys.

*What objectives did you have for the program? How did you choose these objectives?*

When people in the Balkans talk about men and gender equality, it is often negative. We wanted to change this, men are not obstacles for gender equality, but they can be strong allies and engaged partners.

*What challenges have you faced that are unique to this project?*

Our challenges have come from the fact that we are trying to address taboo subjects. Thus far, the society here has not tried to address the role of men and gender and what it is that society promotes when it come to young men.

*What do you think the biggest successes are from this project?*

Now, young men here are talking about gender equality and violence, and that is a huge success. Young men are engaged in this issues as if they were just waiting for someone to ask them what they thought. It has been really great to watch!

## Strategies

The program strategized that by participating in gender reflective activities, young men can reduce their risky sexual and violent behaviors. The intervention design was informed by previous impact evaluation studies of a similar approach in both Brazil and India that showed changes in attitudes and self-reported behaviors related to gender norms, condom use and use of violence against female partners (*see box at right for specific approaches*).

## Results

For the program evaluation, the International Center for the Research on Women (ICRW) has been working with CARE and its partners on the research, monitoring and evaluation component of the program. Measuring impact of the program is important for working on policy focused on young men and scaling up of the Young Men Initiative. (In January 2011, this project received additional years of funding to scale up its efforts).

A baseline survey with 2,567 young men in February and March 2009 and a post-intervention follow-up survey with 2,339 young men was implemented in May and June of 2010. The YMI evaluation also included qualitative insights and observations collected from several young men, as well as from other partners and stakeholders involved in YMI.

The quantitative data show positive gender attitude changes over the time period of the study in 6 of the 9 sites (including both experimental and control groups). Considering that this intervention took place over the course of almost two years in these young men's important developmental years, it is difficult to separate the effects of YMI and the effects of maturation. However, promising results of this project go beyond just numbers. This project was able to engage other regional agencies working with youth around a common goal and form new partnerships in CARE NW Balkan's fight for gender equality. In addition, Tomislav Ivkošić, a freshman in high school from Croatia, was able to comment on alternatives to violence, a change that was commonly mentioned by the youth:

*"I liked workshops about violence the most. I realized I do not have to fight when things become tough; I can simply leave."*

*The Young Men Initiative has three main approaches:*

**'Be a Man' Campaign:** This lifestyle social marketing campaign was developed in close collaboration with young men from all project countries. Several materials were developed, including posters, t-shirts and brochures. Activities, such as including quizzes, music contests, graffiti art and street fairs, were open to all young men and women in the schools. This component attempted to change the social norms toward more positive characterization of what it means to be a man because supportive social norms is one crucial element to behavior change in youth.

**Group Educational Workshops:** Workshop sessions addressed multiple topics, such as male norms, expressing emotions, negotiating skills, decision-making, anger management, role-models, homosexuality, peer violence and violence against women. Sessions included interactive approaches that provoked dialogue and reflection by participants which has been shown to be an effective strategy to change individual attitudes around gender norms.

**Regional Young Men Forum:** This forum was the first of its kind in the region, bringing together youth from four countries that have recently been in conflict. The forum is a vehicle to give young men a voice in the project, promote them as role models and peer educators, and have them contribute to the lifestyle campaign development. Consulting young men on this project gives them a sense of ownership which further engages them in transforming their community's male norms.



## Significance:

The Young Men Initiative demonstrates that young males can be engaged and motivated to reconstruct gender norms in their society. While work with young girls and women is extremely important for women's empowerment, gender roles are defined by males *and* females. Working with males, especially at a young age, is a powerful strategy to help redefine a society's gender norms in favor of gender equality.