

P1.5. Experiences and Constructions of Violence and Masculinity among Young Men in Post-Conflict Countries in the Balkans: Results from Youth-Led Participatory Learning and Action Research - **Aparna Jain**, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW); **Sarah Degnan Kambou**, ICRW; **John Crownover**, CARE International NW Balkans; **Anne Eckman**, Consultant
E-mail: ajain@icrw.org

Background/Significance: 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 NW Balkans and the consequences of violence within the family and the community severely affects the development and health of young men and young women. Youth is a critical moment when young people develop and rehearse gender equitable attitudes and related violent behaviors. Researchers and youth programmers have recognized the importance of working with young men to cultivate gender-equitable attitudes and reduce violence. Yet youth service agencies (YSA) in post-conflict countries in the Balkans do not have context-specific information about how constructs of masculinity and violence operate in young men's lives. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and CARE worked with male youth, youth facilitators and YSA to implement participatory learning and action (PLA) research. The PLA was conducted with young men to deconstruct masculinity in their cultures and determine how gender norms and male socialization lead to inequitable attitudes and behaviors toward women and girls.

Main Question/Hypothesis: The PLA sought to answer: *How do current social constructs and experiences of masculinity for young men in the NW Balkans relate to young men's violent use of power? What influences young men's decisions not to use violence? And what opportunities exist to support young men's more gender-equitable constructions of masculinity, especially alternatives to the violent use of power?* The project hypothesizes that by understanding constructs of masculinity and violence, YSA can better address personal attitudes about gender equity and a broader definition of sexuality for young men to foster changes in gender norms that contribute to violent behaviors.

Methodology: In March – April 2007, a 5-day qualitative assessment was conducted using PLA methodologies in five sites in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia. Research teams consisted of senior YSA representatives, youth facilitators, local researchers and team leaders. A total of 63 young men participated in the PLA and fourteen participants also completed in-depth interviews (IDIs). Daily notes and visual outputs from PLA exercises, plus transcripts from IDIs, were analyzed to identify emergent themes for each research question. Where possible, the analysis situates these constructions of young men's masculinity within ongoing gendered discourses of conflict and reconstruction in the Balkans.

Findings: The PLA research and IDIs highlight several important contexts where young men negotiate constructions of masculinity and the violent use of power. One context young men identified is widespread fighting and bullying among their male peers that begins in primary school where violence is perceived as mandatory. Although many young men did not want to engage in such violence they reported seeing few alternatives to using physical violence. Moreover, young men reported that most fathers expect and exhort their sons to use violence in fights. However, a few young men who had fathers or older brothers or friends who opposed violence found them to be powerful resources. Other young men identified the following successful strategies in avoiding the use of violence: (1) their own internal reserves like an ability to withstand being marginalized and the value in individual pursuits such as reading or music; (2) finding other peers who rejected the use of violence; and (3) becoming involved in sport teams where coaches promoted cooperation and teamwork.

Another context where young men negotiate masculinity and violence is their attitudes about intimate relations and sexuality. A number of young men expressed their desire to enact more gender-equitable attitudes in their intimate relations with young women. Young men actively opposed physical and sexual violence against women and intimate partners and few identified any situation in which they felt violence against a woman was justified. Most young men expressed that only a "weak" man would hit a woman or

child. Young men attributed the influence of their female family members to their supportive attitudes toward emotional intimacy and gender equity.

These findings suggest that some young men in post-conflict countries in the Balkans are reshaping a traditional notion of masculinity that rejects violent use of force and supports more gender-equitable attitudes in relationships with women. The findings also indicate entry points for interventions to support alternatives to violence, such as: violence prevention programs with boys and young men; recognition of young men's positive experiences of emotional intimacy and interdependence with female family members; and availability of spaces (such as PLA) for young men to engage in ongoing critical self- and group-reflection about masculinities.

Knowledge Contribution: This PLA research contributes to an emerging body of data that may help identify global as well as context-specific similarities and differences in how to support young men in enacting gender-equitable relations.