The Continuum of Harm: What Men Can Do to End Men's Violence Against Women (Part I)

Learning Objectives
- To identify everyday attitudes and behaviors that support the dominant story of masculinity and contribute to men's violence against women
- To recognize everyday opportunities to challenge the dominant story of masculinity and prevent men's violence against women

Session Outline
“The Continuum of Harm: What Men Can Do to End Men’s Violence Against Women (Part I)”
(Approx. 90 minutes or two 45 minute sessions)

Part I. Continuum of Harm Exercise
- The River of Rape Culture
- Continuum of Harm Exercise
- Debriefing the Continuum

*What You’ll Need*
- Continuum of Harm cards, some of which represent role play scenarios from Session 4 and behaviors/attitudes from the Wheel of Power and Control
- Tape
- Flipchart and markers

Session Breakdown

Part I. Continuum of Harm Exercise

The River of Rape Culture
What follows is a script for the Continuum of Harm Exercise, and excerpts for the trainers.

“We often find it helpful to approach the daunting task of rape prevention through the use of an imaginary scenario. Picture yourself standing on the banks of a rushing river. It’s a beautiful summer day. The sun’s shining. There’s a soft cool breeze blowing. You’re relaxed, maybe daydreaming or reading a book. All of a sudden, you look up and notice a person floating down the river caught up in the current. They are clearly in distress, bobbing up and down and gasping for breath.”

“What do you do?” (allow time for the audience to respond)

“It’s likely that all of us in such a situation would look for some way to help the person. Maybe jump in if you’re a good swimmer. Or find a branch that the person can grab. OK, so let’s assume that you’re lucky enough to find some way of rescuing him/her. You get the person to safety. Your adrenaline is pumping. But then, no sooner than you lay the person on the river bank, you look up and there’s two people coming downstream, equally distressed, also drowning.”
"Now what?" (allow time for the audience to respond)

"OK, maybe you go back in. Maybe you get help. In either case, you try to save them again. Let’s again assume that by some miracle you manage to rescue these two other people as well. Now you’re exhausted, and the adrenaline is wearing off. You’re slumped over, hands on your knees and all of a sudden, you look out of the corner of your eye at the river and here comes, not one, but a group of 100 drowning people all gasping for breath."

"What can you possibly do now?" (allow time for the audience to respond)

"It certainly seems unlikely that you could save each and every one of those drowning individuals. So instead, we suggest that you go upstream and figure out where all these people in distress are coming from. Or as one young man in a workshop once said, ‘You have to wonder what’s up with that river.’"

*A NOTE FOR THE TRAINER:

The river metaphor is an imaginative and engaging way to lead the workshop participants to ask, “What is the root source of sexual violence?” Because this metaphor asks audience members to imagine themselves as the lead character in the story, it’s useful to use details that are familiar to their everyday lives. If you’re speaking to high school and college students, for instance, you might begin by asking them to imagine they’ve just gone through a round of difficult exams and are ready for some down time, so they’re going to a place they know along a nearby river. When you’re describing the person in distress, it’s a good idea to use your voice emphatically and gesture wildly to convey the drama of the situation. When you ask the audience, “What do you do?” they might think that you’re speaking rhetorically, but assure them you really want to know what they would do. Most people say they would jump in and try to rescue the person.

"It works the same with the epidemic of sexual violence. If we think of the people in the river as having been sexually assaulted, then we’re talking numbers much greater than 100. As I’ve already said, more than a million women and girls and hundreds of thousands of men and boys are sexually assaulted every year. Let’s be clear, helping survivors heal after the fact, after we have pulled them out of the river, is essential. There are rape crisis centers all over the country devoted to doing just that. But if we’re going to stop sexual violence, we also have to examine its origins. Preventing rape, stopping it before it even starts, requires us to go to the source, to go upstream and take a close look at the culture in which rape exists."

*A NOTE FOR THE TRAINER

The point in changing the number of drowning people from a few to a hundred is to move from manageable numbers to numbers that seem completely overwhelming. This change encourages people to seek a different solution to the problem—one that eventually moves us in the direction of understanding the source of sexual violence. While the final point of the river metaphor is a very serious one, the parts leading up to it have an element of absurdity—the more people in the river, the more the audience members will come up with inventive ways of saving them. When two people are in the river, sometimes an audience member will suggest asking the person they just saved to jump in and help. After asking, "What can you possibly do now that a hundred people are drowning?" we have had audiences suggest using a cell phone to call for help, bringing in helicopters, and relying on the Coast Guard. Sometimes audience members will throw up their hands and say, "I'd just go home." In that case, acknowledge that feeling helpless is understandable given the situation, but continue asking for other possible responses. Eventually, someone may suggest a need to find out why all these people are in the river and drowning.

CONTINUUM OF HARM EXERCISE
“What we’re going to do now is take you through an exercise that will help us all walk upstream and begin to examine the cultural origins of sexual violence, what we often refer to as rape culture. The exercise is called the Continuum of Harm to Women. What we’re going to do is show you a series of cards. On each card is a behavior, belief, assumption, or attitude. What we want you to do is to place each card somewhere along a continuum from ‘Most Harmful to Women’ to ‘Least Harmful to Women.’ And if there are some cards which you feel cause no harm at all, we’ll place them to the side under the heading ‘Not at All Harmful.’ We could make the continuum ‘Harm to Men,’ but we focus on women because they are sexually assaulted in much higher numbers. Before we begin, I want to emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers here. We expect that you will disagree about where the cards should go and we may end up having to split the difference in your opinions in order to place each card. More importantly, we want to hear what you think and give you a chance to share your views with each other.”

*A NOTE FOR THE TRAINER*

The continuum cards are placed along a wall, with “Most Harmful to Women” to your right and “Least Harmful to Women” at your left. The “Not at All Harmful” card should be placed close to the “Least Harmful” card but far enough away to distinguish it as a separate category. If you’re not able to check out the room you’ll be presenting in beforehand, it’s important to find out whether there will be a wall you can use for the continuum. If not, be creative. For example, line up folding chairs, use the edge of a stage, or locate a moveable blackboard.

The exercise offers great flexibility in its approach to rape culture since you can use the cards to cover a broad range of topics, or you can make up cards that focus on a particular aspect of rape culture—language, sexual communication, or pop culture, for instance. Depending on the audience, you might consider comparing the continuum of harm to women to continuums of harm to people of color or to gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people.

Because the continuum is so easy for both presenter and audience to get caught up in, it is especially important to keep an eye on time. This exercise takes at least 30 to 40 minutes, and preferably 50 to 60. If your time is limited, limit the number of responses to a card (e.g., no more than four or five) and/or the number of cards you use (but make sure to use no fewer than seven). Keep in mind that two of the cards used should always be “Stranger Rape” and “Acquaintance Rape,” since they are crucial to explaining the continuum. However, if time is short, using one card, “Rape,” also works.

When preparing for the presentation, arrange all of the continuum cards in the order you want to present them. We find it useful to vary the cards in terms of severity of harm. We frequently start with a card that most of the audience will find fairly harmful, like “Blaming a woman/girl for being raped because she wore revealing clothes” and then move to one that is likely to stir up more debate, like “Referring to one’s girlfriend as ‘my bitch.’” Here’s a sample of the order in which we typically present the cards:

“Blaming a woman/girl for being raped because she wore revealing clothes”
“Referring to one’s girlfriend as ‘my bitch’”
“Using alcohol or drugs to ‘loosen a girl up’”
“Honking or whistling at a woman/girl walking down the street”
“Believing that when a woman/girl says no to sex, you just have to push a little harder”
“Telling a man/boy that he throws like a girl”
“Acquaintance rape”
“Stranger rape”
“Believing that a woman’s place is in the home with the kids”
“Watching a pornographic movie”

By no means are the cards limited to those suggested above. We encourage you to come up with some of your own.

First and foremost, the continuum exercise engages audience members in presenting their viewpoints about rape culture. The wording on the cards is intentionally vague to allow the audience to explore many of the complex issues presented and clarify their views of the different situations that might apply to a single card. Audience members frequently will claim, for in-
stance, that being honked at by a friend during the day is far less harmful than being honked at by a group of strangers at night.

One challenge for a speaker during this exercise is managing the urge to argue with audience members. Because this work means so much to those of us who do it, it can be tempting to persuade participants to see how an attitude represented on a card is harmful to women. The audience might decide, for example, to place “Telling a man/boy that he throws like a girl” in the “Not at All Harmful” category, and you might disagree. Speakers should accept people’s opinions and avoid arguing. Your job is to facilitate discussion and encourage the audience to feel ownership of the continuum they create. Remember, your opportunity to share your perspective will come when you debrief the exercise.

Begin the exercise by asking participants where they would place a card on the continuum and why they would place it there. Once they respond, use reflective listening—repeating to a participant what you heard him or her say—while facilitating discussion. Reflective listening indicates to an audience member that you are paying attention and offers the audience a second chance to take in what was said. Once audience members spend a little time talking about where to place a card and why, you can use two strategies to further generate discussion: stories and questions. Stories are part of our everyday lives and can have considerable impact on us. They make a subject matter real by presenting us with real people tangled in the complexities of the topics we are discussing. Stories also offer us opportunities to examine how social forces can shape individual actions. Telling stories related to the cards often leads audience members to share their own stories. They also lead to the second strategy: questions. Asking questions about a story you’ve told moves the audience from the position of listener to the position of analyst. What is the significance of the story? What does the story mean? What messages are conveyed through the story? All these questions engage the audience. But questions should not be limited to stories. They should also be used independent of stories as a method of generating discussion. Below are some examples of how stories and questions might be used in relation to particular cards.

"Blaming a woman/girl for being raped because she wore revealing clothes"

Often audiences quickly place this card very close to the “most harmful” end of the continuum without much discussion. In order to encourage more thought and discussion, you might ask what we call women who dress in revealing clothes. Someone will quickly respond with words like “slut,” “freak,” and “ho.” You might then ask why this is so, and whether the same rules apply to males.

Depending on the make-up of the audience, a race parallel might be a valuable analogy. For example, ask if it is fair for the police to harass a young black man driving a nice car, or dressed in baggy pants, Nikes, and wearing a beeper. These examples relate to racial profiling, which is based—like the “Blaming” card—on assumptions about appearance.

"Using alcohol or drugs to ‘loosen a girl up.’"

Audiences tend to agree that drugs—“roofies,” GHB, and other date rape drugs—in this situation are unacceptable, so most of the conversation will be about alcohol. It is important to make clear that consent is an especially significant issue when alcohol is involved.

You are likely to meet with some defensiveness in relation to drinking and sex. Someone is almost certain to ask, “What if we’re both drunk?” While this is a reasonable question, it may also indicate the questioner’s fear of being falsely accused or shame about his or her past behavior. One way to respond is to say that the man is more likely to be charged and explain that this is one of the unfortunate costs to men living in a rape culture where males perpetrate the overwhelming majority of sexual assaults. You might also stress that, from a prevention perspective, something has already gone wrong if you’re asking, “What if we’re both drunk?” We encourage people to have sex when both are capable of consenting so that the question of “Who
raped whom?” does not even need to be asked.

Another question that is likely to come up is whether the “girl” is aware that she is consuming the alcohol or drugs. Many people argue that it makes a difference whether someone drugs a person without their knowledge or simply encourages them to drink or get high. The card is intentionally ambiguous to allow the audience to discuss both options and bring these issues into the open.

Here are some valuable statistics to keep in mind when discussing this card: 66 percent of young people believe that alcohol consumption increases the likelihood that sex will occur. In a study done of sexual assaults on college campuses, 75 percent of the men and 55 percent of the women had been drinking (Schwartz & Dekeserdy).

"Referring to one’s girlfriend as ‘my bitch.’"

Young people often laugh when this card is read out loud because they rarely hear such language used by authority figures/presenters. Some will think “my bitch” is harmful because it implies possession and equates a woman with a female dog. Don’t limit discussion of the card to the phrase “my bitch”; feel free to discuss the use of “bitch” by itself. You might ask for a show of hands from people who have used the word or heard it used in the last month. Virtually everyone will raise their hand.

Some audience members are likely to think “bitch” is not at all harmful because language doesn’t harm anyone or because the word “bitch” is so commonly used that it has lost its ability to demean. As follow-up, you might ask questions about racist language (e.g., “nigger”) and whether it is harmful to people of color.

Other audience members might say that saying “my bitch” wouldn’t harm a woman as long as she didn’t hear it. A statement like this lends itself to talking about different kinds of harm. Sometimes audiences will conceptualize harm as only occurring to an individual; you can complicate this by asking whether referring to one’s girlfriend as “my bitch” perpetuates harm not only to individual females but also to women as a group.

Someone will probably bring up stereotyping.

Most audiences will make distinctions about the contexts in which “bitch” is used. Ask them questions about why the language might be more harmful in one context and less (or not at all) in another. Usually the answer is connected to power relations between groups of people. Some women, for example, are much more offended if men call them a bitch than if their female friends do. In relation to context, you might also ask if it makes any difference whether a man calls a woman “my bitch” among a group of males with no women present.

"Telling a man/boy that he throws like a girl"

Audiences tend to quickly place this card in the “Not at All Harmful” category. They argue that men generally do throw better than girls and so the card is simply stating a biological fact, OR they lose sight of whether it’s harmful to women and focus on that statement’s harm to men.

If they focus on what they consider biological reality, you might point out that women softball pitchers throw underhand at speeds equal to overhand male pitchers. You also might ask what boys look like when they are first learning to throw; someone will probably say, “They look like girls.” This provides an opportunity to discuss how males traditionally have had much more opportunity to practice at sports than females and receive much more social support and praise for their athleticism. So clearly the way men are socialized plays an important role in the development of their athletic abilities.

Another response to the biological argument is to link the card with racial issues. Some people argue, for instance, that African Americans don’t score as highly on the SAT because of innate biological inferiority. Does the audience agree with this statement? If not, what might account for test score differences between racial groups?
Some men in the audience might argue that "telling a boy he throws like a girl" is positive because it motivates men to work even harder at a sport. You might respond by asking why it drives males to work even harder; most male audience members will eventually say because they don’t want to be like a girl. You can then ask what message the card sends out about women.

We usually supplement this card with various sports-related stories. One from The Washington Post is about a male high school basketball team in Wisconsin. The male coach made the players perform a rebound drill at the end of practice, and forced the last player to get a rebound to wear women’s panties outside his uniform during the team’s next practice.

Over time, you will develop your own questions and stories related to the cards. Before you debrief the continuum, hold up for the audience any cards that haven’t been discussed. Place them close by, but not within the continuum, so they can be seen but won’t disrupt the continuum as it stands.

"Stranger Rape’ and ‘Acquaintance Rape’"

Although most or all audience members will agree that rape is wrong and is harmful to women, the goal of these cards is to note the difference between these two forms of rape, which is why we always use both cards in this exercise. Most men think of rape as stranger rape, even though nearly 85 percent are in fact acquaintance rapes, which includes sexual assaults committed by a spouse, boyfriend, friend, classmate, co-worker, or anyone who is known to the survivor.

The key difference is that survivors of acquaintance rape often feel more betrayal, guilt, and shame than survivors of stranger rape because the rape was committed by someone they knew and, often, trusted. In addition to the betrayal of trust, the survivor often thinks she should have known better than to trust that person, and in many cases she is blamed for the assault by others; "she shouldn’t have gone to his apartment" or "she shouldn’t have been hanging out with him." In addition, acquaintance rapes are reported more rarely than stranger rapes, and the survivor often continues to see the perpetrator on a regular basis, especially if he is a classmate or co-worker, and can be alienated from mutual friends or colleagues.

As a result, participants often place acquaintance rape a little further along the continuum toward "Most Harmful to Women" than stranger rape. The goal of the discussion is to help members think about the different types of sexual assault that occur, the kinds of sexual assault their friends or partners who are survivors are most likely to experience, and the effect an assault of that kind is most likely to have.

DEBRIEFING THE CONTINUUM

"Now that we’ve discussed some of these cards, I want to return to where we started this exercise: the river. Let’s say we go upstream and, when we get there, we find a man shoving people in the river, one after another. I say ‘man’ because, as I mentioned earlier, when a rape is committed, it’s almost always by a male. What do you imagine this man thinks of the people he’s throwing in the water? What’s his view of them?"

(Give the audience time to respond.)

"He thinks that they’re nothing, they’re inferior, that they’re less than him. It is much easier to commit violence against people when we see them as less than fully human. For example, it is common during wartime to portray the enemy as an animal in order to make it easier for soldiers to kill them. Walt Disney, in fact, became famous drawing German soldiers with pig faces during World War II. Exposing allied soldiers to that kind of propaganda reduced their resistance to committing violence. Racist violence and gay bashing rely on a similar form of dehumanization, and it’s the same with sexual violence. Rape depends upon attitudes or assumptions or language or actions that dehumanize women. We believe that every single card on this continuum chips away at women’s full humanity. Calling a woman a "bitch" is literally referring to her as a female dog—an animal. Blaming a woman for being raped because she wore revealing clothes essentially steals a woman’s freedom to dress as she pleases without being in danger, not to mention the silencing effect such a belief has on survivors themselves. Watching a porn movie involves seeing women as one-dimensional sex objects on display to get men off.
Even using 'he’ in a paper to refer to men and women does damage. A former male workshop participant, in fact, said that using 'he' is one of the most harmful things you can do because it makes women and girls invisible. It’s the ultimate insult because it sends the message, not that women are simply inferior, but that they don’t even exist.”

"In isolation, each of these attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs may not be extremely harmful, but taken all together, they make up our rape culture. Together, they create an environment in which men are more likely to rape. Another way to think about it is that each attitude or behavior on a card is a metal bar. If 'Telling a man/boy that he throws like a girl’ is one bar in front of you, it’s not such a big deal. You can walk around it. But if the bars start appearing all around you, pretty soon you’re in a cage. This is the situation that women face every day their freedom limited, their status diminished, and their safety compromised. It is this cage that we must dismantle, because it makes women more likely targets of sexual violence. Without this cage, there could be no sexual assault.”

"Stopping rape, therefore, does not mean waiting until you encounter a rape in progress to intervene. If that’s what you wait for, you will likely never act. What we must do to prevent sexual violence is pull out its roots by standing up and speaking out against all the attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors that we witness every day that dehumanize women and support rape. In the same way that all of these cards together create an environment in which rape is more likely, all of you speaking out together can create an environment in which rape is less likely. Only then will we start to make our community and our world safer.”

**A NOTE FOR THE TRAINER**

Debriefing the continuum is perhaps the most important part of “Stopping Rape Before It Starts.” It’s the time when the source of sexual violence is revealed, when an approach to rape prevention involving men and women falls into place. Before you begin debriefing, you might ask the audience if anyone can explain the purpose behind the continuum. It’s not unusual for some to recognize what the cards have in common: the potential to dehumanize women and make it easier to commit violence against them. Explain how each of the cards confine and dehumanize women (or if time is running short, focus on three or four cards), and connect them with other forms of dehumanization—war propaganda, for example, or racist attitudes and assumptions.