Unboxing masculinity(ies).
A contrast to Teen Dating Violence starting from the pedagogical questioning of hegemonic masculinities
Unboxing masculinity(ies).
Un contrasto alla Teen Dating Violence a partire dalla messa in discussione pedagogica delle mascolinità egemoniche

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ABSTRACT

The English expression Teen Dating Violence (TDV) refers to an aggressive behaviour that develops among male* and female* teenagers during their first love affairs. Starting from some data and features of the phenomenon, this paper aims to provide a framework for the problem of gender-based violence paying specific attention to male* adolescents, with the purpose of deconstructing the main toxic stereotypes concerning their relationships with peers. In this regard, the theoretical and operational methodology used is the so-called "Men box", which allows to develop a critical and pedagogical evaluation and to identify effective educational strategies to cope with the hegemonic masculinities, through an experiential approach.

KEYWORDS
Gender-based violence, plural and hegemonic masculinities, Man box, toxic stereotypes, Teen Dating Violence.
Violenza di genere, maschilità plurali ed egemoniche, man box, stereotipi tossici, Teen Dating Violence.

L'espressione inglese Teen Dating Violence (TDV) indica un comportamento di tipo aggressivo che s'instaura tra gli e le adolescenti durante le loro prime relazioni sentimentali. A partire da alcuni dati e caratteristiche del fenomeno, il contributo intende offrire un inquadramento del problema della violenza di genere prestando una peculiare focalizzazione sugli adolescenti maschi, con l'obiettivo di decostruire i principali stereotipi tossici che caratterizzano la loro relazione con le coetanee. A tal riguardo, si propone una metodologia teorico-operativa denominata Men box che, mediante un approccio di tipo esperienziale, permette di sviluppare un'analisi critico-pedagogica e di individuare delle strategie educative per far fronte al modello delle maschilità egemoniche.

*   To implement gender-equitable language, this report uses the asterisk* for boys*, girls*, men*, women*, inter*, non-binary persons* or trans*. This spelling is used to refer to the social construction of gender and gender identities. This means that not all persons who are perceived as boys*, girls*, men*, women*, inter*, non-binary persons* or trans* also identify as such. The asterisk shows the openness of gender identities and that they are never finished processes. This notation does not apply to fixed terms, compound words, quotations or when the context requires it.

1. Teen Dating Violence: for a "teenification" of gender-based violence

The phenomenon of gender-based violence can be defined as a real "trickle of killings of women* by husbands, cohabitants, boyfriends, lovers, partners, and ex-partners, but also by fathers and brothers" (Ulivieri, 2013, p. 169). The WHO report (2013) shows that globally one in four women* have been victims of physical and sexual abuse, by partners, as early as age 15. This is a very serious public health problem that according to the European Union affects society as a whole. Furthermore, recent research by Save the Children (2024) on onlife[1] violence in intimate relationships among Italian teenagers shows that 30% of teenagers consider jealousy as a sign of love. The issue of violence against women* is a social scourge in various parts of the world and seems unwilling to stop despite numerous prevention campaigns and subsequent intervention strategies.

Gender-based violence is generally associated with the adult world, in the dynamics of couple relationships, and it is often used as a synonym for the expression of domestic violence. Moreover, violence does not pertain exclusively to the vexatious-coercive forms exercised by men* on women*, but also to those of women* on men* (albeit in smaller percentages and in different ways), of heterosexual men* on other men* who deviate from traditional models of masculinity due to their sexual orientation and gender identity, and among LGBTQIA+ couples (Beltramini, 2020, p. 18). There is a common thread between violence toward women*, homophobia and genderism that has its origins in the social and cultural pattern of heterosexism and heteronormativity.

The term Teen Dating Violence refers to: "a pattern of repeated actual or threatened acts that physically, sexually, or verbally abuse a member of an unmarried heterosexual or homosexual couple in which one or both partners is between thirteen and twenty years old" (Pensak, 2015, p. 499).

It is evident that such phenomenon needs specific attention from the scientific world and, above all, from the field of pedagogical-scientific research. The causes of this "absence of the phenomenon" in the analysis concerning gender-based violence lie in the tendency to erroneously associate all discriminatory forms affecting the world of young people (especially adolescents) with bullying and cyberbullying. Infact, this prejudice contributes to a failure to disclose the scope and consequences from a prevention perspective of violence between couples in adolescence. Furthermore, in most cases, support for victims comes too late, when the next stage of violence has been reached, namely feminicide, which arouses astonishment and disbelief, due to a naïve imagery in the representation of adolescent couple problems, as if they were issues of little importance. Beltramini identifies six aspects concerning gender-based violence in adolescence:

– adolescence as a phase of the life cycle in which there is a strong drive for the need for new relationships;
– the concept of "relationship" in adolescence, which is characterized by loose boundaries with respect to stability and duration;
– the difficulty for girls to move away from an abusive partner (because they are in the same school or the same group of friends);
– the tendency on the part of adults (especially parents) to downplay signs of a toxic relationship;
– a positive response from the victimized partner reinforces in the other the tendency to repeat the event over time;
– violent behaviour in adulthood most likely has its origins in behaviours developed and enacted in adolescence (2020, p. 50).

The phenomenon of Teen Dating Violence is the result of a cultural and social model characterised by toxic relationship dynamics in which there is an asymmetry of power in the couple. Although the number of cases of Teen Dating Violence in LGBTQIA+ couples has increased in recent years, and albeit with due differences, some elements such as possession and control, are the result of the introjection of a hegemonic model of masculinity that refer to the heterosexual relationship system. For this reason, the following paragraphs will problematise the hegemonic masculinity embodied mainly by heterosexual boys*, but which may also concern other identity subjectivities.

2. Hegemonic masculinities as an interpretive system of male violence in adolescence

Raewyn Connell have had the merit of framing the problem of masculinity as a gender issue and part of the problem of gender violence. According to the scholar, our society is built on a pyramid system with a few (white, heterosexual) men* at the top who hold the "patriarchal dividend," or the set of economic, social and political privileges

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1 Onlife is a term coined by Luciano Floridi (2009) to express the lived experience of 'ever increasing' pervasiveness of information and communication technologies. Onlife concerns the transformation that our online and offline experiences and lives are inextricably interwoven.

derived from hegemonic male positioning (2005). The lower level of the pyramid is covered by the complicit masculinities, referring to those who do not hold the privileges of the patriarchal dividend, but who enjoy some privileges from their complicity with hegemonic males. Going lower and lower, there are subordinated masculinities (immigrant or with migrant background men*, GBT men* and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds compared to the normative standard of a given society) and women*.

Such a model has been made increasingly complex and articulated as critical aspects about masculinity as a gender category have been intersected with those of race, sexual orientation, and colonialism, eventually pluralizing and localizing the concept of masculine hegemony. Indeed, the hegemonic system on which masculinity is structured is to be understood as the result of hybridization, whose appropriation of different elements makes it capable of reconfiguring itself and adapting to the specificities of new historical but also social and cultural conjunctures.

While Connell spoke about the privileges of those who hold the advantages of the patriarchal dividend, there are also costs to men that patriarchy renders invisible. Kaufman speaks of a triad of male violence toward women*, that is, a construct composed of three dimensions that delineate the construction of masculinity from a predatory and violent perspective. The first is the "individual reproduction of male dominance", which begins in early childhood and is related to the tension between the child's desires related to his own emotional and sexual pleasures and the heterosexual norm imposed by familial and social expectations. The child acquires and negotiates a certain model based on the one proposed by the family. The second aspect is referred to as the "reinforcement of masculinity" in which it is during adolescence that masculinity takes its definitive form for the individual. The masculine norm has particular nuances and traits that depend on class, nation, race, religion and ethnicity. Adolescence is important because it is the time when the body awakens, when the long-awaited entry into adulthood occurs, and when our culture makes the final socio-educational preparations for adult working life. At this stage, primary and secondary socialization agencies (school, peer group, sports groups) play a key role in socializing the adolescent to a gender role and reinforcing the male dominance embedded during childhood. The third aspect of the triad is that of the "fragility of masculinity", which is represented by the exacerbation of the tension between emotional needs and gender expectations. The adolescent experiences with exasperation the cumbersome role of the hegemonic model to aspire to, sacrificing emotional needs through their repression (Kaufman, 1987).

Kaufman's triad model emphasizes the costs represented by hegemonic masculinity, consisting of a set of norms, codes that leave no room for man's* emotional dimension, through a process that begins in early childhood. The costs of masculinity drive the child, adolescent and adult man* to use violence as the only channel through which to manifest a form of emotionality.

In the following paragraphs, attention will be paid to the norms of masculinity and their role in the creation of homosocial bonds as aspects that reinforce the tension of masculinity and its fragility as a decisive factor in the concurrence of gender-based violence beginning in adolescence.

3. Masculinity norms and homosocial bonds in adolescence

As noted earlier, Kaufman's triad model of masculinity argues that the "reproduction of masculine dominance" begins in early childhood, when at the centre of the development of a subject's gender identity is the tension between his own needs and social expectations. The construction of gender identity is a process that begins before birth and continues throughout life. Today, psycho-pedagogical research agrees that there are stages, in correlation with the cognitive development of girls* and boys*, through which a boy* and a girl* construct their identity as gender membership, around two years, when girls* and boys* are able to discriminate their being male or female. While some perspectives on the development of sexual and gender identity follow a binary perspective, which takes up Kholberg's gender constancy (1966), more recent theories exclude this perspective, indicating that boys and girls already from early childhood may not recognise themselves in the gender and sex assigned at birth, preferring a less restrictive choice of only the male-female gender (Burman, 2016; Ehrensaft, 2019; Pastel et al., 2019; Steele, Nicholson, 2020; Sullivan, Urraro, 2019). Society has constructed the differentiation between males and females through the creation of standardised and polarised roles, interests and tastes for women and men, creating a double standard and a double morality for males and females. During adolescence, identity construction is understood as a: "a profound connection between the worldview and the behaviour it will act upon. The processes of change that the child experiences must necessarily take place along a future-oriented time axis, and the vision of tomorrow has a close correlation with the social fears that act in the depths of the present" (Mancaniello, 2020, p. 6).

In this scenario of uncertainty and fears for a body that is changing and for expectations regulated by cultural codes based on certain models and roles, adolescents consider the model of virile masculinity the dimension to which to aspire, in a synergetic 'balancing act' between socio-educational drives and the adaptation of their deepest dimension to them. If in some cultural systems being a 'winning man' in the eyes of the patriarchy is a good education and a well-paid job, for others it is leaving school in order to work, while for still others it may represent membership in groups where vandalism, drug use, and so on are practised. There is no single model for the con-

struction of hegemonic or dominant masculinity, but there are certain assonances that unite the boy* 'from a good family' and the boy* from the slums, which are part of the adolescent's 'pedagogical path' of constructing his own masculinity through violence (Messerschmidt, 2018).

The topic of gender-based violence and the push for male involvement to stop the problem has highlighted deep dimensions of toxic masculinity[2] that do not only affect men, but also children and adolescents, showing that it is a problem that has deep roots in culture and education. A report published by the APA - American Psychological Association - found that boys experience a deep sense of frustration and discomfort caused by the social pressure of masculinity becoming cumbersome (2018). Such pressures are attributable to traditional norms of masculinity and shape a heteronormative, hegemonic and toxic ideology of masculinity.

The APA report emphasises an approach to the problem that should not insist on the blaming of masculinity in cases of intra-gender and inter-gender violence, but neither should de-responsibilise boys and men for the problem. In particular, it refers to the impact of the double-standard model for masculinity, for example, in the field of medical and psychological studies, leading to an over-representation of children and adolescents associated with a range of behavioural problems, such as aggression and violence. In reality, the issue concerns the lack of de-essentialising work of this type of research, which ends up giving us a reading of the phenomenon linked to the 'nature of being male'. This biased reading of the masculinity/aggressiveness/heterosexuality association is the result of the widespread dissemination and radicalisation of myths about boys and (heterosexual) men who are by nature strong, aggressive and have a limited capacity to feel emotions.

These myths translate into norms of conduct or 'boy code'[3] (Pollak, 1998), which serve to shape one's gender identity. In adolescence, such codes have a bonding effect to promote homosocial bonds between males that regulate their actions and behaviour, one of which is 'talking about sexuality to reinforce one's male status'. In homosocial peer groups, adolescents stage sexist and homophobic conduct through the use of stigmatising language towards both women and other peers who do not identify as heterosexual (Rinaldi, 2016). During this stage of psychosocial development, the processes of homosocialisation contribute to the configuration of masculinising and heterosexual practices that consolidate the boy code between boys*, with a sacrifice of the affective and emotional dimension in favour, instead, of the competitive dimension and hyperbolicity of sexual attitudes towards girls*. In homosocial spaces and relationships, the desire of many adolescents is to play the role of the 'alpha male' which, however, could present itself as a double-edged sword, since the close bond between peers, in these types of spaces, should not cross the threshold of homo-erotic approaches. In short, the emotional distance between boys is that which resides in the context of warrior societies or fighting classes. The peer friendships of men*, in competitive atmospheres, are based on the skills they bring to the group. Showing concern means questioning competitive skills not presenting a woman's annoying worries.

According to the 'masculine' logic that is created in these spaces, a true male is one who follows a script, who plays a part in which the action is to enact violent acts useful for demonstrating to the peer group his virile power. This is necessary to become a male leader. It is violent behaviour carried out with blind lucidity. The idea of a biological sex that necessarily determines belonging to a gender continues to take root in an insidious way among adolescents, through the messages coming from misinformative sources that confuse the young person and see him at the centre of a harsh, but 'just', struggle against diversity understood as synonymous with inferiority. It is necessary to understand what lies behind the mask that, with difficulty and day after day, the adolescent builds in order not to show his inner world, characterised by conflicting emotions about his own self, others and the value of masculinity.

4. Unboxing masculinities and pedagogical questioning

Around the 1980s, the Canadian educator Paul Kivel coined the expression "Man Box" with whom succeeded in translating the hegemonic model of masculinity to a level that is perhaps more understandable for pedagogical and educational work with boys and men on critical reflection around their masculinity. According to Kivel, who worked with abusive men* in masculine self-awareness groups, hegemonic masculinity is a box made up of social,

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2   Toxic masculinity is a constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence - undermines the scope of the human experience. Also known as hypermasculinity, it is a type of masculinity that exalts stereotypical behavioural traits and attributes historically associated with traditional masculinity, such as strength, violence and sexual performance. As is evident, this concept does not imply that all masculinities are toxic, but simply highlights how the internalisation of heteronormative behaviours can make the process of masculine identity construction "toxic" (Krupers, 2005).

3   Boycode refers to the belief that there is only one way to 'real' masculinity and that a boy should never 'act like a girl'. Scholars in the field of masculinity studies believe that this 'masculinity code' prevents boys from expressing their feelings in class or with other people in general; it makes them feel ashamed of interests they may have in almost anything outside sport; it makes them feel that they have to be as different as possible from girls, so they are ashamed to have friendships with members of the opposite sex.

cultural and educational expectations that encase the real emotional experience of masculinity, contributing to the tension within the subject between self-realisation and stereotypes of masculinity (1999).

Besides being an important theoretical perspective on the deconstruction of obsolete forms of masculinity, the Man Box is also a working methodology that is implemented in educational spaces with adolescents and men. The Man Box is essentially the code of behaviours and characteristics traditionally expected of boys and men, such as being tough, dominant and heterosexual. For example, boys are implicitly and explicitly discouraged from expressing themselves emotionally, being vulnerable or effeminate, because these behaviours do not fit into the box and are therefore not acceptable.

In a European funded Project[4] in which I took part as a team member of the Isituto degli Innocenti, it was planned to train adolescents on the issues of combating gender-based violence by addressing the topic of masculinities. As experts we were to train adolescent peer educators aged 16-18 years who, in turn, were to train younger adolescents aged 14-15 years on the costs of hegemonic masculinity. The team chose to use the Man Box as a methodology for working with peer educators. The boys, previously divided into small groups, were asked to draw a box on a white sheet of paper. We then suggested that they draw outside the box the social expectations on masculinity and inside the box the consequences of the social expectations on masculinity. Although the methodological choice was not to explain the activity to the children straight away in order to avoid influencing them, the end result fulfilled the initial expectations, as both girls* and boys* were able to disentangle the tension between social expectations/subjectivity of an individual. They then expanded the discourse by giving some concrete examples on gender expectations from the world of pop culture, family and school from their own personal experience. The peer educators declared the effectiveness of using this method to unbox adolescents from stereotypes of masculinity and to be able to talk about the causes of gender-based violence, homophobia but also about the mental health of many boys* who live oppressed and locked inside the box of masculinity norms and boy code. Such an example does not represent the theoretical and methodological solution with respect to pedagogical strategies on how to educate adolescents in positive models of masculinity. Rather, it questioned us on the need to find strategies to talk clearly with adolescents about gender issues, masculinity and the consequence of stereotypes without resorting to an adult-centred or overly theoretical approach.

The emerging problem of *Teen Dating Violence* calls for a commitment on the part of pedagogy to develop theoretical and practical models that adapt reflections on masculinity to adolescent studies. The educational work with an adolescent is different from the work done with an abusive adult in an anti-violence centre.

Questioning pedagogical gender identity implies rethinking empowerment strategies that go beyond the feminine/oppressed versus masculine/oppressor logic. As previously reported, the hegemonic model of masculinity is characterised by its replicability in social, geographical and cultural contexts that escape a rigidity linked to the whiteness and heterosexuality of masculinity. Moreover, this model is internalised by men as well as by women (mothers, teachers) who often unconsciously educate young males* in a stereotypical manner by replicating the double standard and double morality for the masculine and the feminine.

Another aspect that invests the pedagogical questioning on the engagement of masculinity concerns the rethinking of theoretical perspectives necessary to elaborate concrete educational strategies for the education of the masculine on gender issues. Despite the pedagogical openness of recent years to issues relating to masculinity (Burgio, 2024; Bernacchi, Di Grigoli, 2024; Chello, Maltese, 2024), masculinity in gender pedagogy still has a long way to go to firmly establish itself as a project in academic and professional research. Questioning pedagogical identity also means reflecting on theoretical and operational positioning when working with adolescents.

In the project experience with adolescents, one aspect that emerged concerned the way in which responsibility is discussed with male adolescents. For example, the use of discursive methodologies that 'accuse' masculinity in such a delicate phase of life as adolescence can lead boys to withdraw into themselves and invalidate the effectiveness of educational work.

The last point, I would like to address is the use of an intersectional approach when questioning gender pedagogy which implies within it a decolonial reinterpretation of masculinity. This last aspect is important and relates to the positioning of the researcher (in the case of doing academic research) of the teacher, pedagogue and educator (in the case of doing training in formal, non-formal and informal educational contexts). A decolonial approach to gender politics implies the assumption that not everything produced by the theories of the global North is applicable to the specific cultural situations of a heterogeneous class. For instance when promoting gender education, it is important to consider how gender is shaped by other categories such as race, ethnicities and migration background therefore avoiding the idea of one-only model of woman based on the Western model (Mohanty, 2003).

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4 The European Project *EiE - Engaged in Equality. Challenging masculinities and engaging adolescent boys to end gender-based violence* aims to challenge traditional gender roles and hegemonic masculinity by engaging adolescent boys as allies in the fight against gender-based violence. It also aims to help girls identify the potential risks of hegemonic masculinity and gain self-confidence to reject abusive behaviour and relationships. For further information, please consult the following link: https://www.istitutodeglinnocenti.it/en/projects/engaged-in-equality-challenging-masculinities-and-engaging-adolescent-boys-end-gender

The pedagogical positioning that reflects on masculinity, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, cannot disregard the due consideration that in the co-construction of plural models of masculinity one must consider the social, religious, cultural experience of a subject. For this, it is necessary take a decentralised approach with respect to Western assumptions that allows for the co-construction of new meanings of masculinity that respect each specificities.

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