



# RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS TO MALE INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE: VIEWS OF SOME MALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*This article reports on a study that sought to elicit the views of male university students on risk and protective factors to male interpersonal violence. The participants were 116 third-year students who participated in a final year research project in the Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) Programme at the University of Western Cape (UWC). Each of the students conducted six semi-structured face to face interviews with male students. Following initial analyses of the interviews, a video-recorded class discussion was held to discuss the research findings. The data from the class discussion was captured under the four levels of individual, relationship, community and society, utilised by the World Health Organization (WHO) in its World Health Report on Violence and Health. The analysis of the class discussion and the students' own research reports revealed that at the individual level, risk and protective factors primarily revolve around the challenges of constructing a viable masculinity in specific social and economic contexts; at the relationship level, the key factors appear to be the experiences and expectations around gender roles and family dynamics; at the community level, it seems that weak or non-existent community networks and activities feed into increasing the risk of male community members becoming involved in violence. Each of these three levels needs to be understood against the historically specific backdrop of the societal ecological level: the gendered cultural values expressed in and reflected*



*by the wider social, economic and political contexts.*

*Key words: male interpersonal violence, risk and protective factors, male university students, Western Cape, gender, masculinities*

## **INTRODUCTION**

South Africa has a global reputation for having extremely high rates of violence. In the popular imagination this violence is understood primarily to be attacks by men on women. According to newspaper reports, South African men “have been ranked as among the most violent in the world” (*Sunday Times*, October 5, 2008, p. 5), while South Africa has been labelled “the most dangerous country in the world for women and girl children” (*Mail and Guardian*, November 16–22, 2007, p. 17). The social consensus that sees women as victims and men as perpetrators of violence is reinforced by media headlines, images and analyses that tend to uncritically reproduce images of men as aggressive and violent, and women as vulnerable and passive (Buthelezi, 2007; Sanger, 2007; Sanger & Hadland, 2008). This consensus tends to be fortified by research into sexual and gender-based violence which has contributed (often inadvertently) towards building what is now an almost hegemonic understanding of women as victims and men as perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence (Shefer, Ratele, Strelbel, Shabalala, & Buikema, 2007).

It is certainly true that high rates of sexual and gender-based attacks on women and children continue to present a major social and health problem (Louw & Shaw 1997; Shefer et al., 2007; South Africa Survey, 2006/2007). For example, according to the South African Police Service, the rate of reported cases of rape from April to December 2007 was 75.6/100 000 (or 36 190 reported cases of rape) (Crime Information Management: South African Police Service, 2008). From their randomised controlled trial study on 1 370 men aged 15–26, Jewkes and her colleagues reported that 16.3% of the participants admitted having raped a non-partner or participating in group rape and 8.4% reported having raped an intimate partner (Jewkes et al., 2006). More recently, Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell and Dunkle (2009) reported that 27.6% of the participants in a study of men in three districts in Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal reported having raped a woman or girl.

Notwithstanding the above, the general understanding of violence tends to conceal the extent to which men are also victims of physical as well as sexual violence. Evidence that South African men can be and are victims of sexual and gender-based assaults has tended not to be taken seriously and is sometimes even seen as something of a “joke” (Ghanotakis et al., 2007). Until very recently, South African legislation simply did not recognise that men could, for example, be victims or survivors of rape. It is only very



recently – and after a great deal of debate – that legislation has recognised the forced anal penetration of men as rape rather than sexual assault (Republic of South Africa, 2007).

Recognition that men can be victims of male violence is slowly gaining currency. A report in the *Cape Times* suggested that “Two out of five male South African pupils say they have been raped” and that their rapists were mainly other men (*Cape Times*, July 29, 2008, p. 5). In their study, Jewkes et al. stated that 2.9% of the respondents had reported raping men and boys, and that the men who perpetrated rape reported “significantly greater degrees of exposure to trauma in childhood” (2009, p. 4).

According to Ratele: “It is South African males”, rather than South African females, “who die in overwhelming numbers from ‘man made’ causes” (2006, p. 279). Drawing on population figures released by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) in 2006, Shefer et al. (2007) have recently drawn researchers’ attention to the almost three quarters of a million “missing” South African men. Noting that these men begin to go “missing” from the population statistics in their mid-30s, Shefer et al. (2007) noted that they are absent because they are dead, and that many have died as a result of a violent attack by another male. In other words, while it has been generally accepted that men’s violence is a problem for women and children, it is becoming increasingly apparent that men’s violence is a major problem for men too.

There is increasing evidence that it is young men, across a variety of contexts, who are the predominant victims and perpetrators of violence (Altbeker, 2006; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002; Norman, Matzopoulos, Groenewald, & Bradshaw, 2007; Pelser, 2008). The World Health Report on Violence and Health (Krug et al., 2002) indicated that homicide rates among males are more than three times higher than those for females, and this accounts for 77% of all homicides globally. In South Africa, the National Injury Mortality Surveillance System (NIMSS) has indicated that males are approximately six times more likely to be victims of homicide than women (Donson, 2008), and the rate of interpersonal violence among young men is nine times higher than the corresponding global average (Norman et al., 2007). Thus, as Abrahams, Jewkes, Laubscher, and Hoffman have noted, it is “critical that further research be done to better understand men’s use of violence ... and to develop effective prevention strategies” (2006, p. 263). Additionally, there is an urgent need to attempt to understand men’s vulnerability to other men’s violence.

With these aims in mind, the Medical Research Council-University of South Africa (MRC-UNISA) Crime, Violence and Injury Lead Programme (CVI) has engaged in a long-term study that aims to explore the risk and protective factors to male interpersonal violence. The project aims to establish what factors increase the risk of or protect South African

men from becoming involved in interpersonal violence, either as victims or as perpetrators.

An initial exploratory study into the risk and protective factors to male interpersonal violence (Lazarus, Tonsing, Ratele, & Van Niekerk, 2009) was conducted in 2007. This study was limited to a literature review of South African and international studies focusing on male interpersonal violence. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the key findings of the study, highlighting the critical risk and protective factors to male interpersonal violence. The factors are categorised within the ecological framework that analyses factors at four levels, namely: individual, relationship, community and societal (Krug et al., 2002).

Ecological Level	Groups of Protective Factors	Examples of Protective Factors
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masculine identity challenges</li> <li>• Demographic factors</li> <li>• Emotional factors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masculine identity needs, loss of masculine role, link between masculinity and guns</li> <li>• Low SES, low levels of education, being unskilled</li> <li>• Feelings of shame and humiliation</li> </ul>
Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence in the family</li> <li>• Gender relations and roles</li> <li>• Family structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, learning aggressive behaviour in the family</li> <li>• Gender inequities, stereotypes, gender role conflict, family honour</li> <li>• Being single/unattached, low family cohesion</li> </ul>
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socio-economic factors</li> <li>• Lack of community support and involvement</li> <li>• Community safety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low SES, income inequality, unemployment</li> <li>• Lack of social support and interaction, no recreational facilities, lack of school connectedness</li> <li>• High crime, violence and conflict; lack of faith in police</li> </ul>
Societal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socio-economic and political structure</li> <li>• Cultural norms and values</li> <li>• Gender relations in society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Globalisation, income inequality, arms and drugs trade, rapid social change</li> <li>• Culture of violence, negative construction of masculinity, media violence</li> <li>• Gender inequality, low status of women in society</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Main clusters of risk factors to male interpersonal violence**

(Source: Lazarus, Tonsing, Ratele, & Van Niekerk, 2009)



Table 2: Protective factors to male interpersonal violence

<b>Ecological Level</b>	<b>Groups of Protective Factors</b>	<b>Examples of Protective Factors</b>
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demographic</li> <li>• Intra-psychic/emotional</li> <li>• Behaviours and skills</li> <li>• Cultural and religious factors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher level of education for men, maturity/higher age</li> <li>• Individual resilience, self-reflection, constructive view of masculinity</li> <li>• Conflict management skills, vocational skills</li> <li>• Having a purpose in life, religious/spiritual beliefs</li> </ul>
Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marital and family relations</li> <li>• Peer relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive family role models, attachment to family, family support, presence of father</li> <li>• Belonging to a social group, close peer relations</li> </ul>
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social capital</li> <li>• Community support and networks</li> <li>• Community empowerment</li> <li>• School connectedness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of community, cultural-community resilience</li> <li>• Recreation opportunities, active community structures</li> <li>• Sense of human agency, community mobilisation</li> <li>• Participation in and connectedness to schools</li> </ul>
Societal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National policies and legislation</li> <li>• Socio-economic factors</li> <li>• Cultural factors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human rights framework and policies, laws to constrain violence</li> <li>• Economic opportunities, affordable housing, welfare</li> <li>• Non-violent male role in media, values promoting gender equality and positive view of masculinity</li> </ul>

(Source: Lazarus, Tonsing, Ratele, & Van Niekerk, 2009)

A major finding that emerged from this exploratory qualitative study that needs underlining was that masculinity appears to be a major dynamic that interacts in various ways with other factors to place men at risk. At the same time, masculinity constitutes a potential protective factor and focus for violence prevention when linked to the promotion of constructive, non-violent and egalitarian views of masculinity (Lazarus et al., 2009).

In a collaboration between the MRC-UNISA CVI and the WGS Programme at UWC, a research project was developed for the purposes of eliciting the views of male students at a South African university on the key risk and protective factors to male interpersonal violence in the South African context. The participants included 116 third-year students who participated in a final year research project under the WGS Programme at UWC. This article explores some of the findings that emerged from the work of these final year students.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The WGS Programme is a teaching unit with a mandate to produce students equipped with research and critical thinking skills. Central to the feminist pedagogy employed by the programme is the development of an inquiry and research-based curriculum. This curriculum aims to ensure that “learning proceeds at least partly from the questions of the students themselves and/or from the everyday experiences of ordinary people, those in the ‘bywaters of the culture’ ” (Maher & Thompson-Tetreault, 2001, p. 3). The aim is to “create knowledges which both emerge from the diverse and complex contexts in which we live and work and [that] speak to such contexts with sufficient resonance to sustain innovative and transformative action” (Bennett, 2008, p. 1). A key element of this aim is the WGS third-year research module in which students are expected to complete an independent research report. The module attempts to synchronise the demands of learning, research and skills development.

Apart from its primary aim of conducting and disseminating research on crime, violence and injury, the CVI functions as an internship site for postgraduate training. To this end, senior CVI staff routinely act as co-supervisors and examiners for master and doctoral theses. It is against this background that the qualitative methodology employed in this collaborative study is unique and transformative. The research agenda at both the CVI and WGS aims to make a contribution to both research and teaching on women’s studies and critical studies of men through the production of research that contributes towards wider social change and the transformation of the psychology of individuals.

The idea of combining the aim of transmitting knowledge and skills with the aim of conducting socially relevant research by locating the final year research project of WGS students as a qualitative study within the larger CVI project was mooted at the beginning of 2007. The ensuing collaboration between the CVI and WGS in the second half of 2007 saw each of the 116 UWC students registered for the research module conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews with six male students. This study drew on interviews obtained by five students in this class. In line with the aims of the larger project, the research question was: “What do male students see as the risk and protective factors



contributing towards male interpersonal violence?” Students were expected to find out what male students (ranging from undergraduate to post-graduate) on the UWC campus thought were the factors that increased or decreased the chances of men becoming involved as victims or perpetrators of violence.

The research project was structured in such a way that students worked independently until they had completed their six interviews and begun a qualitative thematic analysis of their data. Draft copies of their analyses were submitted and critiqued by the first author. The most unique part of the project occurred in this respect. On the basis of their preliminary analyses and critique received, five students were invited to lead a video-recorded class discussion about their findings. This discussion was considered to be a further and legitimate opportunity to gather views of students on male interpersonal violence. Facilitated by the last two authors, the data from the class discussion was publicly captured (through online computer facilities in the lecture room) under the four levels utilised in the ecological framework used by the WHO in its World Report on Violence and Health (Krug et al., 2002), namely: individual, relationship, community, and societal risk and protective factors.

While there are advantages to this four-level analysis, the tensions and dialectical interplay between the person and her/his immediate and broader social contexts needs to be recognised. For example, individual views of gender and masculinity are characterised by both psychological demands as well as being part of relationships and the broader social context. The authors are therefore aware of the need to take care not to produce a simplistic and one-dimensional analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The first part of this discussion provides a table summarising the findings processed from the class discussion. The findings captured in Table 3 utilise the levels in the ecological framework employed by Krug et al. (2002) to understand violence. The second part of this section reports on the interviews conducted by the students. Where appropriate, this discussion will relate the analysis of the scripts to the class discussion.

One of the main features of the findings from the class discussion and the analysis of the students' individual research reports, was the emphasis on factors that increased rather than decreased the chances of men becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. While students had been primed to ask about risk *and* protective factors, much of what they reported on focused on risk factors. This could be because the protective factors were more difficult to identify, or that the social context of living in a society in which violence is common and in which men tend to be seen as perpetrators rather than victims



served to encourage the foregrounding of causes of violence. In a discussion of the role of education, for example, the emphasis tended to be on how limited formal education operates as a risk factor rather than the obverse: that increased access to education acts as a prevention factor. Table 3 below constitutes a summary of the findings of the class discussion.

Table 3: Summary of risk and protective factors to male interpersonal violence that emerged from the class discussion

Risk Factors	Protective Factors
<p>Individual level factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substance Abuse</li> <li>• Protection motives (e.g. to protect oneself or others)</li> <li>• Limited self-reflection and emotional maturity</li> <li>• Struggles relating to male identity</li> </ul>	<p>Individual level factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher education level</li> <li>• Individual resilience</li> <li>• Religion</li> <li>• Maturity</li> </ul>
<p>Relationship level factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of positive male role in family</li> <li>• Absent father</li> <li>• Threats to male role in family, especially in respect to unemployment of breadwinner</li> <li>• Single-parent households</li> <li>• Peer pressure</li> <li>• Normative view of violence in peer settings</li> <li>• Gender relations (e.g. jealousy)</li> <li>• Sexual preference (homophobia)</li> <li>• Violent home environment</li> <li>• Lack of non-violent conflict resolutions skills</li> </ul>	<p>Relationship level factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A supportive home environment</li> <li>• Positive parent roles</li> <li>• Positive father roles</li> <li>• Relationship skills (e.g. communication and conflict management skills)</li> </ul>
<p>Community level factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent environment</li> <li>• Gangsterism</li> <li>• Work and school stresses</li> </ul>	<p>Community level factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community and recreational activities for adults and especially youth</li> <li>• Belonging to a gang protects against threats from others</li> </ul>
<p>Societal level factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic factors (poverty and economic inequalities)</li> <li>• Media (violent role of men)</li> <li>• Drug culture</li> <li>• Availability of fire-arms</li> </ul>	<p>Societal level factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment</li> <li>• Higher socio-economic status</li> <li>• Promotion of positive masculinity in media</li> <li>• Spiritual values</li> <li>• Protective government policies and legislation</li> </ul>

The analysis of the class discussion reveals that, at the individual level, risk and protective



factors primarily revolve around the challenges of constructing a viable masculinity in specific social and economic contexts. At the level of interpersonal relationships, the key factors appear to be the experiences and expectations around gender roles and family dynamics. At the community level (including neighbourhood, employment and educational settings), it seems that weak or non-existent community networks and activities feed into increasing the risk of male community members becoming involved in violence. Each of these three levels needs to be understood against the historically specific backdrop of the societal ecological level: the gendered cultural values expressed in and reflected by the wider social, economic and political contexts.

An idea that helps to draw together the class discussion as well as the student interviews on different risk and protective factors is that of masculinity – as positioned in the intersection between wider politics and economic conditions on the one side and, an individual's emotional and mental life on the other. Ratele has contended that:

Studies of African males that do not address their positioning in society as well as their cognitions, emotions and bodily practices are likely to perpetuate stereotypes, misunderstand and delay efforts towards democratising gender relations. In researching and mobilising males, activists and scholars need to consider male personal biographies, including their fantasy lives, as well as conditions of societies, such as levels of employment and violence (2008, p. 522).

In this framework, a man's ideas about masculinity are thus seen as forming a risk or protective factor between, for instance, substance use and violence, or between unemployment and violence perpetration.

Turning to the material from the students' research reports, at the ecological level of the individual, some of the participants thought that a key component contributing towards increasing the risk of men becoming perpetrators of violence was the pervasiveness of essentialist ideas that men are "naturally" violent beings whose patriarchal imperatives emerge primarily out of human biology rather than human culture. In observing that "violence is biblical and cannot be stopped completely", Participant CB implied that violence is a long-standing, intractable, almost natural problem of living in the world. The participant seemed to be saying if violence is found even in the bible, then perhaps people should learn to live with it rather than try to prevent it. On the contrary, public health approach to violence has shown that violence can be prevented if a society and individuals are persuaded to shift the way they think of and deal with violence – away from a reactive response to violence whose aim tends to be to pour resources into the police and court system to one where there is a sustained, community-based, preventative intervention

where the primary goal is to change knowledge, skills, or attitudes (in particular around men's domination of women); the socio-economic environment (especially deprivation and wealth and income inequalities); or the physical infrastructure in which people live and relate to each other (Mercy, Rosenberg, Powell, Broome, & Roper, 1993, pp. 11 & 13).

Participants also identified numerous factors that are clearly linked to culture and to performances of masculinity that place men at risk or encourage men to engage in risky practices. These performances were connected to personal expectations of men that they should be seen to be "in charge" or "in control" as autonomous adults. It seems, from the views of many of the students involved in this study, that the ability to demand "respect", "acknowledgement" or even "obedience" from other men and women is understood as fundamental to a successful performance of masculinity, and that successful performances of masculinity often require the violent subordination of others in order to "regain control", to conceal weakness and to hide failure.

The following quotations from participants give substance to the points highlighted above:

Some people use violence to instil fear in others in order to get respect. It is desperation that leads to violence. It is when men don't feel good about themselves that they are violent to regain control (CA).

The dread of being called sissy or soft, and the need to avoid such labelling further induces youth to use violence (N4).

A man is taught to be dominant and not to cry as men do not cry, they rather fight out their anger or hurt but you do not cry (B2).

Men get angry and feel disrespected and they get violent (CF).

I think they do it [violence] to feel powerful or to satisfy their ego, especially when they have nothing else ... it is this feeling of inadequacy that makes him violent (CE).

Thus, far from being an expression of strength, male interpersonal violence is partly understood (at least by the participants in this study), as a fairly desperate expression of the personal anxieties around public performances of masculinity. It appears that it is the anxieties about failing as a *man* that underpin acts of violence, and the responses to these anxieties are understood to be amplified by social contexts in which alcohol and drugs are available. When, in the class discussion, a student noted that, "The issues are there before ... the issue creates the alcohol abuse ... then comes the violence", she was supported by others. This view also found resonance in the interviews: "Substance abuse



is a precipitating factor in violence ... It's easy to get into a fight at a club or a bar because people are usually drunk and do not know what they are doing (X1)".

While these may be personal feelings of frustration and inadequacy, they have to be seen in terms of relationships with others and the wider society. The relationships identified as particularly important were those with other men in their peer group, wives and girlfriends, as well as family dynamics, the roles of parents in general and fathers in particular:

You have to prove to the next bra that you are a man or he will think he can walk all over you (B2).

A man's friends tries [sic] to encourage him to start fights with another man just to see if he has what it takes to be a man (X1).

Men could be encouraged to be violent by their friends to peers, so that they can be seen as hardcore by their group members and fit in (CE).

Ratele (2008) has argued that masculinities are best seen as produced at both the level of wider structures within which individual males find themselves having to live, and the level of individual behaviour. When CA reported that, "It is when men don't feel good about themselves that they are violent to regain control", she illustrated a useful point in how to think about changing masculinities: change the way a man feels about himself and you will reduce a man's chances of being involved in violence; but change the way men as a group regard socially constructed "successful" manhood and you will redraw connections between masculinity, control and violence. Similarly, when CE wrote that men might get violent because they wish to "be seen as hardcore by their group members and fit in", the student illustrated the fact that for violent masculinities to thrive they have to be supported overtly or covertly by groups.

Further underlining the interconnections between individual performances of masculinity and the interactions between and within a larger group, Participant B1 commented that, "If you are part of a group and they use alcohol, drugs and are violent, you do not stop to think what we are doing is wrong, you follow because you want to be part of the group and you want to be seen as a man not a sissy". Others noted that:

Men use violence to assert control. For example a guy that is married to a lady who is more educated or earns more will use violence to make up for what he doesn't have,



because he feels threatened by his wife (CE).

Sometimes boys fight because they want to protect their girlfriends, and they fight against each other upon a girlfriend (N2).

At the same time, as suggested by Participant N2 above, there were occasions when violence could be seen as legitimate. "Righteous" violence was employed in self defence or in the defence of a wife or girlfriend. This position was supported by another participant: "My girlfriend and I were at a club and this guy tried to kiss her and she was really upset, so I was ready and prepared to fight with him, simply because I had to protect her" (X1).

Family dynamics were understood to be particularly important through the modelling of interpersonal relationships, by creating normative practices which legitimised violence. The following quotations support this finding:

If you grow up in a family in which there is too much violence, you think violence is the only way to get things done (IC).

If kids grow up seeing their parents fighting or even their neighbours, it makes them prone to doing the same thing (IE).

Parents have a strong role to play in the upbringing of their children. Especially when it comes to boys (IE).

In my house my father is very moody and comes home angry most of the times and he tends to take it out on us and this makes me angry as well (X5).

In this study, fathers or father figures, were seen as particularly important, although no distinction was made between biological and social fathers. Participants drew direct links between the practices of fathers and sons, reinforcing the work of Mathe (2007), suggesting that boys tend to reproduce the behaviours employed by more senior men. A point highlighted in the class discussion revealed that: "Young men will follow their father's role modelling". It was argued that, in homes where violence and aggression is limited or absent, there appears to be an increased chance that young men will grow up to abjure violence. Participants in this study thought that boys who saw their fathers or father figures employ violence were more likely to grow up to employ violence themselves:

A friend of mine used to beat his wife, as a result his son is also aggressive at school,

and is also fighting with other learners (N1).

My father is polygamy [sic] and he used to abuse my mother, so my older brother also started having a date with other women and abuses his wife, probably he thought that it is normal (N3).

Many boys grow up in families without resident men and this is also perceived to increase the chances of a boy growing up to understand violence as a legitimate method of solving conflicts. In the class discussion it was agreed that the absence of senior male family members meant that a boy “must fight for his own survival”, and, “Children don’t have a father to protect them so they fight for survival”. As Participant IE observed, again underlining the interconnectedness of the different ecological levels: “Boys need a male figure in the home: when they do not get one, they seek it outside the home and usually in the wrong places”.

The structures, institutions and social dynamics outside the home, that is, community dynamics, represent the third ecological level. The negative role models outside the home alluded to by Participant IE above were understood to be of particular importance in understanding the factors that increased the chances of young men becoming victims or perpetrators of violence: “Where the environment is dangerous, so a man takes a knife in case he needs to fight back” (class discussion). “If a child lives near a tavern and sees people fighting every day, he’s gonna do the same because he’s learned that it’s the way people behave in such places,” argued Participant IF.

The rise of gangsterism over the past two or three decades in the communities from which many of the students were drawn was considered to be a major risk factor. A number of local studies have made these connections. For example, in her study of gang rape on the Cape Flats, Moolman noted that: “Older men in the gang play the role of elders in a family and/or community. They teach the young men the practices and customs of their culture [and] play the roles of initiating gang rape” (2004, p. 60). Salo’s (2007) study of gendered personhood in Mannenberg further reinforced the view that community norms and practices legitimise certain kinds of violence that contribute to the making of violent men. So, while it was noted that, “Gangsterism can be protective because you are part of a community” (class discussion), most of the participants in this study thought that gangsterism increased men’s exposure to violence both as perpetrators and as victims. “Gang members want to prove themselves ... showing that they are stronger” and once drawn into a gang it is difficult to give up the status and resources gang membership confers: “Men don’t know how to get out of the gangs” (class discussion). And yet, while community level factors were understood to operate as risk factors, the community was also seen to be an important locus of protective factors. The existence of after-school and youth activities such as sport, for example, “Teaches you discipline ... and how to work



within a hierarchy ... and it provides positive male role models that work as protective factors” (class discussion).

In an attempt to make the interconnections between individual feelings of inadequacy, the gendered dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the wider socio economic context clearer, Participant CF explained that, “We use violence because our masculinity is threatened. Let’s say I lose my job and my girlfriend is cheating. Even if she is cheating before, I will think she is cheating now because I cannot buy her everything she wants or take her out”. Further illustrating the interconnections between a man’s expectations of himself relative to others against the broader socio economic and political context, the class discussion drew attention to economic challenges and gendered imperatives around breadwinning and providing within a capitalist consumer culture. In communities where men are expected to provide, high rates of unemployment, “Create pressure to live up to expectations” (class discussion). Poverty and economic inequality add to the pressures on the individual: Men are violent, Participant CE noted, “When they have nothing else”. It is men who “don’t feel good [about themselves] because they are poor – they have nothing – who resort to violence” (CA). As Horowitz has put it, “When men feel like they are not living up to the expectations of themselves or others, they engage in one or a combination of three destructive behaviours: they either ‘drop out, numb out, and/or punch out’ ” (1997, p. 77).

These types of harmful responses are further legitimised, the participants in this study argued, by media portrayals of men as violent and violence as glamorous. The media “glorifies crime and makes it look cool”, commented Participant X3. “Maybe,” as Participant CE observed, “children learn from television for example, like men killing their rivals. You find that a lot on TV”. Yet, even though the participants in this study thought that media portrayals of men tended to contribute to high levels of violence, they also thought there was an important role for the media in protecting men from interpersonal violence through promoting “different views of family relationships” and alternative patterns of behaviour (class discussion).

The role of organised religion and spirituality were also seen as positive phenomena that had the potential to protect men from interpersonal violence: “If you grow up in a situation where you were taught spiritual values even if things are difficult now ... this helps one to sustain oneself in difficult circumstances” (class discussion). “Parents need to instil some religious values in their children,” stated Participant CE.

In this study, the government was also understood to have the potential to play an important role in reducing risk factors and promoting protective factors through a variety



of mechanisms. While the constitution was held up as an important document articulating the ideals of a non-violent society, the government was thought to have the capacity to play a much more active role in creating the conditions within which individuals would be empowered to make less violent choices. Education was a critical element of this. On the one hand, more effort should be made to teach people the skills of anger management, and by “teaching young boys how to be more sensitive and caring [which] could help them control their anger which in turn helps them not to be violent and find a better way of dealing with their issues or the situation” (X4). Further underlining the connections between the individual and the broader social context, Participant CC argued that:

The government must find a way of attracting people to go to school because people finish high school and want to get into things that bring fast money, things that are illegal like drugs. People need to engage in things that cannot be taken away from them, like education so that these feelings of frustration and jealousy as well as poverty are reduced. Education keeps people busy and keeps them away from illegal or wrong stuff.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the views of university male students regarding risk and protective factors to male interpersonal violence. The study used a unique methodology which sought to develop research skills and analytical knowledge in students about masculinities. It also aimed to make a contribution to research and teaching on women’s studies and critical studies of men. Part of the material analysed in this article was collected by students registered for the research module in the WGS Programme at UWC. They each conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with six male students regarding the question, “What are the risk and protective factors contributing towards male interpersonal violence?” Students were expected to find out what male students on the UWC campus thought were the factors that heightened or reduced the likelihood of men becoming involved in violence. For the analysis in this article, the interview material generated by the students as well as a video-recorded and computer documented class discussion conducted on their views and interviews, was used. Five students led the discussion about their interviews, with the discussion facilitated by two of the authors.

The results of the study underline the interconnections between individual men’s practices of masculinity and their interactions with other men, children, women, and the larger social structures. Among the factors indicated to be important in increasing men’s risk of becoming victims of or perpetrating violence are: avoidance of being labelled sissies; alcohol and drug use; pressure to prove themselves; lack of non-violent conflict resolution skills; the desire to protect a girlfriend; growing up in a violent home; lack of presence and role modelling of a positive father-figure; living in a dangerous environment; the existence

of gangs in the neighbourhood; the glorification of violence in the media; and various economic factors. Among the factors thought to help in protecting men from violence are: relationship skills; a supportive home environment; a positive male figure in the home; community and recreational activities for adults and youth; employment and less economic inequality; the media (which can promote different family structures); religious values and spirituality; protective government policies and legislation; and ironically, gangs.

An idea used to draw these disparate views on risk and protective factors together is that of masculinity as made and located where individual men's psychologies meet social structures. This makes it easier to understand why some of the material collected by the students and the views expressed in the class discussion emphasised substance abuse, violence in the family, or being poor while others pointed to government, community environment, the media and father figures. The point the authors want to underline is that in order to understand male violence, and non-violent masculinities, it is important to respect the biographies of individual males, including their fantasy lives about control and "respect", but also always to be mindful of the social conditions, such as levels of poverty, inequality and rates of violence, in which men live.

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