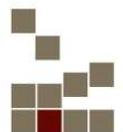


# Male Sexual Violence Against Women: A New and Transformative Definition

Ending racism and white supremacy is urgent. Ending male sexual violence against women and girls is urgent. This white paper provides an excellent example of how Men Stopping Violence strives to hold and respond to both truths.



**Men Stopping Violence**

*Working together for a change.*

## Contents

Key Points .....	3
Current Definitions of Sexual Violence .....	4
Legal .....	4
Public Health .....	5
Campus/School Policies .....	6
Community-Based/Social Justice .....	7
Men Stopping Violence: A Different Approach .....	8
MSV’s Analysis of Male Violence Against Women .....	8
Why a MSV Definition .....	11
Unpacking “Male Sexual Entitlement” .....	11
Unpacking “Tactics to Impose His Will” .....	12
How and Where the Definition Is Used .....	13
Roger: A Case Study .....	14
Strengths and Limitations of the MSV Definition.....	15
Implications for Intervention and Prevention Efforts .....	16
Creating Spaces that Enhance Learning for Men .....	17

## Key Points

This paper provides “*a way in*” for all men to talk within their communities about male sexual violence – both male socialization and the tactics men use – rather than at police stations or courthouses where some men are sent because of the color of their skin, where other men will never go because of their privilege, and where discussions of social norms are unlikely.

To prevent male sexual violence, community norms need to be changed. Men Stopping Violence (MSV) offers practitioners a definition of male sexual violence against women that invites both men and communities into the conversation to interrogate the socialization and training that all men receive concerning male entitlement to women’s bodies.

### Male Sexual Violence Against Women Defined

The MSV definition of male sexual violence against women is “*Male sexual entitlement combined with tactics to impose his will.*” This definition identifies male socialization and training as a root cause of male sexual violence against women. MSV applies this definition in their Men’s Education Program and within the larger community.

**Male sexual violence against women as defined by MSV is “*Male sexual entitlement combined with tactics to impose his will.*”**

### An Intersectional Approach

An intersectional approach to policy and practice is essential to preventing and ending male sexual violence against women. Intersectionality is “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.”

### Community Responsibility

Focusing on serial rapists and sexual predators lets the community avoid responsibility for the multiple ways that it gives men permission to access women’s bodies, services, and resources at will and without consequences.

### Spaces for Men to Reflect

The community must provide men spaces where they can be honest about their use of sexual violence. There are far too few spaces where men can honestly examine their beliefs and actions, learn, and change.

## Current Definitions of Sexual Violence

Generally, definitions fall into the following four categories: legal, public health, campus, and community-based/social justice.

Definitions currently used for sexual violence vary greatly depending on the purpose of the definition and how the organizations have analyzed and proposed them. Most definitions, while accomplishing their goal within the context they were created, are not suitable for educational settings designed to encourage behavioral change. MSV has created a definition that aims to engage men in conversations about social norms, while at the same time, it encourages men to take a mental inventory of their beliefs used to justify sexual violence in themselves and others.

### Legal

The primary purpose of legal definitions of sexual violence is that they must be enforceable to punish perpetrators or hold individuals liable for civil penalties. These definitions focus on defining specific tactics and behaviors that constitute illegal behavior rather than the non-legal, community-based approach of male socialization and training.

### **Legal definitions do little to acknowledge the culture that trains and socializes men to commit sexual violence in all its forms.**

Legal definitions do little to acknowledge the culture that trains and socializes men to commit sexual violence in all its forms. They focus on the actions of individual perpetrators rather than examining social norms. These definitions are difficult to use in educational settings designed to increase knowledge about sexual violence and encourage behavioral change.

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## Public Health

Public health definitions of sexual violence are designed “*to monitor the prevalence of sexual violence and examine trends over time*” and “*to measure risk and protective factors for victimization and perpetration*” (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2018a).

Public health definitions may more accurately reflect the experience of sexual violence and coercion, even if some of those violations may not be actionable by the criminal justice system. For instance, “*nonphysically forced penetration,*” includes “*being worn down by someone who repeatedly asked for sex or showed they were unhappy*” and “*having someone threaten to end a relationship or spread rumors.*”

While the CDC provides some recognition of cultural norms, male socialization, and training of men to become abusers, societal factors are de-emphasized in favor of more focus on

**The CDC’s definitions, like many public health definitions, are broader and more encompassing than legal definitions.**

individual and relationship risk factors. Its strategies to promote social norms that protect against violence including bystander approaches and mobilizing men and boys as allies are important, but avoid the male socialization and entitlement that all men and boys receive as well as the analysis of gender and power necessary to fully address male sexual violence.

## Campus/School Policies

Campus definitions related to sexual violence focus on sexual misconduct and are designed to ensure that all students have a safe environment where they can learn. Campus response is guided by the Title IX Civil Right that states, *“No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance”* (Education Amendments Act of 1972, 2018).

**Campus sexual misconduct is often defined very broadly as it needs to cover myriad ways that actions related to sex, and gender may impede a student’s opportunity to learn.**

Schools must respond to sexual violence and sexual harassment because they create a hostile environment that keeps students from learning and fully accessing their education.

This breadth of behaviors related to sexual misconduct strongly reflects so many of the ways that women face duress and threats – physical, psychological, and sexual – daily.

In addition, campuses have a responsibility to address not only individual actions after the fact, but also the environment that students operate in to ensure that all students are safe to learn. Title IX holds institutions responsible for creating a safe environment, which means that schools often have a vested interest in addressing both individual acts but also the cultural and social norms on campus that support male sexual violence against women.

However, without the appropriate social context, definitions of sexual misconduct on college campuses can be challenging when using as an educational tool. The number and complexity of behaviors defined as sexual misconduct can be overwhelming to men who have internalized messages of entitlement to women’s bodies.

## Community-Based/Social Justice

Community-based and social justice organizations that address sexual violence are often nonprofit organizations. The purpose of their definitions is to facilitate advocacy and articulate the experiences of people and communities that have been violated, and influence change on the individual, community, and societal levels. That involves advocating for increased resources for victim services, persuading individuals to change their behaviors (i.e., to stop sexually harassing women), and pushing institutions to take sexual violence more seriously.

**Many of these community-based and social justice organizations' definitions skew towards legal definitions by focusing on the concrete examples provided that constitute sexual violence, and they often reference laws and legal codes for defining sexual violence as "crime."**

This tendency to use legal definitions makes sense given that many mainstream sexual assault agencies have historical ties to law enforcement agencies. Their advocacy objectives include persuading legislatures, law enforcement, and judicial systems to enforce more severe legal penalties for sexual violence.

Law enforcement and legislators were among the first institutions to be accountable and responsive enough to the public to increase criminal legal sanctions for sexual assault. However, many of the advocates whose voices were prioritized during that period were the white middle-class who felt confident law enforcement was an acceptable way to respond to sexual violence – and this belief is still prevalent today. Many advocates of color remained unconvinced as their communities were often over-policed by law enforcement, suffered inequitable incarceration rates, police brutality, and even the increased risk of sexual violence by law enforcement officers themselves.

Since the purpose of the community-based and social justice definitions of sexual violence is advocacy rather than enforcement, these definitions do not have to be concrete and legally actionable. These definitions have great potential for changing norms within communities because they have the most latitude and freedom to name those norms and connect them to individual tactics. Since community-based and social justice definitions are not written specifically for men, they are limited as an educational tool. MSV seeks to engage men in conversations about sexual violence based on women's experiences.

Since 1982, MSV has educated over 100,000 men about how to change abusive behavior and impacted hundreds of thousands of families and many communities across the country. MSV has provided expert analysis and commentary on domestic violence and sexual assault through media including CNN, Al Jazeera America, The New York Times, TV One, the Tom Joyner Morning Show, and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. In addition, MSV has authored peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, including *Deconstructing male violence against women: The Men Stopping Violence community-accountability model* and *African American men who batter: A community-centered approach to prevention and intervention*, and the *Men At Work: Building Safe Communities* curriculum.

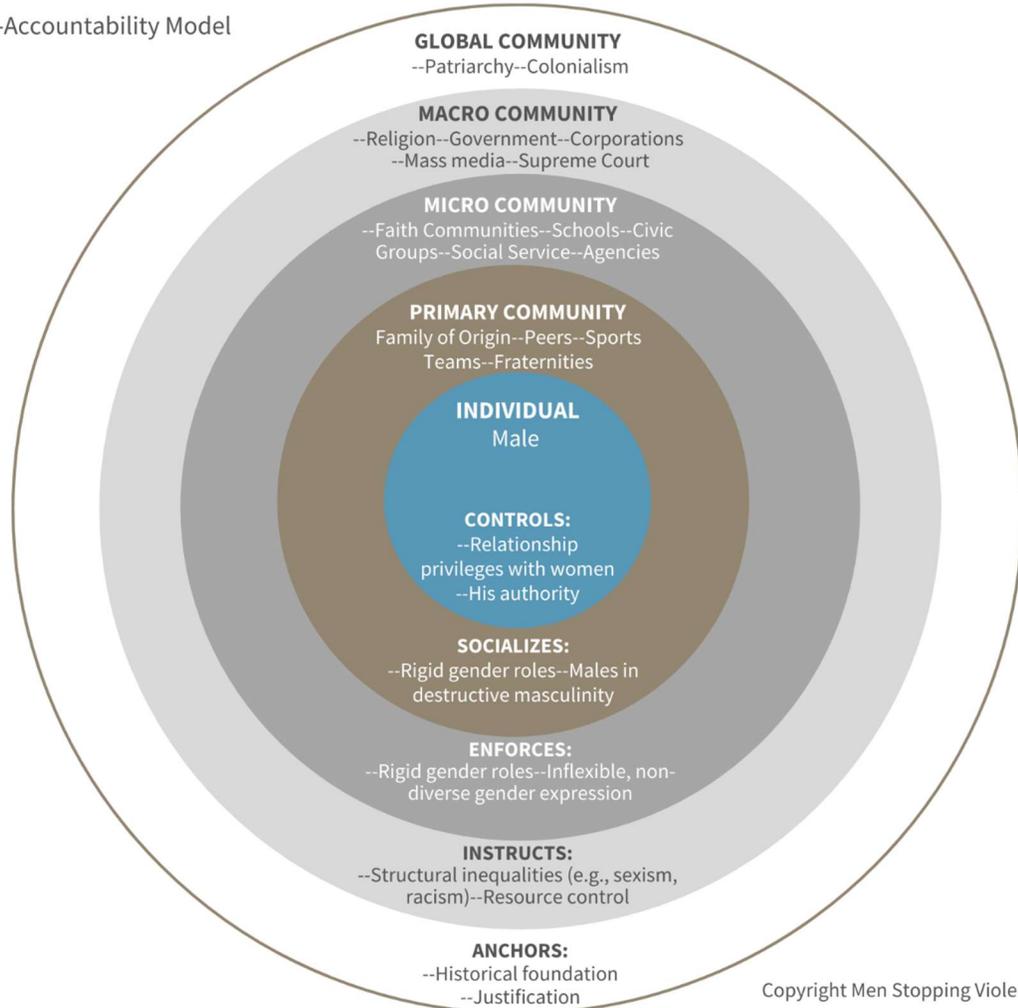
## Men Stopping Violence: A Different Approach

MSV is a community-based organization whose mission is to engage men and communities to take action to end violence against women.

### An Analysis of Male Violence Against Women

The **MSV Community-Accountability Model** below offers an extensive view of the cultural and historical mechanisms that support violence against women. The model illustrates how the problem of male violence against women is not rooted in individual men but rooted in the community. Within this analysis, all men receive training and socialization from communities and institutions that support patriarchal norms and male violence against women. This includes implicit and explicit messages that reinforce that men are more important than women, and therefore men should have access to women's bodies and services at will. Individual men may become conscious of these messages and beliefs and may or may not choose to act on them. If they choose to, they can count on the support of male-identified, male-dominant institutions that will minimize and deny their behaviors while blaming women for men's choices.

MSV Community-Accountability Model



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The **MSV Community-Accountability Model** points to the need to engage and organize men to change the ecological systems where they are nestled. The patriarchal ecosystem – comprised of the primary, micro, macro, and global communities – creates a destructive environment for women. Since communities are made up of individuals, men will stop committing acts of violence against women when men believe their communities will not tolerate it. While MSV’s practice demands accountability and change from individual men, the model illustrates how intervention strategies focusing solely on individual men are insufficient to end male violence against women.

Research and experience have shown it is difficult to reach larger numbers of individual men through formal systems. Bias and racism within the criminal legal system often lead to the overrepresentation of low-income men of color who are sent to batterer intervention programs while men with greater privilege are often shielded by the system rather than facing consequences. Individuals need to be held accountable for their choices, but so do institutions and community organizations that support and condone male violence against women. This analysis forms the foundation for the MSV definition: *Male sexual entitlement combined with tactics to impose his will.*

Two of MSV's core principles – (1) “*Women’s Voices and Experiences Must be Central to the Work,*” and (2) “*Community Accountability is Key to Ending Male Violence Against Women*” – direct MSV's prioritization of addressing male sexual violence and the centrality of creating a definition that invites men to critique both the socialization and tactics they have used within relationships. Another core MSV principle – “*Intersectionality Matters*” – demands the questions: which women's voices and experiences are centered, and which communities are held accountable?

**All women do not speak with one voice, particularly when articulating their understanding of causes and solutions to issues of oppression.**

The marginalization of the voices of women of color (racism) undermines the work to end the violence perpetrated against them. What works for white women does not always work for women of color. The women's movement and the subsequent battered women's movement involved women of all races and class; but the white middle-class narrative dominated the discourse and influenced policies and practices. The historical facts of slavery, segregation, and ongoing discrimination demand a thoughtful and thorough examination of race and how it influences the work to end male violence against women.

African American women have consistently challenged MSV to create pathways and spaces other than the legal system to engage communities, including faith-based institutions. Based on this guidance, MSV's community work requires a definition of male sexual violence that is approachable and usable within community contexts. While legal definitions are important, they cannot undo the societal messages men receive about their privileged place in the world.

## Why a MSV Definition?

As discussed, the definitions from legal, public health, campus, and community-based/social justice organizations are each crafted for different purposes and have strengths and limitations in addressing sexual violence. The number of these definitions and functions are confusing and overwhelming for some men, communities, and practitioners who sometimes say: “*Just tell me what not to do!*” Women’s realities are much clearer and more urgent: women are under siege and targeted because of their gender.

Rather than a legal definition, MSV saw the need for a definition designed to promote individual and community self-reflection and, ultimately, for prevention, social change, and justice.

Definitions that focus solely on tactics let men and communities avoid responsibility – both individually and collectively – in acknowledging and addressing the male socialization and training received by men. They exemplify how institutions work to keep social norms in place by focusing on the individual instead of requiring the structural and institutional change necessary to disrupt patriarchy, sexism, and other forms of oppression. The MSV definition offers a critique of the dominant norms and invites a critical examination of socialization.

MSV Definition: Male sexual entitlement combined with tactics to impose his will.

### Unpacking “*male sexual entitlement*”

The definition begins with the word “*male*” as an adjective, rather than a noun. This word relates to a biological determination made at birth that leads to a socialization process that informs cultural norms of masculinity. Men and boys are perceived to have certain innate qualities and are rewarded or punished for their loyalty or disloyalty in demonstrating those qualities. Using “*male*” here, refers to an often uninterrogated way of being in the world that goes well beyond biology and refers to a vernacular way of talking about sex and gender rather than adhering to strict definitions.

Since most sexual violence is committed by those socialized as a male, MSV’s work focuses on negative aspects of male socialization as a major contributor to male violence against women. It allows MSV to avoid the trap of framing this issue as about “good” women versus “bad” men. This problem is a massive fallout caused by harmful aspects of male socialization – not men themselves. Women receive these same messages and socialization and often pass it on to the men, boys, and girls in their lives. Importantly, focusing on male socialization rather than men allows MSV to cast a broader net.

*“Male sexual entitlement”* is experienced by men as having an inherent “right” to women’s bodies for sex acts and services at will and a right to have power over other sexes and genders. Many men share common experiences that teach and reinforce male entitlement, like peer pressure from other men and boys.

An example is a boy being asked for details following a date with a girl. Questions posed by men in his life or his peers include, *“Did you get some?”* or *“How far did you get?”* These interrogations imply that sexual activity was the goal of the date. A negative response often leads to pressure to “succeed” next time while an affirmative response leads to congratulations and requests for details. The boy may lie about these encounters and exaggerate his sexual experience for the sake of fitting in, and this is compounded by the broader messages in mass media.

Constant portrayals of male entitlement show male role models pursuing women who inevitably give in to the constant sexual demand. Specifically, male-identified, male dominated institutions work in men’s interests across primary, micro, macro, and global communities to maintain male power and privilege. Men who sexually violate women are not acting in isolation. Rather, they are being fiercely loyal to the script which they have received that men are more important than women and that men have a *“right”* to dominate and control women.

Entitlement operates differently for different people: the entitlement of a white man may manifest itself differently than that of an African American man. But a controlling aspect across patriarchal masculinities is dominance over women and entitlement to sex acts and services from women. By starting the MSV definition with *“male sexual entitlement”*, it invites broader systems and communities to look at an essential aspect of male violence against women that is too often ignored: the socialization and normalization of the patriarchal training that men have a right to access women’s bodies at will. This training says, *“I am more important than women and I am entitled to their bodies as I wish.”*

### Unpacking “Tactics to impose his will”

The Men at Work curriculum used in MSV’s intervention classes contains multiple lessons on male sexual violence that ask the participants to interrogate the broad range of sexual tactics that men use to dominate women. Men are often surprised by the range of tactics that go far beyond illegal actions that are violating to women and designed to establish and maintain dominance. These tactics are functional: the goal is *“to impose his will.”* Notice how male-centered the definition is – *“Male sexual entitlement combined with tactics to impose his will.”* It is all about him; there is no *“her”* – she does not matter.

Contrast the implied aggression of this definition with assertiveness as taught in the Men at Work curriculum:

**Assertive communication** is when a person communicates his or her desires, but the intention is respect instead of “imposing his will.” The other person and what they think, feel, and want really matters.

With **aggressive communication**, the other person does not matter or whether they consent or not. The goal is gaining and maintaining power and control and maintaining

### How and Where the Definition Is Used

MSV uses its definition of male sexual violence against women in various contexts, including Men’s Education Programs for both court-ordered and self-referred men, and with national trainings for batterer intervention programs facilitators. MSV presents the definition regularly at college classes and events, conference workshops and keynotes, and community events. The definition is highly effective in evoking conversations about violence against women, particularly with men. Women participate fully in the discussions, but the definition is not intended to define women’s realities or to determine if they have experienced sexual violence.

**The definition provides an invitation for men to examine internalized beliefs as well as their tactics that may or may not lead to an individual woman’s experience of sexual violence. Men (and women) can critique these tactics as problematic whether they are illegal or not.**

For example, in a partnership with Emory University’s Interfraternity Council to discuss sexual violence on campus, the discussion about MSV’s definition was vibrant and energetic as participants examined men’s entitlement and expectations, and how that entitlement translated to tactics of sexual violence. A discussion using a legal or campus definition focused solely on prohibited activities would likely have been less effective in engaging Emory’s male students.

## Roger: A Case Study

MSV's 24-week Men's Education Program curriculum provides an example of the transformative power of the definition of male sexual violence against women. In 2018, Roger, a young white, middle-class man, presented his 12-week self-inventory - a formal review at the halfway point in the course. Men are required to verbally recount their worst incident of violence towards a woman, their patterns of abuse towards women, and the effects of their abuse.

Participants receive feedback from other men for the purposes of eliminating any justifications while learning to take full responsibility for their actions. Roger's 12-Week self-inventory sent shock waves through the class because he named his patterns of sexual violence with an extraordinary level of detail and ownership – beyond anything that one class facilitator had experienced in his 25 years in the classroom.

*Some men were crying, "I don't want to believe that!"; others were frozen, "I don't know what to say to you"; some identified with Roger, "Oh my God, that was me in college!"; others tried to distance themselves from him, "That's not me! That's not us!"; and some men were angry.*

Roger's honesty was a betrayal of the silence that allows men to deny the reality of male sexual violence against women, and, consequently, to avoid holding a mirror up to themselves and their actions. Patriarchal norms dictate that men are not supposed to talk about the sexual violence that they have used or its effects. The discomfort that each man felt provided an opportunity to examine his own socialization and behaviors.

Awareness of male sexual violence has increased significantly because of the #MeToo movement. Likely influenced and empowered by #MeToo, one of Roger's former partners called out his sexually abusive behavior towards her on her social media. Remarkably, he confirmed on social media that she was telling the truth.

MSV's curriculum encourages men to name their abuse fully and work to change their future behavior. Men may feel uncomfortable or even guilty as they grapple with what they have done and the effects of their abuse on others. But MSV strives for a classroom culture where men are not harmed, shamed, or disrespected when they practice accountability. Within this context of raised awareness and classroom culture, the MSV definition of male sexual violence crystallized the discussion: it provided Roger and the men with a clear definition to center the discussion and a framework necessary to reflect on their own beliefs and tactics. Community accountability, truth-telling, and education: all three were present and contributed to Roger and the class shifting in important ways.

### Strengths and Limitations of the MSV Definition

First, the MSV definition of male sexual violence against women is succinct and focused. When presented well, the definition encourages self-examination and community accountability.

Second, breadth is also a strength as too many men and institutions still view male sexual violence as forcible rape only while the MSV definition encompasses a broad range of behaviors that constitute male sexual violence. Within a context where acts of male aggression towards women are normalized, the more expansive MSV definition has value in inviting men to closely interrogate their beliefs and behaviors and how those impact women regardless of whether those behaviors are socially sanctioned or not.

A third major strength of the MSV definition is connecting male socialization and training to male sexual violence. It invites men and communities to examine the normative aspects of male sexual entitlement. Going beyond individual men, the definition holds a mirror up to society and has implications for prevention and social change.

**The MSV definition invites men into a conversation about the socialization and training all men receive rather than prompting men to “opt out” because they have not committed – or been caught committing – a specific violation.**

A limitation of the MSV definition is its applicability for addressing sexual violence committed by women and LGBTQ populations. It does not account for the complexity nor the variation of gender identification, sex identification, or sexual orientation, such as men engaging in sexual violence against other men.

Another limitation is the definition may be overly broad. Does it problematize “normal” courtship behaviors and label them as sexual violence? For example, has a man committed sexual violence if he has an expectation of sex after buying a woman a glass of wine at a bar? There is a risk of diluting the terror and meaning of “sexual violence” if applied too broadly.

Despite its heteronormative and gendered limitation, the definition does have implications for women, LGBTQ individuals, and communities as well. Everyone is socialized about gendered norms and expectations. Regardless of social location, everyone receives and to some extent internalizes the training that produces “*male sexual entitlement.*” For example, gay men receive the same messages that heterosexual men do about male superiority and male entitlement to women’s bodies, attention, and services. Sexual violence against women may not be the weapon of choice for many gay men, but entitlement is still there.

### Implications for Intervention and Prevention Efforts

The MSV definition of male sexual violence against women as “*male sexual entitlement combined with tactics to impose his will*” has significant implications for prevention and how communities participate in the normalization of male sexual violence. If negative beliefs about women are promoted, men will act on those beliefs.

**The MSV definition does not refute legal definitions nor the need for legal protections from certain individuals; it refutes the social norms that nurture male sexual violence against all women.**

The definition is unique in the level of emphasis it places on male socialization and training as a root cause. For some, it is easier to define the problem as limited to serial rapists and offenders and, if the problem is rooted in a few bad men, the solution relies on identifying and prosecuting serial rapists and sexual predators. Certainly, they exist, and a fair and stout criminal justice system response is warranted to protect victims. Unfortunately, the emphasis on individual rapists allows men to distance themselves from the problem of male sexual violence – “*That’s not me! I’m not a rapist!*” – rather than explore how they have internalized male sexual entitlement and enacted it within their relationships.

## Creating Spaces That Enhance Learning for Men

Since men learn to sexually violate women primarily from other men, they can also unlearn it from other men and move to create more safety in their relationships and their communities. To facilitate change, men need spaces where they can be honest about their use of sexual violence and learn new ways of being in relationships.

To the extent that space for these discussions is being created within batterer intervention programs, it is ironic that the men most benefitting from these discussions are also those most stigmatized in their communities. The movement to end male sexual violence must commit to creating more spaces that enhance learning for all men in the community, not just men identified and prosecuted by the criminal justice system.

The Roger Case Study illustrates how learning is possible within a context of increased community accountability, like the #MeToo movement, and a classroom culture that facilitates honesty and change, and includes educational components like the MSV definition of male sexual violence against women.

Men need to receive honest feedback and experience meaningful accountability. As more men join the movement to end sexual violence, they will make mistakes, and that will be an opportunity for growth for all. It will be hard for men to learn in the absence of sharing, accountability, and empathy. MSV strives to engage all men, including those who have assaulted women and are willing to be accountable for their actions and change.

Creating and facilitating more spaces in the community to enhance men's learning is critical to improving safety and creating meaningful and respectful relationships with women and girls. The promise of these spaces goes beyond individual change and safety; they also allow men to become change agents within their communities. Self-reflection is the first step in organizing men to change the social norms that influence all men. This organizing and social change are critical for the community to make the changes necessary to prevent male violence against women.

Defining male sexual violence is one example of how MSV looks to end male sexual violence against women apart from the criminal justice system and its disastrous effects on communities of color.

**Stand with us. [Menstoppingviolence.org](https://menstoppingviolence.org)**

For more information, see Men Stopping Violence's Definition of Male Sexual Violence Against Women: Implications for Prevention and Intervention (2020). In: Geffner R., Vieth V., Vaughan-Eden V., Rosenbaum A., Hamberger L., White J. (eds) Handbook of Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62122-7\\_190-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62122-7_190-1)