

Speaker 1 ([00:19](#)):

The

Speaker 2 ([00:23](#)):

Welcome to Let's Examine This: Unpacking Young Male Health. Our podcast is sponsored by the Partnership for Male Youth. I'm Dennis Barbour, the Partnership's President. Our podcast series is designed to answer questions parents, coaches, teachers, caregivers, and others may have about the health of young males in their lives. In each episode, we'll explore a different health issue for which young males are at particularly high risk. Today, we are joined by two guests who discuss the subject of gender equity. We will answer a number of questions, including what gender equity means and what parents and other caregivers to young males should know about it. Our first guest is Dr. Gary Barker. Dr. Barker is CEO of Promundo, which works internationally in research programs and advocacy to engagement of boys as allies and gender equity, and to promote healthy masculinity. He has led global research on where men and young men are on gender equality.

Speaker 2 ([01:19](#)):

He is a developmental psychologist and has advised national governments, UN agencies and international brands in how to engage men in these discussions. Our second guest is Mr. Che Nembhard. Mr. Nembhard is creative producer for Remember. I Love You ,a cultural intelligence and community impact studio that works with people, organizations, and brands to deepen their understanding of culture and systems to make a meaningful contribution to society. He has a background in the nonprofit sector, specifically focusing on gender-based violence prevention and as the co-founder of Clips, a digital media cooperative and creative studio vested in creating platforms for storytellers and visual media artists predominantly from marginalized communities. A warm welcome to both of you.

Speaker 3 ([02:05](#)):

Good to see you, Dennis. Thanks Dennis.

Speaker 2 ([02:08](#)):

I'd like to start with you, Dr. Barker, how did you become interested in this subject? And can you tell me a little bit about the work that you do?

Speaker 3 ([02:15](#)):

I started my career working on issues affecting homeless youth, particularly in Latin America. And the beginning part of that career was working with UNICEF in Brazil, looking at issues, affecting girls, homeless girls on the streets, particularly sexual exploitation and sexual violence. And it wasn't very far into that work that it became obvious to me how much we needed to be talking to the men, the men who were sexually exploiting them, that work led me to do work in HIV prevention. Also with girls who were living on the streets or living in very low income settings, we talked about the risk to young women of HIV. Their rates were higher. Their health needs were much higher than the young men who were on the streets, but we weren't asking the direct question that was saying the sexual behavior of boys and men is what's driving the poor health outcomes and the issues of sexual exploitation and violence that was affecting women and girls.

Speaker 3 ([03:13](#)):

I'm clearly not the only one who was asked that question for me. It was so obvious to say, we need, need to talk about where men and boys are in these issues. It's not simply enough to say men are causing these problems. How is it that we learn the sexual behaviors, our ideas about sexuality as boys and men, both in our relationships, whether those are heterosexual relationships or of other kinds. And what do we understand about out bringing boys and men into the process as allies? So Promundo was born out of that first in Brazil, where we started as an organization. And then we've been based in the US where we coordinate and collaborate with partners in more than 40 countries on asking that question, how do we bring boys and men into the conversation as allies? There's huge movement. And I know we'll talk about this later of what me too has meant, but certainly years of feminist activism in this space saying men cannot abuse or harass.

Speaker 3 ([04:11](#)):

We need to understand what the full rights of women are. But I think in that calling out we need to do a lot of work that says, how do we call boys and men into what we mean by full gender equality? What we mean by healthy sexuality. Promundo's work has been around that, a combination of research, advocacy and program development, some of which Che's been involved with, with us on of looking at how we bring boys and men into that conversation in meaningful and also in, in evidence based ways, cuz we've been spending a lot of ways building the evidence base of how to do that and how to measure whether we've achieved notions of healthier sexuality on the part of boys and men.

Speaker 2 ([04:53](#)):

Mr. Nembhard, the same questions to you. How did you become interested in the subject and what can you tell me a little bit about the work that you do?

New Speaker ([05:00](#)):

I think I became interested in the subject of understanding gender and masculinity when I was a bit younger, when I was in college, I had the opportunity to work with a steering committee for the Obama administration around their, My Brother's Keeper initiative, where they had brought in a few young men to basically almost be consultants on like real life experiences of what it means to be my brother's keeper in that current climate. If you remember, a lot of that administration's work with young men was around trying to understand health, both mental and physical for young men and trying to address how to create spaces, where they could feel like they were supported, especially those of color from that space. I kind of just continued down that path of trying to better understand gender, trying to understand where these constructs and social narratives come from. I was predominantly raised by my mother and surrounded by women growing up.

Speaker 4 ([05:58](#)):

So a lot of my experience with gender has always been grounded in understanding some of the inequalities that non cis hetero men face in the world. And I had the opportunity a few times to connect with organizations such as Gary's, Promundo, to learn more. And it's been a really great experience. Currently I think my work touches on that space in trying to understand more about how certain brands and media groups advertise and or try and indoctrinate some young men and those who are male identifying into certain tropes of masculinity for financial gain, to be honest and understanding where does that come from? How does it work and how can we subvert those narratives to better show up in healthy ways, both in media and corporate world, but also in our social interactions on a more day-to-day footing.

New Speaker ([06:54](#)):

Could you define the current gender climate as, especially as it pertains to adolescent and young adult males? What impact has the Me Too movement had on young men, Dr. Barker?

Speaker 3 ([07:05](#)):

It does exist and it causes a lot of harm in terms of how men see many heterosexual and often says gender men see their sexuality and that kind of reduced narrow way. I think we've been questioning that a long time, not just during me too, but a lot of pushback on that view of male sexuality. And how do we draw men into a healthier version that says it's about a relationship, even if it's a relationship for today, but still, how do we do that with the full respect for the humanity and the citizenship of the other? How do we see each other as mutual sexual citizens to use them an expression from Jennifer Hirsch at Columbia university, where we respect the rights of others and see ourselves as well as having agency and autonomy and rights. And I think me too has led to even more of that. So I think it's important to say, I see a lot of men and young men out there kind of saying, I that old script doesn't work, help me figure out what the right one is. And I think there's a lot of young men of all, you know, sexual orientations and gender identities saying this has been obvious to me for the beginning that, you know, any partner, potential partner is a full equal with agency and autonomy. And I respect that.

Speaker 4 ([08:17](#)):

I've heard from a lot of young men that they're also a awkward, you know, when it comes to interactions with those that they're sexually attracted to. And as most people starting off are, and, and there's this space of what do I do to make myself seem like I'm a sufficient or well experienced person in this world of, of sexual interaction. And what happens with that space is that you get a lot of that from film or you get it from TV or you get it from social media, but at the same time, there's this new say dichotomy to it where you also see the downside of doing it wrong. There is a dialogue going on though, amongst men to understand what they've experienced, right? So they're talking to each other, they're trying to understand what each other has done or has not done or chooses to do or chooses to not do, and then have us as the adults and the experts and the parents be the guardrails to make sure that whatever is circulating in those chat rooms or in those conversations is not going down the wrong rabbit hole.

New Speaker ([09:16](#)):

Well, how can young males show up without the fear of people judging?

Speaker 3 ([09:20](#)):

You know, what we try to do in some of our group education and Che's alluding to that, how to create a space where other guys can say, yeah, man, I'm tired of being judged too. As part of a conversation that says, look, we all kind of live within this. Let me call it what it is is this of the male peer group in the sense of the pressure in often negative ways that it puts on us. And so I think it's trying to create a space that says, Hey, let's acknowledge that we've all felt that pressure. We've all felt like I wish somebody else would, you know, be brave enough to stand up with me and speak out against that harmful behavior. These are not easy conversations that young men want to come into. And when we do these at times in schools or after school programming and often, you know, this is the really challenging one, right?

Speaker 3 ([10:06](#)):

Let's talk about sex. We are a country that feels very squeamish talking about it. You know, parents and teachers often come into the conversation in a way of if we wanna reduce sexual behavior or sexual activity, rather than let's talk openly and freely about it. And so I think the importance of creating a safe space with thoughtful facilitators who are sex positive in the sense of saying sex is not problem, consent and health and healthy sexuality are the issues that we, we want to achieve. But going in with an open discussion to say, we are all sexual beings, your sexual feelings are normal and natural. They are life, your sexuality, your sexual drive, your sexual desires are not the problem. The problem is the issue is how do we express those? You've led these with some of, uh, Promundo's work and, and even before or so, I know you've got lots of comments on this too.

New Speaker ([10:59](#)):

I think it's completely about trying to not approach them as the lecturers, but I think in the past I've used the word referees. So coming into a space, thinking like how can I cultivate a conversation amongst peers to get to some sort of revelation or discovery as opposed to a sex ed class, where I'm gonna show you some slides and a weird seventies, you know, a sex ed video about condom usage, and then that's gonna be it. I think what I've seen be most effective is to give them the space to speak on what they are going through. But to get to that point, there is a prerequisite of establishing it as a safe space and, and as a space for them to be brave and to be comfortable in speaking their minds, which is hard to do, but also extremely invaluable because once that's established, you can really get to the heart of, of what they're thinking about.

Speaker 4 ([11:55](#)):

And it all starts again with just rethinking the concept of facilitation and coming to it as a space of wanting to cultivate and be the conduit of conversation, as opposed to being the leader of the conversation, which I think we as adults can do sometimes with youth in that we are more experienced and therefore assume that we should lead those types of dialogues. But I think they're just as sufficiently equipped, if not more equipped to speak to what's going on in their lives, they just don't necessarily have the proper vocabulary sometimes to express that. And that's why we're there to support that conversation.

Speaker 2 ([12:33](#)):

How does a parent spur a conversation about gender equity with their son? I mean, how does he, or she have an explicit conversation about consent?

Speaker 3 ([12:42](#)):

It's not as if, you know, Hey, my child has reached puberty. Now let's have that conversation. I think it really is. How do we start young? You know, our awareness of ourselves as sexual being is from our youngest ages of being aware of ourselves <laugh> and who we are in relation to others. And I think it really is about starting that conversation much earlier. Did you create an environment where you've had open conversations with your three year old or your four year old who will make a joke or play about girls can't do that and a conversation. And then to your boy about girls can do anything that boys can do. And here's why, or, you know, why do you think that haven't you seen, you know, mommy do this haven't you seen a woman in your life do this as well. So those are conversations that need to start very young, just as you know, the questions of where did babies come from?

Speaker 3 ([13:30](#)):

Where did my sister come from? How did that baby get in mommy's tummy, you know, start at three and four. How to help parents figure out that there's not like one day we have the explicit conversation at 13, but it really is a moving target of having it at appropriate levels to talk about sexuality from that early. And that does make parents very nervous to think about how to do that. I'm not talking about, you're gonna talk about all the details of penetrative sex to your three year old or your four year old, but you are going to talk about intimacy things that mom and dad do, or dad and dad, or mom and mom do together without going into the kinds of details that we will with an adolescent. But to begin to have those conversations early is so key. I think it is about creating a style between parents and children, that sexuality and sex is something we can talk about from earlier ages.

Speaker 4 ([14:25](#)):

What's funny about this question is that even my experience feels outdated now, cause I have younger brothers who have been talked to in a totally different way than I was talked to as a child. And I think it's been quite interesting to, to see the evolution of conversations around gender. One of my youngest brothers, who's only 13. He, at one point he had a revelation that he might be asexual. And then a year later he was like, no, I'm not nevermind. And they were like, okay, I had never experienced that type of accessibility or fluidity or knew that I could even assess my own gender or my understandings of gender at that age in such a way. So it's been quite interesting to see how dynamic this new space is. So I would say maybe the biggest part now is just education for parents and having them fit comfortable to have those types of conversations, to be able to adapt and or respond to their children's inquiries in a beneficial way. Cause it seems like the youth are gonna hear these terms and these dialogues regardless. So it's best to be prepared to not

Speaker 2 ([15:29](#)):

How can young men be engaged, as gender equity allies. And beyond that, uh, how do you support young males to call out transgressions by others?

New Speaker ([15:38](#)):

Looking at young men? I mean the, the experiences, the attitudes and Che just gave, you know, an example of even the generational, you know, and sub generational differences are so huge that, you know, this category of young men is huge. I think there's a lot of young men who are already acting as gender equity allies, who, you know, their first experiences of who they've encountered and Che gave his own of, you know, of growing up with women, led households that, you know, kind of, of course I live gender equality. Of course I believe in it. I think there's a lot of young men who already are allies on this. The issue is defining sort of where and how, how can they feel empowered to act out what they already believe, which is that women are their full equals that, you know, heterosexuality is not the only thing that's normal.

Speaker 3 ([16:28](#)):

It is, you know, that all forms of sexual expression between consenting individuals, that to understand the plurality of sexuality as well. I think there's a generation of young people and even of an older generation who already got this. And so I think many times our work as Promundo has been engaging that engaging that energy and those young men in particular who already believe that, just giving them a space to say what you do and already believe, let us together turn up the volume. So the educational materials that we develop are manhood 2.0 curriculum was developed together with young people and young men in particular, but there's also young women's component and individuals of all gender

identities and sexual orientation. When we start it off in Brazil and our adaptation for the US, it was young people who are co-authors of it with us, cuz they know how to, you know, have these conversations. Many of them have, and they already believe that

Speaker 4 ([17:24](#)):

A lot of young men see what's happening around them and emulate what's happening or follow the lead of those who they look up to. And it can be very hard to break out of that. You know, that theory applies to soldiers, to politicians. Like it's not just young men that fall into that trap of like that looks right or that person seems like they have a high level of authority. I should follow this. And therefore I shouldn't feel bad if I make issues or transgres because I was just told to do that. Right. I think to get out of that space, there's also this space of self discovery and being an individual that comes into play. And it's really important that as young men and those who are male identifying find their identity, they become empowered to embrace that sense of individuality so that they can make those, those calls to say, you know, like Gary was saying like, Hey, this is not right.

Speaker 4 ([18:26](#)):

Or this was, this is a weird interaction that I saw. You should probably not do that. I think it just requires them to kind of break free of the groupthink that comes with being a young person who doesn't know what they're doing. It is a bit of responsibility, but I don't think it's too much to ask. What does everyone young person want, but to stand out, to be an individual, to be seen as unique, right? And if we can support them, feeling unique in that they're being allies and that being a actual, like benefit to their identity all the better. But I think first and foremost, it just comes to them, grounding themselves or finding themselves more comfortable with their own individuality as opposed to following the group.

Speaker 2 ([19:09](#)):

Can you talk a bit about initiatives in this area that have had some success?

New Speaker ([19:14](#)):

We started our manhood 2.0 approach as something we've been working on. It comes out of what we originally called it as program H H for hombres in Spanish and hombres in Portuguese from our work in Latin America as a way to create a safe space for young men to talk about what is healthy, what is it, how is it going? How do you define it for yourself? How do you apply it in real life? It's a group education model, but we try to build onto it with either peer advocates who are part of the process or something else happening in terms of educational activities online or around you. So that we get a converse around what is healthy masculinity. We go into it, of course, with some ideas of what that should be, but it's really a very experiential process where young men come up with a definition themselves.

Speaker 3 ([20:01](#)):

It comes out of hall Farian experience around how we, by having greater critical awareness of how norms are created around us, how we can become co authors of those norms, how we can question systems of power and oppression around us and how we can become, you know, as Che was just alluding to how we can feel a sense of our own individuality within that to say, I get how those norms are produced. Here's how I want them to be for me. That essentially is what we try to do with it. We've implemented, it partnered in 30 something countries. And then we also do some work with more recently, we're doing work with younger boys ages four to 13, and that is mostly with parents, teachers, other educators, coaches on how to create a space with younger boys. Obviously four year old is

different than a 12 year old and lots in between, but how to create a space, including both a curriculum that we're developing together with boys and girls club of America, with partners in the UK and France and in Mexico as well.

Speaker 3 ([21:03](#)):

But also just some, uh, card deck that we put to together of how to conversation starters with parents of making it easier, to have more difficult conversations. It's not like you start a conversation immediately with your 10 year old, which is kind of the, actually the, the average age that boys start to have access to porn of saying, Hey son, let's talk about what you're seeing on porn. This is basically saying that come conversation. That's not a way we start a conversation. We started about lots of other things. And then it may end up about what you're seeing in those spaces, how you've heard others talk about sexuality. But what we tried in the card deck is for younger boys, the kind of middle school boys to have different ways that parents can start a conversation about topics that are often difficult. There's not like a checklist of what's right or wrong answers, but just how to create that safe space that you feel like you can start some of the more difficult conversations, not only about consent, but also thinking about racism and racial justice, and also thinking about bullying of multiple forms, homophobic bullying in particular and what you may have seen and how you can stand up to that.

Speaker 3 ([22:10](#)):

Less of I've got the answer because I'm older than you telling you what to do and much more a let's help you make meaning of this for yourself, but scaffolded, you know, referee to use Che's word there, you know, in a way where we push back when, you know, Hey, maybe this idea is kind of problematic. Let's talk about that, but it's really not trying to be didactic. And it's really not trying to be. I've got all the answers.

New Speaker ([22:35](#)):

Are there any other resources that you can direct parents to who want to explore this further?

Speaker 3 ([22:40](#)):

Certainly our, our global boyhood initiative is one Promundo website is Promundo global.org and there's a face into there. I would also send folks to A Call to Men. I think they've got some great materials as well for parents and Futures Without Violence, to other groups in the US that I think do great work on this and have resources online for how to talk to parents about these issues as well, as well as coaches and other adults in children's lives. I think we have to be careful as well. Don't think it's just parents who have these conversations. In fact, at times with an uncle, a brother or another adult in a young person's life, sometimes that conversation is even easier with an aunt or an uncle. So I think all of those groups, ours and, and the other two I mentioned are called Men in Futures Without Violence, have some great materials online for adults to talk to young people. Che you could probably mention a few that I've forgotten as well. I think Medium has some super interesting articles that in my days we would send across each other's bows to read, but there's always people sharing their narratives on those types of websites. That can be really interesting. And also a lot of professional writers and academics that share their stories in those spaces as well. I would suggest people just doing their own research, but also researching the individuals that are writing those stories. Cause not everyone comes from the same background. So it should be important to recognize who's telling the story before completely buying into what you read, but it's always important to, to look for fresh narratives on sites like Medium, that can be really helpful.

Speaker 2 ([24:17](#)):

Dr. Barker, any final thoughts,

Speaker 3 ([24:19](#)):

There's an opportunity and there's a crisis before us at the same time. I mean, you know, the current research shows us that young people in the US are having less sex than they have in a couple of decades. Now, some folks find that to be a good thing in terms of teen pregnancy rates and, and STIs, but it's also troubling because it does go hand in hand with what we see of data on youth loneliness and particularly boys, and it goes hand in hand with what we know about porn and how ubiquitous it has become both as part of individual sexual practice and also kind of their sexual information that they're receiving. So I think we've gotta look at this moment and say, there's a lot of conversations we've gotta have that are better about what healthy sexuality is. And I think a lot of our looking in at young people's sexuality has often been kind of as police wanting to say, you know, you're gonna mess up your life.

Speaker 3 ([25:14](#)):

Don't do it instead of a, this is a part of your life. And of course it is life <laugh>. How do we help you be the sexual person you are and thoughtful, caring ways. Another great resource that I think I alluded to before is the book called Sexual Citizens by Jennifer Hurst and Shama Khan. And I think that is a great, great presentation. They look at sexual behaviors and young people on Columbia university campus, but there's a lot of great insights beyond a college campus around how to think about as you know, a key part of our lives. I think that definition of raising our sons and daughters to see themselves as full sexual citizens is really a key way that says we can't look away from it. We can't try to repress our sons and daughters sexuality. It's about helping them be in the world, healthy, connected, caring as they think about their sexuality.

Speaker 3 ([26:09](#)):

And is that they think about themselves as sexual beings. Cause I think it's so thoughtful about thinking about what we want the state of our sons and daughters to be in terms of their sex lives to say it's not about preventing sex. It is about promoting good caring, respectful sex. So I think we've got a moment that says we've gotta affirm as parents and educators and those who care about supporting the younger generations of how to think about sexuality in those ways of acknowledging it's part of our lives and how full our lives can be when our intimate lives are also satisfactory and, and happy and fulfilling. So I think with our sons in particular and what all those things that I just mentioned together with me too, you get, and we'll go back to that word that Che and I were using before you get a huge amount of confusion.

Speaker 3 ([27:01](#)):

The good news about confusion is we can take it and make it an educable moment. We can say, yeah, lots of young people are getting information about sex from porn. We need to call out the harmful pieces of it, but let's also call out that, you know, young people are learning about some things about sex, sometimes in positive ways about it on porn. And it's obliging us as parents to have conversations we maybe didn't want to have, and we can't step away from that conversation and ignore it. I think that's the issue to me is how to call boys in terms of my focus area of how do we cause boys into a conversation around not thinking that their sexuality is something they've gotta be ashamed of or to hide, but to figure out how to be healthy, can connected, caring when they think about themselves as sexual beings.

Speaker 2 ([27:48](#)):

Well, thank you both very much for joining us today and for our listeners who want more information about gender equity and young males, please visit our website@www.partnershipformaleoyouth.org where you will find more information and resources.