



BREAKTHROUGH: ACTION TOOLKIT





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INTRODUCTION



What is BreakthroughU?

BreakthroughU follows four college students, Sam, Norma, Norm, and Oscar, as they navigate their lives, identities, relationships, and activities on campus. A three-part narrative video series, BreakthroughU uses puppets to explore intersectionality, gender norms, and culture change. These concepts are central to Breakthrough's mission and theory of change. By unpacking these broad, theoretical concepts using relatable themes, the series empowers its audience to take action to change the culture of violence in their communities.

In addition to bringing the concepts of intersectionality, gender norms, and culture change to life within the specific campus environment at BreakthroughU, the videos explore instances of gender based discrimination and violence as they commonly occur in college life. By playing out these scenarios involving Norm, Norma, Sam, and Oscar, the videos address a range of issues, including intimate partner violence (in heterosexual and LGBTQ couples); non-consensual image sharing; sexual harassment; discrimination against gender nonconforming and transgender people; hypermasculinity; and gender policing.

These videos connect the dots between the culture we learn, practice, and create; gender norms; and the individual and collective power we all have to challenge and transform culture and create change in our communities.

Why a toolkit?

We created this toolkit for YOU. It's a guide for students, facilitators, organizations, and partners with ways you can use the BreakthroughU video series to navigate complex conversations around gender norms, intersectionality, and culture change. This toolkit supplements the narrative and characters from the videos by offering discussion questions, interactive activities with simple instructions for facilitators of all levels, and a menu of actions to create change in your communities.

The toolkit is organized into sections that correspond to common locations on college campuses in order to encourage students and facilitators to break down the silos separating issue areas, and instead look holistically at the way our culture supports and enables all forms of gender-based violence. You'll also find a glossary of terms and a list of resources Breakthrough offers to support you in your next steps. These include an action hotline to support your activism, a digital storytelling platform (THE G WORD), and a curated action center on our website.

For those looking for an in-depth analysis of Breakthrough's perspective on intersectionality, gender norms, and culture change, this toolkit also includes comprehensive essays on these subjects.

Please do let us know how you're using this toolkit to enact change and spark powerful conversations in your community by emailing us at breakthroughU@breakthrough.tv or contacting us on Twitter at [@BreakthroughUS](https://twitter.com/BreakthroughUS).

What is Breakthrough?

Breakthrough is a global human rights organization that uses media, art, and technology along with community mobilization and leadership development to make gender-based violence unacceptable. We invest in young people's capacity to create iconic, disruptive change to the cultures, language, attitudes, and everyday actions that perpetuate gender-based violence in college life. We view students as experts, and work with them to identify and design challenges to the norms and practices considered most harmful in a given campus culture. Breakthrough's methodology works by shifting individual hearts and minds, and emboldening people to transform norms and practices in their homes, communities, and the institutions to which they belong. Breakthrough uses culture to change culture in order to end gender-based discrimination and violence.



GLOSSARY

In this toolkit, we use quite a few terms related to gender that we would like to go over now, so we can all be oriented from the same understanding. This is not an exhaustive list of terms, so feel free to add to them as you lead your own workshops or discussions.

Biological Sex

Think the “sex of the person” assigned at birth. A medical term designating a certain combination of gonads, chromosomes, external gender organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormonal balances. Common terms are “male,” “female” and “intersex.” [\[Source\]](#)

Culture

Culture is the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society. It's lifestyles, value systems, beliefs, and practices. It's the narrative we're immersed in every day. It's how we make sense of the world. It's our stories, our humor, our collective experiences, and understanding of our world. And none of us inhabits just one culture: you might swim in a tasty soup of your religious culture, your urban/suburban/rural culture, your school or workplace culture, your country's culture, and the culture(s) of your hobbies and interests: cooking, cricket, Comic Con.

But culture is not static. We don't just passively consume it. We create it. So we also have the power to change it. Culture drives the way we treat each other: what's “normal,” what's acceptable. And sometimes we need to change that. And when we do, we can build homes, families, communities, and institutions where dignity, equality, and justice—the core values of human rights—carry the day. We can begin in our own spheres. That's why, and how, human rights start with you. [\[Source\]](#)

You can learn more about how we all can change culture in our essay on [page 28](#).

Gender

Gender refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex. Behavior that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender-normative; behaviors that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender non-conformity. [\[Source\]](#)



Genderfluid

Genderfluid is an umbrella term for transsexuals, cross-dressers (transvestites), transgenderists, genderqueers, and people who identify as neither female nor male and/or as neither a man or as a woman.

Genderqueer

Genderqueer refers to a person whose gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders. This identity is usually related to or in reaction to the social construction of gender, gender stereotypes and the gender binary system. Some genderqueer people identify under the transgender umbrella while others do not. [\[Source\]](#)

Gender Expression

Simply put, gender expression is the way in which a person expresses their gender identity through clothing, behavior, posture, mannerisms, speech patterns, activities and more. This can



change over time – day by day and even hour by hour. These gender expressions sometimes have descriptive names like “femme” or “masculine” or “soft butch” to correspond with how they are perceived and distinguished socially and culturally.

Gender Identity

An individual’s internal sense of gender, which may or may not be the same as one’s gender assigned at birth. Some gender identities are “woman,” “transman,” and “agender,” but there are many more. Since gender identity is internal, it isn’t necessarily visible to others. Additionally, gender identity is often conflated with sex, but they are separate concepts. [\[Source\]](#)

Gender Norms

Gender Norms refer to social attitudes about what behaviors, preferences, products, professions, or knowledge are appropriate for women and men. Gender norms draw upon and reinforce gender stereotypes, which are widely held, idealized beliefs about women and men, femininities and masculinities.

Gender norms and behaviors are produced through social institutions (such as families, schools, workplaces, laboratories, universities, or boardrooms) and wider cultural products (such as textbooks, literature, film, and video games). [\[Source\]](#)

To learn more about gender norms and how they affect our culture, check out our essay on [page 25](#).

Intersectionality

The term intersectionality was coined by civil rights activist and professor Kimberlé Crenshaw and can be defined as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.” [\[Source\]](#)

To learn more about intersectionality, and how its nuances impact our power to create change, check out our essay on [page 23](#).

Sexual Orientation

The type of sexual, romantic, and/or physical attraction someone feels toward others. Often labeled based on the gender identity/expression of the person and who they are attracted to. Common labels: lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, etc. [\[Source\]](#).

Transgender/Trans

Transgender (sometimes shortened to trans or TG) people are those whose psychological self (“gender identity”) differs from the social expectations for the physical sex they were born with. To understand this, one must understand the difference between biological sex, which is one’s body (genitals, chromosomes, etc.), and social gender, which refers to levels of masculinity and femininity. Often, society conflates sex and gender, viewing them as the same thing. But gender and sex are not the same thing. For example, a person could be assigned female at birth, based on their body, but have a masculine gender identity or identify as a man. Transgender is not a sexual orientation; transgender people may have any sexual orientation. It is important to acknowledge that while some people may fit under this definition of transgender, they may not identify as such.



CHARACTERS



Norma

She/her
Junior
Major: Physics, Minor: Africana Studies

Norma is an active member of her student body. She is a founding member of Minorities in STEM, a student group she began as a support network for other women of color in the science departments at BreakthroughU. She considers herself an intersectional feminist and loves talking about sex positivity as part of a few online communities.

She also *loves* gaming, and often participates in LAN parties on campus. As a Peer Educator she has training in identifying relationship abuse and understands how prevalent this is in her campus community.



Norm

He/his
Senior
Major: Political Science

Norm is **big** on intramural football – and knitting. But that’s a *long* story. You’ll probably find him playing club football, talking about his bracket or fantasy team, or in the library trying to stay on top of school work. He is pretty introverted, so adjusting to college life wasn’t easy.

He’s graduating soon and college wasn’t the Animal House dream he thought it would be. However, he is graduating with a great GPA and a job with a senator, so he must have done something right!



Sam

They/their
First year
Pre-med track, Major: Psychology

Sam is a high profile activist at BreakthroughU. You’re most likely to find them at an Open Mic Night in town performing spoken word, or hanging out in the student union handing out flyers for a rally. Sam is genderfluid, and is financially independent from their parents, who live in a conservative town. As a result, they also have to make time for a

part-time restaurant job on top of their activism, school work, and social life. Sam’s well-known on campus because of their deep commitment to ensuring non-binary students at BreakthroughU are supported and able to thrive during their college years and beyond.



Oscar

He/his
Sophomore
Major: Economics

Oscar is pretty well-known on campus. He's a member of a top-tier fraternity and studies Econ. As a result, he finds that a lot of people assume he's straight, and he finds it uncomfortable to have to come out to people every. single. day. He has a big personality and is usually the center of attention in any room he's in. He started dating Michael at the end of his first year, and things got intense fast. He's never been in a relationship before, and often feels like he's a little out of his depth in this one. He recognizes that things aren't healthy, but doesn't really know what to do about it.



Michael

He/his
Junior
Double Major: Film and Business

Michael came out as bisexual after his first year in college. He's had a hard time adjusting to college life, because his first-year friends didn't really support him or understand how he could be attracted to both men *and* women. He met Oscar when he was going through a rough patch, and now he relies on Oscar for most of his needs. He's really passionate about filmmaking and his favorite director is Wong Kar-Wai. You can find him in the arts building, on a computer, editing his latest project.

Aliyah



Lionel



Cathy



Nate



Coach



Cathy's Mom





THE HOME

A home is one of the first places we experience culture. We acquire it from our parents, siblings, and family, as well as from the media and toys we interact with as children. Over time, our home becomes a learning ground for norms, expectation, and attitudes reflected in society – though, of course, they vary depending on our family and their identities.

Home means many things to many people – and we can have more than one home at any given time. Our family home, our first home, the home where our parents live, our dorm, the place where we sleep, where we have sex, or a combination of these things might all feel like home at different points in our lives. What connects all these is that home is a place where we should always feel safe, welcome, and protected. And if we're at a residential college, the lines between "school" and "home" are easily blurred.

Issues Covered:

- Culture change
- Gender policing
- Gender norms
- Non-consensual photo sharing
- Slut-shaming

For Cathy (Culture Change 101), home is where she learned the word "dyke." Her mother would use it to mean the exact opposite of how she, as a girl, should act – girly, polite, quiet, well-dressed, well-groomed, straight, and popular. The word "dyke" described other girls who weren't right – those who didn't fit into rigid and prescribed gender norms of being a girl. And like her mother, Cathy learnt to use that word to show her disapproval for those people (whom she perceived as women), who didn't conform to her idea of femininity, as she does when Sam bumps into her.



Cathy calls Aliyah (Culture change 101) a slut because of the way she's dressed. This is because Cathy has a very specific culturally-enforced view of how a lady should be, namely: pure and chaste. Women who don't conform to the cultural preference for "innocence" – which often has racial connotations because women of color are so hypersexualized – are more vulnerable to harassment, violence, and mistreatment when they attempt to report this. Same goes for how Cathy spoke to Aliyah (Culture

Change 101). She called Aliyah a slut to show her disapproval for people (whom she again perceived as women) who did not meet her expectations of women's purity. This is an example of a cultural norm, learned and reinforced at home, or elsewhere and then perpetuated by this person.

Here's the other thing about home: it's also one of the primary spaces for important things like eating, sleeping, and sex. First, it's important to note that not everyone is sexually active, either out of choice or because of other circumstances. However, many people do enjoy sex, and Norma (Gender Norms 101) is one of them. As long as all participants are into it and communicating openly, sex – including foreplay, penetration, roleplaying, taking intimate photos, and recording the experience – can be a healthy and fun thing to do!

The key here is consent. Remember, consent should not be assumed – no matter how many times we've been with someone previously. The same goes for intimate photos or videos – we can't assume that someone would be okay with us showing or sharing these photos with other people just because they were sent to us, or because they were alright with us taking them. Sharing photos without permission is a violation of consent, and it can really hurt the person in the photos.

When Norm (Gender Norms 101) shared photos of Norma, he did so because he felt rejected when Norma had moved on to another person. He was angry that she, as a woman, had moved



on, while he, as a man, hadn't. There's a certain sense of entitlement at play here – one that is based in gender norms around masculinity. Norma has the autonomy to choose who she hooks up with, and when – and Norm should have respected her decision to move on. After all, they had talked about the fact that their interaction was casual.

After the photo is shared, we see how Norma's classmates react to her. They blame and "slut-shame" her, because we live in a culture where women are constantly objectified in sexual terms, but are shamed for acting on their own sexual desires. This is something that happens all the time, and not just to Norma – when intimate photos and videos of famous celebrities were released online after their iCloud accounts were hacked, we saw the high level of shaming and victim-blaming that exists for this practice of gender-based violence. Non-consensual image sharing is not seen as the



serious violation that it is: a form of online sexual assault. We need to elevate our conversations around consent to include building consent culture in our online interactions, too.

What's more, as a woman of color, Norma most probably experienced a racialized dimension to the comments people were making about her. Women of color are often over-sexualized and fetishized, which not only makes them more vulnerable to violence but also means that if they do try to report violence against them, it is often taken less seriously and dismissed as less believable.

Let's Discuss!

- What was the first time you realized you had a gender?
- Do you think there is a difference in how gender roles affect men and boys versus women and girls?
- Do you think that the way someone is raised can affect their gender identity? Why? How?
- What norms and expectations around gender have your family, friends, or school taught you?
- Can you think of ways that those who are perceived as, and who identify as male can also be hurt by gender norms and expectations?
- What norms and expectations around race have your family, friends, or school taught you?
- What does consent mean to you?
- What are ways we can practice consent?
- Do you feel the same rules around consent apply when sexting or online? Why or why not?

Take Action!

- Respond to victim blaming by [flooding social media](#) or apps like YikYak with positive messages that call out this behavior.
- [Use storytelling](#) to encourage a sex-positive, non-shaming approach to conversations around intimate photos.
- Run [reactive campaigns](#) when incidents occur that show solidarity with victims.
- Instead of getting competitive about sex, get competitive about calling out the ways we pressure people to have sex. Keep score and [share strategies](#) and tips to step up your game.



Activity: Toy Box

Part 1: Your Childhood Toy

Go around person-by-person and have each answer the following question: “What was your favorite toy as a child?” Toys can mean different things to different people – it can be a physical object, something imaginary, a family member, a pet, or something totally different. Any answer is fine. Once everyone answers, ask them if they see any themes or connections between the toys people had and their identities. Then ask the following questions:

- Why was that toy your favorite? Was the reason you chose that toy or were given that toy influenced by your parents, media, or friends?
- For those of you who had toys that were not “typical” for your gender, did you feel like you were treated differently for having that toy?

Part 2: Buying Toys/Books

Based off the [Gender Stereotypes Activity](#)

Have participants spend 5-7 minutes shopping on amazon.com or toysrus.com for a gift for a five year old child. The gift should be a toy or a children’s book in the \$10-20 range. A third of the class should shop for a girl, a third should shop for a boy, and a third should shop for a gender-neutral toy. Ask the students to search for specific toys or books they thought of themselves (and not search for boys or girls or gender neutral toys). Then ask the following questions:

- How was the exercise? Difficult or easy? How did you feel?
- How are the toys advertised in gendered ways? What words, adjectives, colors, and themes do you see in these advertisements?
- Do you think the choices parents make about their children’s toys are meant to influence the child’s beliefs about roles and norms for women/girls and men/boys?
- Did this exercise bring up any additional memories for you about toys and gender roles during your childhood?



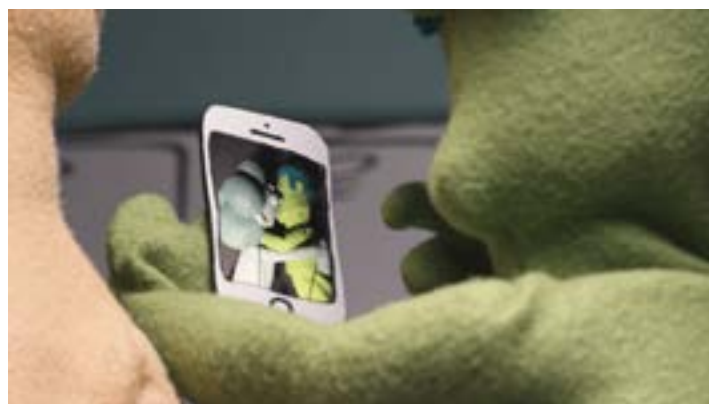


THE LOCKER ROOM

Locker rooms are so much more than a place to get changed before or after practice or a game. They're spaces for team-building, for getting pumped to win the game, and to lift spirits when you don't. Locker rooms are for joking around and hanging out with friends. Every campus has a culture. Every team has one, too. And each locker room has its own culture as well. What that means is that there are certain norms, behaviors, expectations, and language that define that locker room. This is also the case for other meeting places like break rooms, sleepovers, or pre-games and parties, to name a few.

The men's locker room at BreakthroughU, like men's locker rooms on many other campuses, is like a classroom for norms around "being a man." This is a place where expectations of how a man should act are put in place by role models – coaches and captains – and peers. One such expectation is that men will have lots of sex with lots of women. Norm and his friends spend much of their time in the locker room talking about sex, who they're doing it with, and how much they're having (Gender Norms 101). These sorts of conversations can feel like an important aspect of male-bonding, and there is pressure to participate so that you're not excluded from the group. This sort of storytelling can often become competitive, and when this happens, sexual scoring is the result.

Let's be clear here. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having lots of consensual sex and celebrating that fact. Sexual scoring becomes dangerous when it makes people feel pressured to have sex at any cost. This is when we see people push or coerce someone into having sex with them. Another consequence of normalizing this kind of behavior is that people decide to share "trophies" of their hook ups – like intimate photos – without the appropriate consent, like in the case of Norm and Norma (Gender Norms 101). This is not okay.



Issues Covered:

- Gender norms
- Masculinity
- Non-consensual photo sharing
- Sexual scoring
- Victim blaming

Let's unpack what went down with Norm and Norma. It all started in class, where Norm and Norma swapped numbers. From there, they exchanged a few flirty texts which eventually led to sex. Norma likes having sex with different people. Norm also likes having sex with different people. They had a fun night together which included a sexy photoshoot that was consensual. It was a night to remember and both Norm and Norma felt good about their time together. So what went wrong?

When conversation in the locker room turned into sharing stories about who's hooking up with whom, Norm finds out that one of his buddies is now having sex with Norma. Even though it was only casual, and neither Norm or Norma were interested in taking things further, it's still a sore spot for Norm. Why? Because he doesn't feel very manly in that moment. For Norm, sharing Norma's picture is a power play – it impresses his teammates and friends, and it's a way to get back at Norma, because even though he didn't want anything more with her, he doesn't like that she has moved on. Entitlement, much? Even though these are pictures they consensually took together, she didn't consent to anyone apart from him seeing them. Essentially, Norma became a trophy instead of a person, and a means to an end for Norm.

The gender double-standard is very clear here: for Norm, sharing this photo proved that he was able to score with an attractive woman, therefore cementing his place as one of the guys. Norma,



on the other hand, was shamed. According to everyone at school, it was her fault for being naked, her fault for having sex, her fault that those pictures existed. But in reality, it was Norm's fault for violating her consent and sharing private photos with all his friends. These differences in how we react to men and women's sexuality is especially obvious when it comes to non-consensual image sharing. Women who are victims of this type of violence are often further harmed by the shaming and lack of support from peers.



There are some popular myths that imply that there are only certain men who perpetrate violence, and only certain women who can be victims. These false narratives are often racially motivated, and they imply, for example, that only white women who are not sexually active or those who fit into rigid ideas around being a "lady" can be victims. The hypersexualization of women of color (like Norma) makes it easier for people to blame them for abuse or harms they had no control over. You've probably also heard people suggest that if a man is good looking, successful, powerful, or popular he "can't" perpetrate violence, because there's an expectation that all women would be willing participants and therefore give him their consent. But here's the thing: anyone of any gender can perpetrate or be the victim of violence. We need to stop privileging certain students over others so that everyone can be treated with dignity, equality, and respect.

Discussion Questions:

- When you hear the phrase "be a man" or "man up," what comes to mind?
- When you hear the phrase "act like a lady," what comes to mind?
- Have you ever experienced competitive storytelling?
- How have you seen sexual scoring play out on your campus?
- Do you know anyone who has experienced non-consensual image sharing ("revenge porn")? How did people react to the incident? Do you think they would have reacted differently if the person was of a different gender or race?
- How do you think non-consensual sharing could especially hurt women of color? Those from the LGBTQIA community?

Take Action!

- Get competitive about calling out actions that pressure people to have sex. Keep score and share strategies and tips to step up your game.
- A "No Blame" campaign: collect and share examples of victim blaming on campus and offer solutions and healthier frameworks.
- Use stories or examples of this practice to create understanding of the harms and impacts that arise as a result.
- Transform conversations around consent to include discussions of intimate photos and videos.
- Offer new, real narratives from survivors in your own community. Run campaigns that seek to broaden campus-wide understanding of who can be a victim.



Activity: Locker Room Talk

Based off the [Language Activity](#).

Below is a list of common expressions and words in the English language that are featured in the videos. Please read each statement carefully and indicate if you have ever used this expression or heard someone else use it. You will then rate these words/phrases from 1-5 if you believe they are positive (1), negative (5), neutral (3) or somewhere inbetween. After you rate the expressions, please list what characteristics of the group are associated or implied by the expression. Please do this exercise individually first and report back to the larger group.

Phrase	Have you heard or used this?	Rating (see above)	Characteristics of group referred to in the expression
Pussywhipped			
Dyke			
Slut			
Prude			
Boys will be boys			
You're so sensitive			
That's so gay			
Beach body			
Good girl			
Girlfriend material			



THE HALLWAY

Public spaces, like hallways, parks, plazas, streets, movie theaters, etc, are places we experience culture and – in particular – popular culture. Popular culture is the TV, movies, literature, books, posters, podcasts, video games, fashion trends, pop culture blogs, and advertisements we consume on a daily basis. All forms of culture are created, and popular culture is no different. Pop culture packages and codifies what society considers acceptable. Whether we're deliberately buying into these norms with what we choose to watch, listen to and wear or just absorbing them subconsciously through ads, language, and images we're exposed to, we can't escape culture. It's everywhere.

A glance at the average cop show or stand up comedy act suggests that, for example, a whole lot of dead women and a whole lot of creepy hate are acceptable. In pop culture and media spaces, violence against women is often gratuitous, glorified, or "hilarious". And consent? Representations of consent are few and far between. Most often consent is depicted as assumed, or confusing—but it's usually completely absent from narratives around sex.

Nate and Lionel (Culture Change 101) are two average guys who, like many of us, have learned a lot from popular culture. Pop culture taught them how men are supposed to act, how they should dress if they want to be cool, and how to interact with women. A lot of mainstream media reinforces rigid gender norms and expectations around how men and women should act, and there isn't much representation of people who don't conform to this gender binary or who defy these norms. When someone acts in a way that doesn't conform to these cultural rules and expectations, we often see people try to correct them by policing the way they behave or dress, their mannerisms, and other forms of expression. This happens at many different levels: schools reinforce this through strict dress codes (which often unfairly target women), our families do it, our peers do it, and even those we consider our friends do it, too.

This is what happened when Lionel (Culture Change 101) brought up wanting to have sex with the girl he's seeing. Nate doesn't know many guys who say things like that, and the guys that do are often called out for being too soft. This is where that impulse to reinforce cultural norms comes in, and we see it when Nate mocks and belittles Lionel, questioning his manhood. He uses the word "pussywhipped" to imply that Lionel has given up his power to his girlfriend, whereas in our culture, power, sex, and violence are usually affiliated with masculinity. Nate's "pussywhipped" comment is an example of gender policing. And while this scene is exaggerated to drive home the way we use language and loaded words to police each other, we're sure you can think of other more subtle things you hear all the time.



Issues Covered:

- Media representation of gender
- Gender policing
- Gender norms
- Sexual harassment
- Culture change

Gender policing doesn't help anyone. Instead, it stifles the expressions, emotions, and identities of the people targeted by this practice. It's interesting to consider why people feel the need to police other people's gender expression. More often than not it comes from a need to prove their own conformity to these norms. It can take a lot of courage to stand up to your friends, and stand for respect and consent, but in doing so Lionel challenges Nate's expectations of him, and his understanding of how men can and should act. Interpersonal action like this is an essential step towards challenging norms and changing culture for the better.



While pop culture reinforces the norms of the time, it can also be a tool that changes cultural norms. Think about ways pop culture pushes boundaries. When created thoughtfully, pop culture can make gay and trans folks everyone's neighbors. It offers us a vision or roadmap for a more inclusive future. For example it can help us imagine people of color, or women (or a combination of the two!) in the Oval Office and other positions of power. This power can be used to set new cultural standards for what is seen as normal, acceptable, and cool.

But with great power comes great responsibility. If created irresponsibly, popular culture can also normalize discrimination, harassment, and violence against certain folk – like the sexual harassment of women. Harassing women is often seen as normal; it is even considered a compliment to the woman being harassed! But it isn't, and it often makes women feel unsafe or uncomfortable in public settings. The vast majority of women in the U.S. have faced some sort of public sexual harassment. Trans* people, too, to be sure. And some men. At bars or parties, on the bus or the street, from crude gestures to an unwelcome touch. One individual incident might seem just gross or annoying, but these moments add up to a whole culture suggesting that gender-based violence and discrimination, even in their tiniest everyday forms, are no big deal. These videos tell us that they are a big deal, and that they're not inevitable—we can take action to ensure that everyone feels safe and comfortable in public settings.

Nate catcalls Norma (Intersectionality 101) on her way to class. He wants her to smile at him, and he gets in her personal space to make this known to her. A comment like this often gets dismissed as a compliment, or something casual that a woman should shrug off. This is sexual harassment, and Norma doesn't like it. She feels violated that Nate thinks of her as an object or that he's entitled to her smile, and frankly—she's not sure how he'll react if she says stands up to him. It can be hard to respond when you experience sexual harassment, because you never know if the situation could escalate. That's the thing about sexual harassment in public spaces—it's based on a power imbalance. The person doing the harassment is exploiting the fact that their target is vulnerable and sort of has to accept their comment.

That's where allies can step in. Oscar witnesses this harassment, and steps up to let Nate know that his behavior is NOT okay (Intersectionality 101). In that moment, Oscar uses his male privilege to challenge another man's sense of entitlement. When we seize our power and leverage it to take action to disrupt harmful behaviors, we can change our culture to make it safer and more inclusive for everyone.

Let's Discuss!

- What are some tropes through which men and women are represented in the media? Can you give examples?
- How are gender non-conforming and trans individuals represented in media?
- How do you think these representations affect the way women, men, gender non-conforming, and trans folk are treated or valued?
- How is harassment normalized or even encouraged in television, video games, music, and art? How is it challenged? Think of some examples.
- Can you think of examples where media has successfully challenged harmful norms? Or times it has failed to do so?



Take Action!

- Create or modify walls that everyone can contribute to that call out harmful language and behaviors and offer alternatives that are inclusive, affirming, and celebrate everyone's diversity and experience. [Like our fellow Gloria did!](#)
- Share and display media examples that demonstrate and call out harassment and emphasizes consent (ex: [Cosplay is not consent](#)) and affirms gender expression!
- Hold your friends accountable (ex: [BeThatGuy](#)).

Activity: Imagine People Complexity Bingo

Based off the same exercise from Harry Potter Alliance's [Fandom Forward - Paper Towns](#)

Hand out the following worksheet with the bingo card attached. Ask students to go around the room individually and find a person described in the box. The student will then put the name of the person in the corresponding box and move on. Students should continue to mingle and meet until one student fills out 4 in a row or diagonal and yells "Bingo!"

Someone who likes to knit.	Someone who does intramural sports.	Have someone tell you a story about their mom/dad/parents/role model.	Someone who likes gaming and plays MMORPGs.	Someone who loves science.
Someone who does activism and have them tell you about their cause!	Someone who speaks another language.	Someone who writes poetry or performs spoken word.	Someone who does cosplay.	Someone who loves Instagram.
Someone who reads/writes fanfiction.	Someone who does DIY/crafts.	Someone who is empathetic.	Someone who runs marathons.	Someone who plays a musical instrument.
Someone who is part of Greek Life.	Someone who hates the color pink.	Someone who loves makeup.	Someone who wants children.	Have someone tell you about their favorite stuffed animal.
Have someone tell you about how they got a scar.	Someone who loves weird Internet humor.	Someone who loves to bake.	Have someone tell you about their pet or favorite animal.	Someone who has tattoos.



THE BATHROOM

Bathroom accessibility is not an issue that most able-bodied, cisgender people have to think about. However, for many students, bathroom access is a very real concern. If you're someone who hasn't given it much thought, now is your chance.

Bathrooms are often the intersection of biology and gender. Generally, there are two options for public restrooms: the men's room, or the women's. But we know biology, gender, and gender expression are much more complicated than the binary that most people follow. There are many people who don't fall within the heteronormative binary, and those people discrimination and violence by the enforcement of the binary, especially with respect to bathroom use.

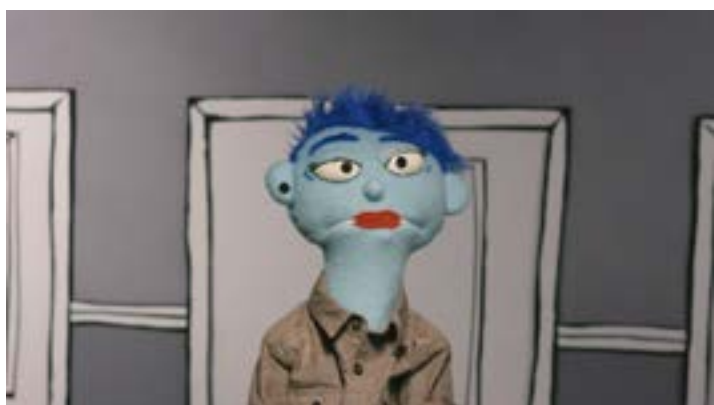
Issues Covered:

- Gender non-conforming identities
- Gender inclusive restrooms
- Gender policing

When transgender and gender nonconforming people are forced to use the bathroom that corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth, they face pain, harassment, discrimination, and even violence. Contrary to some arguments, in no way does this make anyone safer. Additionally, there are plenty of cisgender men and women who do not strictly adhere to normative masculine or feminine gender expressions, and they too are susceptible to harassment and violence in bathrooms.

One of the reasons this bathroom issue has become so politicized is because of just how pervasive harmful gender norms are in our culture. There are a number of problems with the paternalistic narrative that women need to be "protected" from predators in restrooms, the most important being that it is extremely dehumanizing and discriminatory to paint trans people as predators just by virtue of their gender identity. This narrative completely erases trans women's gender identity, equating trans women to men in dresses. It also erases the reality that trans women face on a daily basis – harassment, discrimination, and violence. Trans women are likely to experience assault in a men's restroom, while there are no reported cases of trans women committing violence against cisgender women in restrooms.

This is gender policing, the practice of regulating people's behavior and appearance in order to hold them to rigid gender norms, or limited ideas around how men and women should be. Instead of policing people's genders we should be building a culture that celebrates difference and is not just inclusive but genuinely welcoming of gender diversity. Bathrooms are an essential part of daily life and trans and gender nonconforming folk should feel safe and comfortable using the restroom they identify with.



Sam (Culture Change 101) encounters this policing, discrimination, and erasure of their identity every day at BreakthroughU. Choosing which bathroom to use shouldn't have to be a political act. Unfortunately for Sam, the reality is that they have to weigh their options: will they be viewed as a predator looking to assault women if they go into the women's bathroom? Will they be harassed or assaulted because they don't fit the image of a "man" in the men's bathroom? Most importantly, why should Sam have to choose other people's comfort

over their own safety? All Sam wants to do is pee – a basic, everyday human need – and their bathroom usage becomes another site of exclusion and potential violence. That's not right.



This isn't just about bathrooms—or other gendered facilities like showers or housing. These spaces are just manifestations of a larger cultural problem – discrimination, prejudice, and the erasure of trans and gender nonconforming identities and lives. Practices that exclude and marginalize people who do not subscribe to the cisgender cultural and societal standards.

The cool thing is that it really doesn't have to be this way. Like Cathy and Nate (Culture Change 101), we can ALL provide support and solidarity for each other, and especially for those of us who are trans and gender non-conforming. We can take a stand, challenge the norms and be strong allies, in and out of bathrooms and beyond. This isn't just a trans or gender nonconforming issue--this is everyone's issue, regardless of our gender identities. We all have something at stake in



transforming our culture so that we can all live with dignity and equality. We all have the power to spark change that will result in more people being able to realize their full potential.

Let's Discuss!

- What is the difference between sex, gender identity, and gender expression?
- What was your first experience of being shamed or made fun of for doing something that didn't "fit" with your gender?
- Do you remember when a friend or someone you know was shamed or made fun of for doing something that didn't "fit" with their gender?
- What was a time you felt unsafe or uncomfortable in the restroom? Why?
- What was a time you felt unsafe or uncomfortable in another gendered space or facility? Eg. Housing, gym, etc.

Take Action!

- Build empathy culture: [create systems of peer accountability](#) for homophobic and transphobic behavior. Center [the experiences of LGBT students](#) on your own campus and build strong alliances.
- Work with your campus administration to raise money and change the signs on all single-occupancy or family bathrooms to "all gender" or "gender inclusive" signage.
- Call attention to the ways facilities on your campus exclude trans and gender nonconforming students, [like our student fellow Cash did](#).
- Get inspired by the [ARU Trans Visibility Campaign safe restroom poster](#), and create your own! We love this key message: "[People] are using the facilities they feel safe in. Please do NOT take this right away from them. Trans & gender questioning students, you deserve to be here and feel safe!"



Activity: Gender Nonconforming Situation Exercise

Based off the [USC LGBT Center's Trans Situation Exercise](#)

Clear space in the room for participants to walk and stand freely. Have participants start in the middle of the room. Now, ask them to close their eyes and imagine the room as a pendulum, or a giant opinion scale. One side of the room is very safe or comfortable, the middle is unsure, and the other side of the room is very unsafe or uncomfortable. Ask participants to imagine they are gender nonconforming and ask how they feel in a variety of settings. Read off each of the settings (below) and pause between each to ask people where in the room they would stand for the different settings. Ask students to reflect as they do the exercise.

Settings:

- In class
- At a gay or lesbian bar
- At the campus bar
- In their residence hall
- At a Greek Life party
- At the school health center
- At a football or basketball game
- As a new student at orientation
- Hanging out with friends
- Going to the bathroom
- At a family event
- On the Class of ____ Facebook Group
- On an all-gender/sexuality dating app (Tinder or OkCupid)
- On a gay/lesbian dating app (Grindr or HER)
- Walking through campus

Now, ask participants:

- How did you feel moving around the room based on each setting?
- Do you think your opinions would have been different for a trans person than a gender-fluid individual? What about a lesbian or gay person?
- How might these reactions differ for a gender nonconforming person of color?
- What were some settings you felt you would be unsafe? What about uncomfortable? What do you think is the difference between these two feelings, and how they affect gender nonconforming folk?



THE COUNSELING CENTER

The Counseling Center is meant to be a safe space for students to seek help, counseling, and advice for their emotional and mental health needs. For that to be the case it should be a space free from judgement or prejudice where students interact with counselors, staff, and volunteers who are understanding and supportive. Asking for support can be daunting, and when someone is feeling anxious or intimidated, the slightest misstep can be the difference between that person accessing the resources they require, or feeling alienated and not getting the care they need.

All of us internalize assumptions about others based on their identities. These assumptions are cultural narratives we learned in our homes, from the media, and from our peers. These assumptions can be harmful, leading to negative stereotypes and rigid boxes we put others into based on how we think they are, as opposed to how they actually are.

Cathy's assumptions around who can be a victim of intimate partner violence become visible when she interacts with Oscar at the counseling center (Intersectionality 101). Cathy volunteers at the counseling center on campus because the staff there have really helped her with her own mental health issues and she wanted to see how she could get more involved. However, she makes multiple assumptions about Oscar when he asks for help with the relationship abuse he is experiencing. Cathy's assumptions include that he looks too macho to be gay – obviously she is buying into stereotypes around gay men and Latino men here. Her other assumption is that he's reporting abuse that a woman is facing, because of the societal narrative that only women can be victims, and only men can be abusers. Her assumptions not only make him feel uncomfortable, but they also serve to erase his experience.

Issues Covered:

- Harmful gender norms
- Intersectionality
- LBGTOIA intimate partner violence
- Culture change



In making these assumptions, Cathy risks alienating Oscar when he is at his most vulnerable. Oscar was already reluctant to seek help because he had internalized these same assumptions, which is why it took Norma's gentle encouragement to get him to the counseling center to begin with. Often when people experience relationship abuse, they don't recognize that what they're experiencing isn't okay, and that mental, verbal, and financial manipulation and abuse can be just as harmful as physical acts.

Thankfully, there are more and more educational tools that teach people about relationship abuse and intimate partner violence. However, a lot of these tools solely target women and focus on ways women can protect themselves against violence, as opposed to preventing violence from happening in the first place. This is why Norma understands what's happening to Oscar even if he can't see it himself. There still isn't enough representation of non-binary or male victims of violence. Norma has been noticing a possible pattern of abuse, and she says something when she sees Michael forcefully grabbing Oscar, making offensive digs about his ethnicity ("I hate when you go super Latino"), and mocking him for being sensitive when he asks Michael to stop. Norma leverages her own experience and understanding of relationship abuse to support Oscar, showing compassion and disrupting the gender norms that could easily have stopped Oscar from getting help.



Another student who leverages their own experience to support Oscar is Sam (Intersectionality 101). As a genderfluid person, Sam has had a lot of experience being on the receiving end of other people's assumptions. Sam saw the way Oscar's experience was erased by Cathy when he sought help, and decided to intervene. By letting Cathy know that she had made a very harmful assumption, Sam turned a mistake into a teaching moment. Sam's action let Oscar know that he was not alone, and also taught Cathy that she has a lot of responsibility as the first person people talk to at the counseling center.

Oscar's experience leads to him taking action by volunteering at the counseling center himself. This is because we all hold power and oppression linked to our identities and experiences. Through understanding intersectionality, and how his identity and experiences can actually empower him to create change, Oscar is able to unlock his power and motivation to challenge these norms that have at times held him back.

Let's Discuss

- Tell us about a time when someone made an assumption about you based on one of your identities. How did it feel?
- How do gender norms come into play when we talk about men who experience intimate partner violence? What about intimate partner violence in queer relationships?
- How do assumptions like Cathy's hurt those seeking help?
- What identities or lived experiences do you hold that leave you vulnerable or marginalized?
- What identities do you hold that can give you privilege?

Take Action

- One way we can spark empathy and really see our shared humanity is through [storytelling](#).
- Offer new, real narratives from survivors in your own community. Run campaigns that seek to [broaden campus-wide understanding](#) of who can be a victim.
- Try challenging expectations around hookup culture through storytelling, social media, and/or art, like our fellow Courtenay did with her [Not Just Sex Project](#).

Activity: Power Cake

Give each person a piece of paper and something to draw with. Ask each person to draw a layered cake with five layers. Each person should then pick five social identities that they hold that they personally connect with most, or that they feel are attributed to them most often, and label each layer with a corresponding identity. These can be around gender, race, sexuality, immigration status, nationality, class, ethnicity, ability, etc.

After students choose and write in their identities, ask them to partner up and share their cake for 3 minutes per person – 6 minutes total. Have students then find another partner and share again for 6 minutes total. In the larger group, ask individuals to talk about what they took away from the exercise.



Activity: Step Forward, Step Back

Adapted from [University at Albany's Privilege Walk Activity](#).

Have individuals form a straight line across the room about an arm's length apart. State the following instructions to the group: "Listen to the following statements, and follow the instructions given. For example, when I read "If you are a white male, take one step forward," only white males will move and everyone else will stand still. Each step should be an average length step. No one is going to check up on you, so if you feel you qualify to take a step then do so, if not then you may stay where you are. You are the judge of what you should do."

Read the following statements one at a time allowing time for participants to take a step:

- If you are a white male take one step forward.
- If there have been times in your life when you skipped a meal because there was no food in the house take one step backward.
- If you have visible or invisible disabilities take one step backward.
- If you identify as an immigrant take one step backward.
- If you were raised in a home where there was a nanny or any other "help" take one step forward.
- If you attended school with people you felt were similar to you take one step forward.
- If your family had health insurance take one step forward.
- If your work holidays coincide with religious holidays that you celebrate take one step forward.
- If you feel good about how your race or ethnicity is portrayed by the media take one step forward.
- If you have been the victim of physical violence because of your perceived gender, ethnicity, age or sexual orientation take one step backward.
- If you have ever felt passed over for an employment position based on your gender, ethnicity, age or sexual orientation take one step backward.
- If you were born in the United States take one step forward.
- If English is your first language take one step forward.
- If you came from a supportive family environment take one step forward.
- If you have completed high school take one step forward.
- If you were able to complete college take one step forward.
- If you are a citizen of the United States take one step forward.
- If you took out loans for your education take one step backward.
- If you attended private school take one step forward.
- If you have ever felt unsafe walking alone at night take one step backward
- If you have ever felt unsafe walking into a bathroom take one step backward.

When all the statements have been read, ask individuals to look around at where they and others fall on this line. Process the activity with the following questions:

- Are you surprised at where you are?
- How does it feel to be in front? In the middle? In back?
- Did you come to any new realizations?
- Which statement had the most impact?



INTERSECTIONALITY

In order to craft a new world order – one in which all people are valued equally, free to enjoy their rights, and able to live with dignity – we need profound **cultural** and **social norm** change. Breakthrough's unique contribution to changing culture and building a more just world relies on a nuanced understanding of **intersectionality** that recognizes how power, privilege, and oppression can simultaneously exist within all of us. Recognizing both our sites of oppression AND power allows us to increase our sense of **agency** to activate change.

Breakthrough's mission is to make **gender-based violence unacceptable**. Yet we know that simply addressing the patterns of power and control between men and women as they exist in patriarchal systems is not enough. Patterns of power and control are also determined by multiple and simultaneous embodiments of gender, race, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, and religion.

Breakthrough's commitment to engaging multiple, diverse, and often unlikely constituencies has taught us invaluable lessons about effective frameworks and strategies for transforming a global culture of violence. Holding a nuanced view of intersectionality is critical to building a world in which all of us can thrive.

Breakthrough has 17 years of experience in the world's two largest democracies doing culture change work, giving us space to reflect and share learnings. Our knowledge base is grounded in our work on racial justice, immigrant rights, and gender equality – from local, to (trans)national, to global.

What is intersectionality?

We often think of intersectionality as the way our identities – our gender, race, class, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, immigration status, religion, etc. – **intersect** and affect our lived experiences. Intersectionality is a term used to help us understand how multiple forms of overlapping oppressions – shaped by sexism, racism, poverty, homophobia and other forms of discrimination and violence – affect our lives in nuanced and context-specific ways. For example,





a poor black woman will have unique lived experiences – she will have less privilege than her brother and will likely experience greater levels of discrimination.

Breakthrough adds another layer to this understanding: to examine how our identities may include sites of **oppression** and corresponding sites of **privilege**. These sites of privilege exist along with, in spite of, or even as a result of the ways in which we are oppressed, and they give us power that we can leverage to enact change in our communities and spheres of influence.

In reality, everyone has power in some form or another, at one point or another. We may not always be able to access our power, and it is especially difficult to access this power when other aspects of our identities are being targeted. But once we have identified it exists, then we can learn to **unlock our power** when needed.

For example, a man of color may experience racism, but in being cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied, he would also have power and privilege that he could leverage to create change. He could mobilize his peers to educate other men who engage in sexually predatory behavior against women, using his male privilege to check other men's privilege.

As noted by Kimberlé Crenshaw, groups are not homogenous. Breakthrough's understanding of intersectionality allows for and celebrates intra-group differences as opportunities for changemaking.

Our sites of power are not always limited to our identities. Across history, we have many examples of people whose identities were sources of oppression, but a combination of external forces, support, determination, and catalyzing circumstances, along with their agency, voice, talents and experiences, led them to become artists, mobilizers, and leaders.

Why does it matter?

With a deep understanding of intersectionality, and support from others, individuals can find their **unique voice and agency**, helping them overcome experiences of oppression and victimization. Breakthrough's culture change methodology includes creative storytelling, deep community engagement, and leadership development, to inspire and direct this shift and help transform experiences of oppression into expressions of agency and action. Our view of intersectionality is not only useful in unlocking this motivating force in individuals, but also seeks to **empower potential changemakers** by helping them access their power in creative and innovative ways that are often neglected.



"For the first time in my life, I feel in control of my narrative, in control of my life. In many ways, I have always had this control; I simply surrendered it time and time again. I have succeeded in reclaiming my story and assuming responsibility for the writing of it. That is my proudest accomplishment of all."

–Justin, 22, he/him/his

GENDER NORMS AND VIOLENCE



Gender-based discrimination and violence affects millions around the world every day, and prevents them from living with dignity, equality, and respect. While women, girls, and other minorities are disproportionately affected by this discrimination and violence, the truth is that it affects everyone, including those with gender privilege.

Gender-based discrimination and violence are the result of a patriarchal social order and a global power paradigm that emphasizes vertical power structures that reinforce inequality. Moreover, this paradigm and the resulting forms of violence and discrimination are perpetuated by and expressed through **social and cultural norms** and practices around gender and sexuality.

In the current **global political climate**, we see deep polarization, harmful legislation, acts of hate, and violence targeting traditionally marginalized groups on the grounds of gender, race, religion, ability, ethnicity, sexuality, immigration status and other identities. At the same time, there is little attention to gender among resistance movements, with the exception of reproductive justice – specifically abortion access – and the wage gap. Meanwhile, gender-based violence such as sexual assault, sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, digital abuse, and LGBTQ discrimination and violence are occurring with increased impunity and cultural acceptability. In the U.S., political leaders have openly supported or called for gender-based discrimination and violence. Yet gendered acts of violence often take place in the private sphere, and are therefore not taken as seriously as other acts of violence that are more public.

Both before and after this political moment in our global history, gender-based discrimination and violence were common. Yet now, there is **increased social acceptability** and less accountability – creating conditions for levels of violence to spike.

All forms of violence and discrimination are **interconnected**. We cannot call for gender equality without also calling for racial and economic justice, immigrant and LGBTQI rights, and so on. Similarly, we cannot adequately address racial justice, immigrant rights issues, mental health, economic justice, etc., without acknowledging and addressing gender inequality.



Only with the frame of a deeply **intersectional approach** can we transform the culture of violence. Examples of gender-based violence include dating violence, intimate partner violence, sexual assault and rape, stalking, sexual harassment, street harassment, digital and image-based abuse, hate-motivated assault, and humiliation, exploitation, and retaliation. When we take a closer look at these practices, it is clear that they are violent expressions of widely held **gender norms**.

What are gender norms?

Gender norms refer to social attitudes about what behaviors, preferences, products, professions, or knowledge are appropriate for women and men. Gender norms draw upon and reinforce **gender stereotypes**, which are widely held, idealized beliefs about women and men, femininities and masculinities.

Gender norms are the **cultural messages** we all get about the way men and women are “supposed” to be. Tropes like *boys will be boys*. *Take it like a man*. *A woman’s place*. *Act like a lady*. Sometimes



these messages are indirect, implied, or invisible; others, direct, specific, and overt. These norms **affect us all** – consciously or otherwise.

Gender norms and behaviors are produced through social institutions (such as families, schools, workplaces, laboratories, universities, or boardrooms) and wider cultural products (such as textbooks, literature, film, memes, music, and video games).

Gender norms often constrain us, and allow us to be only some parts of our best selves. They



can keep people from exploring a full range of traits, identities, and expressions – of power, sexuality, emotion, and more – along a whole gender spectrum. These norms embody and perpetuate larger systems of **power, inequality, and harm**. They replicate the valuing of men and the masculine, while devaluing other genders, especially those which are seen as feminine. Many harmful norms reinforce the acceptability of dominance and violence by some, and the subordination of others. This also results in a failure to produce **empathy**, which makes

it near impossible to value and relate to one another as fully human, perpetuating inequality and enabling discrimination. It is also how they can lead to violence.

Through recognizing, disrupting, and replacing harmful norms with healthier and more inclusive norms, we can create true **culture change**, and prevent gender-based violence from happening. We can also ensure that when it does occur, it is treated with the urgency, gravity, and compassion that it merits.

Case Study

Let us look at common norms in the U.S. which underpin most forms of gender-based violence among youth:

1. Gender policing

Gender policing, including proving and regulating **masculinity** through sex and violence, is a gender norm that perpetuates harm. This norm is antithetical to a world in which all genders are valued equally, and values such as consent, respect toward others, and empathy are celebrated, including amongst men. For this to be the case, masculinity can no longer be equated with sex and violence.

2. Minimizing violence

This cultural norm stems from the historical denial and distrust of women's experiences that is rooted in the dehumanization of women, or the view that they are less important than men. Delegitimizing the prevalence and effects of gender-based violence leads to a lack of accountability, less funding to address the issue, and a misunderstanding of the very real consequences of violence. New, **healthier norms** could instead mean that violence is taken seriously; all survivors are believed, supported, and treated with compassion; and perpetrators are held accountable.

3. Objectification

Treating women as objects – and not people – is a cultural norm that is prevalent at all levels of society. This leads to violence as women are seen as a means to an end – be it power, sex, or violence – and not recognized for their full humanity. Instead, people of all genders ought to be valued equally, treated respectfully, have full agency and bodily autonomy, and be recognized for their full humanity.



4. Shaming sexuality

Through shaming women's sexuality and participation in sex culture – as well as other non-normative sexuality – we encourage behavior such as victim-blaming, and prevent survivors of violence from seeking help or justice due to shame and a justified fear of being stigmatized. We seek to replace this belief with a new norm by which consensual sexual expression is considered acceptable, healthy, and positive; **sexual health and rights** are respected; and individuals are treated with dignity regardless of their sexual history.



The solution? Culture change

Given that most forms of gender-based violence are enabled through social norms, it is critical that we employ tactics that allow us to dismantle the power structures that sustain these cultural attitudes. Breakthrough's work relies on a **culture change** approach, and the belief that all people have the power to enact change in their communities.

Much of the work around gender-based violence focuses on responses to violence and risk reduction, as opposed to **primary prevention** and **culture change**. Breakthrough seeks to transform the cultural conditions that makes gender-based violence an inevitable part of life for people today.

We believe that in order to make gender based violence unacceptable, we need everyone to understand their **personal stake** in ending it. Simultaneously, we need a critical mass of people to challenge and transform the cultural norms that enable this violence.



CULTURE CHANGE

In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, **human rights** begin “in small places close to home” with individuals in their homes and neighborhoods, schools or colleges, or places of work. For “without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

Culture change is essential to crafting a new world order in which all people are valued equally, enjoy their rights, and live with dignity. And each one of us, right now, has the power to create this new world. It begins with **you**.

What is culture?

Culture is the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society. It determines our value systems, beliefs, and practices. It comprises of our stories, our humor, our collective experiences, and the narratives through which we understand our world. A society's culture dictates the rules that govern the people within it, and determines what behavior is considered acceptable, how such behaviors are rewarded, and which ones are condemned. This in turn gives rise to the systems of governance, institutions, and policies that then serve to reinforce those **cultural norms**.

None of us inhabit just one culture: we swim in a soup of our religious culture, our urban/suburban culture, our school or workplace culture, and the culture(s) of our hobbies and interests: cooking, cricket, Comic Con. We also use culture to refer to national or regional practices and traditions, or even the behaviors and habits of specific generations.

Culture can represent the best of ourselves, as expressed in art, traditions of love and connectedness, language, cuisine, architecture, even customs or laws that help realize human rights. At the same time, culture can perpetuate violence, discrimination, and other harms to ourselves, others, and the planet.

And yet, **culture is not static**. It is constantly evolving. We don't just passively consume it. We create it. So we also have the **power** to change it. Culture drives the way we treat each other: it defines what's “normal,” what's acceptable. And sometimes we need to change that. That change can happen gradually over time, or it can be accelerated through intentional action. We can begin this culture change at home, and in our communities. And when we do, we can build homes, families, communities, and institutions where dignity, equality, and justice—the core values of human rights—carry the day.

Culture embodies systems of power

The current world order is structured on a “**zero-sum**” power paradigm. In this paradigm, one group sits on top, with others below. Inequality is inherent to this paradigm, creating and reinforcing hierarchies of human value. Gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, class, immigration status, ability, ethnicity, age, and intersections among them determine where people sit on the hierarchy.

This power paradigm shapes everything from our values and belief systems to our institutions, structures, policies, and practices. It also influences our interpersonal and individual behaviors. At the same time, imbalances of power reinforce polarization among groups and uphold notions of “**us versus them**.” This leads to dehumanization and objectification of the “other,” perpetuating cycles of fear and hate.

As a result, **culture often perpetuates harm**.

Culture and Violence

Cultural norms set standards of collective behavior. These norms dictate what society considers acceptable or unacceptable, and what is rewarded or discouraged.



When the dominant group maintains greater power and privilege, and other groups are perceived to have less value, those lower on the hierarchy are dehumanized and become vulnerable to discrimination and violence. Cultural norms support this hierarchy, making discrimination and violence against marginalized groups more acceptable.

For example, the dominant power paradigm around the world generally privileges men over women. As a result, culture becomes a vehicle for indicating that men are entitled to control women and their bodies. Women are often perceived, portrayed, and represented as having less value than men, and as a result, many women experience sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating or intimate partner violence, discrimination in the workplace, and more.

1 in 3 women will experience violence in their lifetime, while only a tiny fraction of those who chose to perpetrate violence are held accountable. In a system that privileges some over others, systems of accountability are weak for the dominant group. This is why impunity for those who commit discrimination and violence is high, as are practices of delegitimizing violence and blaming the victim.



Transforming systems of power: Using culture to change culture (and power!)

To create a new world order that moves us beyond inequality, polarization, and violence we need to re-envision power paradigms. We need paradigms that emphasize horizontal power structures rather than vertical. Culture is not fixed, and hierarchical “zero-sum” power paradigms are not inevitable. Recognizing the current power paradigm and the reproduction of norms that uphold it is the first step toward changing culture and building a new world in which all of us can thrive.

From there, changing culture requires interventions that challenge existing norms and replace them with new ones. Since culture is vast and deep and exists at various levels, culture change interventions can take place at any/all of these levels; individual + interpersonal (eg. home, family, school, relationships); community (eg. sports teams, campus groups, sororities, workplaces, Facebook groups, gaming culture); society (campus life, religious traditions, national culture); institutional (educational systems, governments). And for true culture change to take place on an issue like gender-based violence, intervention must take place at all levels of the ecosystem.

Culture is created, reinforced, and conveyed by various means, from statements that people hear from their parents, teachers, and friends in the formative years of their lives, to the messages sent to us by our religious institutions, educational systems, and governments. Perhaps the strongest cultural messages we receive are from the art, literature, film, and popular culture that we consume. These cultural products that saturate our lives through media and technology often reinforce norms that support existing power paradigms. However, because of their power, scale, and inherent creativity, these same products are also best suited for intervention. In Breakthrough’s experience, culture change strategies are most successful when they use cultural mechanisms to change culture, and meet people where they already are—where they are already consuming and creating culture.

How is Breakthrough’s view on culture change distinct from other organizations?

The culture change field is still emerging. Currently, many organizations working on culture



change are focused on intervening in cultural narratives as they exist in popular culture and media productions (film, television, digital). These also take the form of campaigns that reshape public narratives and shift representations of people at scale, with the goal of breaking norms and stereotypes, creating empathy, and humanizing us all.

Breakthrough fully embraces this approach. Focussing on interventions that lead to narrative shifts on a large scale is a crucial and powerful facet of culture change strategy. However, our experience has shown us that in addition to intervening in cultural narratives as they are embodied in media, popular culture, and technology, powerful culture change happens when intervention also takes place at the individual, interpersonal, and community levels. We strongly believe in the power of individuals—through their actions—to reshape value systems, behaviors and practices within their own communities and peer networks, whether inside or outside the mass media space. This happens when individuals are mobilized and supported in using their unique voice and identity to challenge and transform cultural norms within their spheres of influence.

Effective strategies to transform harmful cultural norms

Breakthrough has 17 years of experience doing culture change work in the world’s two largest democracies, giving us time to reflect and share learnings. Our knowledge base is grounded in our work on racial justice, immigrant rights, and gender equality—from local, to transnational, to global. Here are some essential steps to enacting culture change:

Recognize harmful cultural norms and practices. A fish is the last to recognize that it lives in water. Cultural norms saturate our lives, often making us blind to them. Recognizing the them, acknowledging that they are constructed and not fixed, and bringing public attention to them is a critical first step.



Shift the public narrative. Public narratives shape our perceptions of the world. Shifting the narrative frame and the way we represent people is fundamental to changing culture. While they seem difficult to shift, a combination of smart strategy, moving messaging, and powerful influencers (eg. corporates, media companies, celebrities) can result in narrative shifts. For example, representations of people in the LGBTQIA community in the U.S. have dramatically shifted over the past three decades—from

being characterized as a marginalized “other” with very little/negative cultural power, the LGBTQIA community has become more integrated into the mainstream, with holistic representations and a lot more cultural capital. This shift in narrative laid the groundwork for marriage equality in the U.S.

Use your social influence. Those with social capital in their communities are often best positioned to influence the values, beliefs, and behaviors of others. These community influencers could be religious leaders, government officials, parents, student leaders, celebrated athletes, media icons, artists, or just people who are respected in their community. We believe that interpersonal relationships—especially among peers of similar identities where there is mutual respect—can be leveraged by individuals to challenge harmful narratives, stereotypes, or practices among their peer group.

Create new role models. Instead of shining the spotlight on those people who are most commonly the superheroes of society (traditionally those who already have privilege within the power paradigms), we should celebrate and uplift the people who are challenging norms and embodying the change we want to see. We can amplify the voices of new leaders who model new ways of being.



Win hearts and minds by sharing stories. Fear of the “other” often leads to the objectification and dehumanization of those people we feel are different to us. A well-told story has the power to humanize the subject, address multiple layers of identity, create empathy, and make visible our shared humanity, helping audiences move beyond fear.

Encourage intergenerational dialogue. It is important that new activists act with a knowledge of past social justice movements. Movements can benefit from cross-generational, and global collaboration that ensures that social change and innovation is informed by the lessons of the past—which tactics and strategies worked and which ones didn’t.

Go beyond “Us vs Them.” What if there was no “us vs them,” but just “us”? Recognizing our shared humanity is central to transforming power and creating conditions for people to perceive one another as equal. Avoid othering, objectifying, or stereotyping people based on overt differences. Make an effort to find common ground and shared values—this could help create a new narrative.

Build non-traditional partnerships. Break out of the echo chamber and engage with those you might not naturally consider your partners and allies. In doing so you may forge powerful partnerships that are innovative, that work as strategic levers and help reach new audiences. To create a tipping point for change, we need a critical mass of people, and this can come from the unlikeliest of places.

Create a personal stake for everyone. While a dominant group may not see discrimination and violence against another group as “their issue,” they can become more invested once they’re given a nuanced sense of how they may be touched by it, even tangentially. For example, some men may perceive that violence against women is not “their issue.” By changing the approach and sparking discussion on how gender norms around masculinity and the pressure to conform to hypermasculine standards indeed have affected them, they will feel greater levels of empathy and understanding for the norms that impact women, and feel more invested in challenging gender-based violence.

Don’t play the blame game. Behavioral science shows that people are more likely to change behavior when they see a personal benefit and feel a deep incentive to challenge existing norms. Guilt and shame have not been seen to produce these results, and are not usually successful tactics for long-term behavior change. Offer ways for people to be a part of the solution and use positive-framing to ensure maximum buy-in.

How do we know culture is shifting

Culture change takes time. However, we know that culture is shifting when we start to feel it in those “small places close to home”—in our schools and places of work, in our homes and on our televisions. It will be visible in public dialogue and media representation, in our daily interactions and treatment of others, and in the form of new policies and cultural products. When culture change happens, it will be an equilibrium change at all levels of the ecosystem, from institutional policies and practices down to individual and interpersonal **beliefs and behaviors**. These cultural shifts will be evident through the emergence of new priorities and practices and through structural change that reflect deep shifts in collective community values.

Culture Change Starts with You

Culture change can happen at any/all levels of our society, and is especially powerful when it takes place through **interpersonal action**. This is an empowering concept as it means that all individuals are potential catalysts for change-making. Through **recognizing your own sites of privilege and power** you can identify what is at stake for you, and leverage your talents, skills, influence, and experience to shift narratives, disrupting harmful language and practices, and raising the bar for what behavior is considered acceptable. Whether you create change by taking small steps close to home through practicing compassion and inclusion among your immediate circle of friends and family, or through larger-scale campaigns for behavior change, it all counts toward **tipping the scale** in favor of a more just, equitable, and compassionate society.



PUPPETS, MEDIA, & CULTURE (OR, WHY PUPPETS?)

Breakthrough has a long history of producing pop culture and story-driven multimedia campaigns that harness the power of storytelling to explore complex social issues and inspire a critical mass of people to become agents of social and cultural change that ensures dignity, equality, and justice for all. As we've seen [through this toolkit](#), while all culture isn't bad, certain cultural norms, narratives, and practices are harmful and can lead to violence. Since some of the strongest cultural messages we receive come from the pop culture, film, art, literature, and technology that we consume, these also tend to be the most strategic avenues that can be leveraged to shift attitudes, behaviors, narratives, and norms---to effect culture change. Multimedia products already saturate our lives. When they are innovative and creative, they can achieve scale and reach a wide audience. If they're created thoughtfully, with a good story, a robust dissemination strategy, and thoughtful partnerships, multimedia products can be simultaneously accessible and powerful, changing hearts and minds and moving people to action.

This is why Breakthrough uses culture to change culture. Our past work has included video games, interactive story platforms, short documentary films, animations, and narrative short films. And this time we bring you **puppets!**

Genesis

We conceived BreakthroughU as whiteboard videos that used simple illustration and a narrator to explain the concepts of intersectionality, gender norms and violence, and culture change. But the further we went down that path, the more we realized that a) the trend of whiteboard videos was over, and b) it is better to show rather than tell when it comes to projects like this. Since this concepts and issues tend to be difficult to grasp, we decided to create a fictional universe (BreakthroughU) with characters and mini-plot lines that illustrated the concepts we wanted to talk about. So we found a team of creative writers and started working on some scripts! (Besides, some years ago, one of our colleagues had come up with the cute + punny idea for characters called Norm and Norma who could talk about gender norms, and it would have been a waste to let that one go!)



At this point we were thinking of a few options. We could have made a series of live action shorts with real actors, or we could have used animation. Animation is useful because it allows more creative flexibility than live action when it comes to visual storytelling. However, since animated characters tend to look less realistic, they can be more difficult to relate to. And we really wanted people, like you, to see themselves reflected in these videos. On the other hand, live action has a different problem. The videos talk about social and cultural norms around gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Casting real humans, as we would do in live action, would limit us to representing these identities very literally. And so, as a (literally) happy medium, we decided on puppets!

Strategic choices

- We wanted the videos to be emotional and relatable. Actual humans are great at that, but human-ish puppets are relatable by virtue of their universal appeal—especially for people who have grown up attached to puppets on Sesame Street and the like.
- Representation. Puppets with green skin and purple hair allow us to represent a range of identities playfully and creatively. They're relatable enough that people could see themselves in the characters, yet allow us the opportunity to be both overt and subtle about the multiple



identities we want to represent.

- Pop culture trends. From Sesame Street to The Muppets to Avenue Q, people in the U.S. are familiar with puppet-centered narratives that address cultural and social tropes in often pathbreaking and edgy ways. Puppets seem to be popular with a vast range of age-groups and have a wide appeal. This makes it easier to reach a wide audience.
- Collaborating with artists. Puppetry is a niche, skilled art form, and since this is a relatively small professional community (even in New York City), this project enabled us to work with an incredible group of artists (puppet-makers and puppeteers) who are the best in their field. Some of them are regulars on Sesame Street and Avenue Q! For many of them, this was a unique type of project that they felt very invested in. Gabriel Rodriguez, the actor that played Sam in the series, is also non-binary, and was moved by the opportunity to play a gender nonconforming character for the first time.
- Visibility. By creating a media product that is innovative and surprising in the way that it addresses the subject matter, we created a project with the potential for coverage and visibility in the press. The more outlets that cover it, the farther our message reaches! Press coverage is always a win and an important tactic to build in to projects, when possible.
- Humor + fun = engaging. Puppets lend themselves to playfulness and humor, qualities that are really important when it comes to writing stories for social change. A little bit of humor can go a long way to bring in new audiences and keeping people engaged in subjects like discrimination and violence that are complex and emotionally challenging.
- Narrative storytelling. Nonfiction narratives can be really powerful because they ask the viewer to put themselves in a “real person’s” shoes and work to generate empathy. For content like this, however, narrative stories give the producers much more control. By creating a fictional universe and story, we were able to create characters and scenarios that naturally and efficiently played out the complex nexus of concepts and issues that we wanted to address. Also, fictional storytelling allows us to easily include positive visions for the future within the narrative---something that is important for culture change work to be successful.

Things to note

We’re delighted with the potential, reach, and impact of these videos but want to note that:

- Producing an inspiring media product isn’t enough. The dissemination strategy for the project needs to be equally strong, if not stronger!
- Projects like this take time, money, and capacity to create.
- The most highly produced product isn’t always the most innovative or the most impactful. So think about your goals and your audience, find the most appropriate media trend, and plan strategically.

Takeaways

As consumers and creators of media, we have the responsibility and the opportunity to use our ideas, our voice, our creativity, and our stories in our organizing and our activism. This could be anything from crafting our personal stories and using them to spark conversation within a digital community, to producing a documentary film.

In this time in which hate and discrimination seem increasingly acceptable, it is more pressing than ever that we leverage creative tools that help build power, inspire, and move people to take meaningful action in our communities.

Here’s a [great resource](#) on visual storytelling to get you started!



RESOURCES

Action Inspiration

Check out these [iconic disruptive actions](#) that activists have taken across the country with Breakthrough's advice, support, and expertise. We're so proud of all they've accomplished – and you can do it too. Get inspired, and then get in touch with our Action Hotline (below) to get started!

Breakthrough Campus Organizing Guide

Want to take action to disrupt gender-based violence on YOUR campus? [This guide](#) is filled with resources that can help with your activism around relationship violence, sexual assault, non-consensual photo-sharing, violence and discrimination around trans students and other forms of gender-based violence. It covers a lot because there's a lot of work to be done, and because we wanted to give you the most comprehensive guide we could.

Action Hotline

Need help taking action? Check out Breakthrough's new resource for students looking to take action to disrupt and transform aspects of the culture on campus that support or enable gender-based violence – [the Action Hotline](#). The Action Hotline is a free, one-on-one coaching service for students—whether they think they're activists or not. Our team of experts help students with planning campaigns, getting press coverage, using multimedia, organizing their peers, and so much more.

It's incredibly easy to sign up for a session, and there are no limit to the number of sessions a student can take. Whether they're preparing for Sexual Assault Awareness Month or bringing a gender lens to their other justice work, our Action Hotline is here for students on their journey from idea to action!

THE G WORD

Would you like to share your own story of sexual or gender-based violence? Or read the stories of others? Check out [THE G WORD](#), Breakthrough's digital platform that harnesses the power of personal stories through user-generated content to illuminate the ways that limiting gender norms, and gender-based discrimination and violence show up in people's everyday lives. By collecting, curating, and presenting personal stories from people (across all sexual orientations and gender-identity) Breakthrough aims to illuminate—and ultimately transform—the culture of gender-based discrimination and violence.

You or someone you know need help?

If you are experiencing violence or abuse, please know that it is not your fault, that no one deserves violence, and that you are not alone. There are resources available that offer information and support, even if you want to remain anonymous or think you cannot afford it.

If you know or suspect that a family member, loved one, friend, or acquaintance is experiencing relationship abuse, sexual violence, or stalking, it can be challenging to know what to do. Do what you can to learn more about how best to support someone in these types of situations.

Below is a list of key national resources that offer information about different types of violence and support to those affected by violence. Please note that these resources are specific to the United States. If you or someone you know is in immediate danger of violence, please contact 9-1-1.

Sexual Assault & Sexual Violence

If you or someone you know might be or has been affected by sexual violence or assault, you can reach out to [RAINN's](#) National Sexual Assault Hotline to get information, support, and local resources: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)



Men who have had an unwanted or abusive sexual experience in childhood, can reach out to 1in6.org. They provide a confidential 24/7 Online SupportLine and Online Peer Support Group.

For information about and support with street harassment and cat-calling, visit [Stop Street Harassment](http://StopStreetHarassment.org) or [Hollaback](http://Hollaback.com).

Dating Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, and Domestic Violence

If you or someone you know might be in an abusive or violent relationship, you can reach out to the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](http://NationalDomesticViolenceHotline.org) for information, support, and help finding local resources at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people affected by an abusive or violent relationship, sexual violence, or homophobic violence, you can reach out to the [Anti-Violence Project](http://AntiViolenceProject.org) at 1-212-714-1141

For lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people, [The Trevor Project](http://TheTrevorProject.org) provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention at 1-866-488-7386

Online Harassment

If you are experiencing online harassment visit [HeartMob](http://HeartMob.org) by Hollaback! for real-time support.

For additional resources and supportive organizations visit HeartMob's resources page.

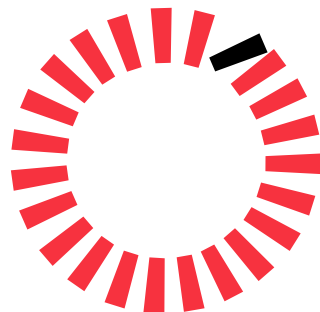




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