

**MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF MEN AND  
BOYS, ALONGSIDE WOMEN AND GIRLS, AS  
AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE GLOBAL  
MOVEMENT FOR GENDER EQUALITY**

**ABSTRACT SUBMITTED BY  
ASABE SHEHU YAR'ADUA  
FOUNDATION**

**AS CALLED FOR BY  
UNESCO'S GLOBAL PRIORITIES AFRICA AND  
GENDER IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE  
BOYS4GENDEREQUALITY INITIATIVE  
IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE  
FRAMEWORK OF THE UNITED NATIONS 2030  
AGENDA**

# **MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF MEN AND BOYS, ALONGSIDE WOMEN AND GIRLS, AS AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE GLOBAL MOVEMENT FOR GENDER EQUALITY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The term “gender” refers to the set of social norms, practices and institutions that regulate the relations between women and men (also known as “gender relations”). Gender relations involve a system of power relations between women and men in the context of sociocultural definitions of masculinity and femininity and economic relations.

In many societies, the system of gender relations gives power and privilege to men and discriminates against women.

The overall system of gender relations in a society is sometimes called the “gender order”. Women’s and men’s lives are shaped by gender relations or the gender order in many ways, including through the gender division of labour and different sociocultural norms and expectations. The gender order determines what is accepted, encouraged and allowed for women and men. When the gender order privileges men, the social acceptance of male domination and female subordination may be sustained by many formal and informal institutions and practices.

## **ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY**

Gender equality refers to the goal of achieving equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and boys and girls. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality is not a women’s issue, but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is both a human right and a precondition for and indicator of sustainable, people-centred development. Achieving gender equality requires that the interests, needs, priorities and contributions of both women and men are taken into consideration, while fully recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men.

## **MEN'S MOTIVATIONS FOR INVOLVEMENT IN GENDER EQUALITY WORK**

Men's lives are complex and are shaped by more than their gender identity. Race/ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality, religion and nationality all influence how men identify their interests. The increased recognition of the need to involve men in promoting gender equality has been accompanied by the growing motivation of men to become engaged. This motivation can emanate from a variety of sources, including men's relationships with women, their concern for their own personal well-being or that of their families, or their sense of social justice.

In their families and communities, men live in social relationships with women and girls: as wives, partners, mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, nieces, friends, classmates, colleagues and neighbours. The quality of these relationships in large part determines the quality of men's lives. Men can increasingly see that their lives are also damaged by a system of gender inequality that has a negative impact on the women and girls with whom they live, work and interact in different ways. Many men make sacrifices for their children and want their daughters to grow up in a world that offers young women security, freedom and opportunities to fulfil themselves. This provides a powerful reason for many men to support gender equality.

## **RATIONALES FOR INVOLVING MEN IN WORK FOR GENDER EQUALITY**

Men's power over women in many contexts necessitates working with men to change the conditions of women's lives. The reproductive health field was one of the first areas in which the pragmatic rationale of "male responsibility" was utilized to encourage male involvement. The 1994 Programme of Action of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development noted: "Men play a key role in bringing about gender equality since, in most societies, men exercise preponderant power in nearly every sphere of life, ranging from personal decisions regarding the size of families to the policy and programme decisions taken at all levels of government."

Working for justice and equality in gender relations should be understood as part of the broader effort to secure equality in social relations. A concern for justice has provided a political incentive for many men to seek change in the gender order.

The maintenance of an unequal gender order in societies is likely to have negative consequences or costs for men as well as women. Such costs for men include the suppression of emotions in order to stay “in control”; the absence of nurturing relations with children; exposure to many health risks; narrowing of educational opportunities; and damage in interpersonal relations with women. Such costs are unevenly distributed among men. Recognition of these costs of inequality to men is one of the important rationales for men’s involvement in gender equality work.

A further very practical reason for engaging men in work on gender equality is that men often control the resources needed for this work, in particular because of the underrepresentation of women in all areas of decision-making. The existing pattern of gender inequality— men’s predominant control of economic assets, political power, cultural authority and armed forces—means that men (often specific groups of men) control most of the resources required to implement women’s claims for justice.

Men may see a collective interest in supporting gender equality because they see its relevance to the well-being of their families and communities. Flexibility in the gender division of labour may be crucial to households in situations of poverty and underemployment, where the incomes of both women and men are critical. In poor communities, in both rural and urban areas, maximizing the total labour resources of both women and men may be vital to prosperity or even survival. Men may recognize that they benefit in the long term from the collective well-being that follows from education, improvements in health, and access to employment or income-generating activities for women and girls.

Personal well-being may also play a role. Research continues to document problems in the current gender order for adult men and boys, including lower life expectancy; premature death from accidents, homicides and suicide; high rates of occupational

injury in gender-segregated industries, such as mining, transport and heavy manufacturing; and higher levels of substance abuse, especially alcohol and tobacco. Men's unwillingness to seek health care when it is needed, because of prevailing perceptions of masculinity, has been observed in many countries. These problems are, in part, the result of men's adherence to gender norms that equate masculinity with toughness and invulnerability. Gender inequality can be damaging for men's health, and increased equality can contribute to men's personal well-being and quality of life.

Even when men cannot see personal, family or communal benefits, they may perceive a social responsibility to promote gender equality. Those with gender privilege have a responsibility to address systematic gender inequalities. This responsibility may be more evident to those men who are working for social justice in other areas in their own lives, for example, in relation to economic or racial justice. There is increasing recognition that these other struggles are related to women's struggles for gender equality, which are, in part, shaped by women's differing experiences of other forms of injustice. Beliefs about domination and subordination that lie at the heart of gender inequality (the power of the male over the female) also play a fundamental role in other forms of injustice, for example, of rich over poor, or of one race over another. Ending other forms of oppression, for example, racism and economic exploitation, depends, in part, on ending gender inequality.

## **INCREASING THE MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE**

With the rationale for men's engagement in work for gender equality becoming clear, and the increasing organization of men into groups and networks, a momentum for change is already apparent. Contributing to this momentum are efforts to make male privilege more visible, increased research on the effects of the prevailing gender order and gender identities, the capacity for change among men, the influence of male leaders and role models, and the impact of other social change processes under way.

It is common that those with privilege rarely notice that they have such privilege, while those without are constantly reminded of its absence. Women are very aware of discriminatory gender norms and roles because they are confronted with the resulting disadvantages on a daily basis. While many men are also disadvantaged by gender

norms and roles, men tend to benefit overall and less often reflect on gender inequalities.

Recent years have witnessed a remarkable growth in research on men's gender identities and masculinity and on the links between gender relations and a range of social problems involving men. Academic journals have been founded for specialized research, and many conferences and a rapidly growing international literature in social science have illuminated many issues pertaining to men and gender equality. A growing debate on men's experiences of the gender order and their gender identities and relations, and the increased visibility of the impact on the situation of women and girls, have clearly increased the momentum for change.

One of the clear findings from historical and crosscultural research is that gender identities and roles are not fixed. Men in many different contexts have changed their attitudes and behaviours over time, often leading to a shift to more equitable gender relations. The evidence that men have a capacity for change is helping to build the momentum for working with men to promote gender equality. However, the belief that masculinity is intrinsically related to war, sexism, violence and aggression remains strong in some contexts. It is therefore important to identify and highlight examples of men who are working to bring about a change towards the goal of gender equality.

While the surge in research and debate on the engagement of men in achieving gender equality is relatively recent, public advocacy for gender equality by, or with the support of, male leaders has a longer history. Historic gains by women's movements have been won not only in the face of male resistance but also sometimes through alliances with men who held organizational or political authority at the time. As early as 1869, the British philosopher John Stuart Mill argued for gender equality in his work "The subjection of women".

Other examples of male leaders who have taken action in support of gender equality include Gough Whitlam, the former Prime Minister of Australia, who pioneered the creation of gender equality mechanisms in government in the 1970s, and the late Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, who actively supported gender equality in the same decade. In the 1990s, late President Nelson Mandela of South Africa, joined male networks in marching to show male support for eliminating

violence against women. More recent examples include former Brazilian President; Lula da Silva who had supported the allocation of significant budgetary resources to eliminate violence against women; former Prime Minister of Spain; José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, supported progressive legislation on violence against women; and former Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, launched a multi-year campaign, *Unite to End Violence against Women*, in 2008.

## **MEN'S RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AS IT RELATE TO GENDER EQUALITY**

Despite the increased research and leadership and the social momentum for change, resistance to gender equality persists among significant groups of men. There are multiple reasons for this resistance. Some men want to defend their privileges and power because they fear the loss of authority and economic benefits that they perceive gender equality would involve. Some men may resist gender equality because of a belief in inherent male supremacy. Most difficult to address is the fact that change towards gender equality will require new patterns of masculinity and thus may be perceived as a threat to identity for men. Change is particularly difficult when men and boys also face a range of problems related to unemployment, educational difficulties, economic restructuring, communal violence, and social exclusion and alienation. It is important to recognize that achieving change in gender relations is a complex process, likely to face difficulties and provoke resistance.

If social definitions of masculinity include being the “breadwinner” and being “strong”, men may be threatened by women’s economic and professional progress. Men’s resistance may also be grounded in their resentment of what they see as attention and resources being given disproportionately to women. This sentiment underpins the development of fathers’ rights groups in developed countries that maintain that mothers have been given too many rights. Such groups regard fathers as an oppressed group.

Experiences from microcredit programmes, for example, suggest that when such programmes empower women to the extent that a threat is perceived to male privilege, a violent backlash is possible. Research in Lagos State-Nigeria during the warm-up to the 2019 Presidential election, it was discovered that;the conditional cash transfer of ten thousand naira to the vulnerable Nigerians-especially women initiated by one of the political parties to empower women had a varied effect on men's violence against women-that was so because, women had access to the conditional cash transfer to their account as opposed to their men counterpart who got nothing. "They can reduce women's vulnerability to men's violence by strengthening their economic roles and making their lives more public. When women challenge gender norms, however, they sometimes provoke violence in their husbands.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is a growing consensus on the need to involve men and boys in gender equality work, stimulated not least through the consideration of this issue by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2004 and its review of the implementation of the recommendations in 2007. The work with men to end men's privileges and promote gender equality is already well under way; many men around the world are engaged in promoting gender equality in a wide range of areas. There is a growing consciousness among men of gender equality as a critical societal goal and an increased awareness that gender norms, roles and identities can be, and are being, transformed by social action. What is needed now is widespread commitment among men to participate in this process of transformation towards gender equality, through increased partnerships with women.

Over the last two decades, there has been much media attention to a perceived "crisis of masculinity". Some of the discussion has been fanciful and has been a way of avoiding issues of gender equality. In other cases, there has been serious discussion of real changes and problems in the lives of men and boys. The momentum for change in gender equality involves two types of change men may perceive as "crises". Promoting change in masculinities is an important process in engaging men to work for gender equality. The more successful this work is, the more men will rethink what it is to be a man, and how their identity and self-respect can be sustained in a gender-equal society. A crisis in male privilege and authority

is also a necessary part of the change process because of the need to challenge assumptions about male superiority in the current gender order.

In many parts of the world, ideologies that justify men's supremacy on grounds of religion, biology, cultural tradition or organizational mission (for example, in the military) persist. These ideas are not simply "traditional". They continue to be actively modernized and renewed, as it is clear in the resurgence of religious fundamentalisms and militant nationalisms that make use of beliefs about male supremacy in mobilizing support for their cause.

## **SUGGESTIONS:**

### **PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION IN ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS AS ADVOCATE OF GENDER EQUALITY**

It is important to identify the principles that should guide men's actions for gender equality, particularly given the resistance still faced from many men, as well as the wariness felt by women's movements about the implications of engaging men. Some women's movements fear that funding will be diverted from activities targeted to women, and that men will assume leadership and divert the focus of the gender equality struggle.

A number of important principles of action have been identified to guide the work on engaging men and boys, including the following:

**Commitment to women's human rights and empowerment:** The goal of gender equality must be kept central. Any effort to engage men should actively promote women's empowerment and in no way undermine women's human rights. Issues that need to be taken into account include ensuring:

- Partnership with and accountability to groups working for women's rights and empowerment;
- Visibility and leadership of women in activities to engage men;
- Accountability for a focus on gender equality in male-only groups and activities;

- Protection of “women’s space” and women-only and women-focused programmes.

**There should be broader context of human rights and social justice:** The denial of rights and justice to women must be understood in the context of other forms of injustice and human rights abuses, and the struggle for gender equality should be seen as part of the broad struggle for social justice and human rights. Framing the gender equality struggle in this manner can be a powerful means to mobilize many men to work for gender equality—linking their desire for justice (such as racial or economic justice) with gender equality.

**Structural as well as personal change should be encouraged:** The male power that maintains women’s disempowerment and that produces gender inequalities is not simply a matter of the actions and attitudes of individual men in their personal lives. It is structured by the major institutions of society—social, cultural, political and economic. Engaging men in work for gender equality involves not only working with individual men on change in their personal lives but also mobilizing their support for structural change, focused on the institutions that express and reinforce male power.

**There is need for Gender equality—involving both women and men:** Gender equality must be defined as a goal that should concern and involve both women and men. It requires the development of integrated gender equality policies, with a focus on both women and men, rather than separate and parallel policies for women or for men, and the equal participation of women and men in all efforts focused on gender equality. It is important to refer to men and boys explicitly in gender equality policies, rather than assume the relevance of such policies for them.

**Constant Emphasis on gender relations:** It is critical to focus on the pattern of relations between women and men in everyday life, for example, within families, schools workplaces and leisure activities. In each of these areas, power can be challenged and more democratic, equitable and respectful relationships constructed.

**Accountability in relation to power and privilege:** It is important that men be accountable for their complicity (explicit and implicit) in systems and practices of gender inequality. This involves creating spaces and building capacity for reflecting on both individual attitudes and behaviours and institutional policies and procedures, and recognizing the ways in which these serve to disempower women. This self-awareness is the basis of any commitment to change, and requires clarity about men's different experiences of power and privilege, as well as various forms of inequality, for example, based on class and race/ethnicity.

**Emphasis on men's contribution:** Affirming the role of boys and adult men in promoting gender equality, believing in men's capacity for change, and supporting their individual and collective efforts for positive change are critical elements in advancing gender equality. Specific roles and responsibilities should be explicitly defined for men in gender equality reform processes.

**There should be Responsiveness to men's diversity:** Engaging men in work for gender equality requires addressing diversity among men. What men have in common is the gender privilege that comes from living in societies that, in many different ways, privilege men over women. Men's lives and experiences are in other ways extremely diverse, shaped by such factors as class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion and nationality. Men's sense of themselves as men and their experience of their gender identity cannot be understood in isolation from these diverse factors that give some men power over other men as well as over women. Such diversity produces different needs, and it is important to respond to specific needs in fostering men's engagement.

