GENDER EQUITY AND MALE ENGAGEMENT:
IT ONLY WORKS WHEN EVERYONE PLAYS

ICRW
INTERNATIONAL CENTER
FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN
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Meaningful engagement with men and boys is increasingly recognized as critical to gender equality and equity, necessary not only for women's empowerment, but also for transforming the social and gender norms that reinforce patriarchy and inequality and harm both women and men. The primary challenge embedded in this work is how to engage men and boys effectively without instrumentalizing them as a pathway to women's empowerment on the one hand, or marginalizing women and girls in gender equity work on the other. Doing so requires a solid understanding of the conceptual underpinning of male engagement work, how that has been brought to bear in practice, and to what effect.

In this brief, ICRW provides an overview of the field and guidance for stakeholders to support the funding, design, and implementation of programming that effectively engages men and boys in creating sustainable gender norm transformation. It is essential that these efforts unfold in collaboration with women and girls, recognize the power structures that disadvantage them, and acknowledge their lived experiences. It is also important to remember that men and women are in this fight together. Just as they do not operate in silos in their communities, neither can programming operate only with one group or another. The ultimate goal of this type of programming – gender equity – will only be possible when working with all genders as co-beneficiaries of a more gender equitable balance of power.

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MALE ENGAGEMENT FOR GENDER EQUITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The concepts of empowerment, equality, and equity underpin all gender work. Empowerment is defined as having the capabilities (including resources, knowledge, and skills) and agency (the ability and freedom to define and act upon one's goals) to make decisions and take action related to matters of significance in one's life. All people stand to benefit from such empowerment; however, due to patriarchal power structures, women and girls generally start from a position of disempowerment, societal constraint, internalized subordination, and lack of control over key aspects of their lives and bodies. Achieving women's empowerment requires a commitment by people of all genders to pursue and realize universal standards of gender equity and equality.

While equality and equity often are used interchangeably, they are in fact distinct concepts. Gender equality is the same treatment of all people regardless of gender identity; simply pursuing equality fails to recognize the ways that gender identity informs needs, aspirations, priorities, and sensibilities. Gender equity refers to the creation of conditions of fairness that take into consideration the diversity of all people across all genders and identities—not despite their gender, but in response to their gender. As such, gender equity is necessary to achieve gender equality. This is why we propose gender equity – not equality – as the ultimate goal of male engagement programming in our conceptual framework below.

A common thread among rationales for engaging men and boys in gender equity work is that both women and men live within patriarchal power structures, uphold those structures, are harmed by those structures, and are responsible for transforming them. This notion should not be used to argue that men and women are harmed equally by patriarchy or to obscure the very

real effects of male privilege. Rather, it should deepen our understanding of the full spectrum of these power imbalances and their ripple effects. At its core, engaging men and boys is therefore about recognizing how social norms of power and gender affect men and women as individuals—in their relationships with each other and in the structures and institutions that organize societies—and bringing this recognition to bear on gender equity programming. While the conceptualization of the role of men and boys in gender equity and women's empowerment programming often varies, a growing consensus is focused on engaging men as stakeholders or *co-beneficiaries* of gender equity programming, in that this allows men to understand and advocate for the benefits of gender equity that both men and women will experience.[1]

Approaches to gender equity in male engagement programming fall along a gender inclusion spectrum, first outlined by former ICRW president, Geeta Rao Gupta, in 2000. The spectrum includes gender reinforcing, gender neutral, gender sensitive, gender transformative, and gender empowering programming.[2] Gender sensitive and gender transformative are the most common approaches utilized. Gender sensitive programming takes into account and seeks to address existing gender inequalities, while gender transformative programming aims to transform unequal gender norms and their attendant behaviors and attitudes. Gender norm transformation is largely considered to be the most effective approach to programming. It includes work on "masculinities"—that is, helping men to reflect on how their conceptions of masculinity, and thus their lives, are influenced by unequal gender norms and encouraging men to move from "toxic" to "positive" definitions of what it means to be a man.

[1]MenEngage & UN Women. (2015). *Men, Masculinities, and Changing Power: A Discussion Paper on Engaging Men in Gender Equality from Beijing 1995 to 2015*. UNFPA.

[2]Gupta, G. R. (2000). Gender, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS: The what, the why, and the how. *Canadian HIV/AIDS Law Review*, 5(4), 86–93.

Still, while many effective programming strategies are emerging from the male engagement field, gaps remain. For instance, programmatic efforts on positive masculinities often do not touch on sexuality or transgender and gender non-conforming identities, and instead employ a predominantly heteronormative framing of gender relations that can be counterproductive to achieving gender equity. Additionally, most male engagement programming is focused on the individual and does not address the broader structures of patriarchy within which individuals and relationships operate. Further, while theoretical framing of male engagement programming presumes the ultimate objective of contributing to gender equity, programs often are not structured in this manner on the ground. As such, they often do not incorporate considerations for women's existing work, voices, and needs throughout their programming. Additionally, programs often do not measure outcomes for women and so are unable to determine connections between changes in attitudes, behaviors, and norms and whether male engagement efforts actually lead to changes in the lives of both men and women.

With support from Cartier Philanthropy, ICRW conducted research on the field of male engagement, which allowed us to identify best practices for addressing these and other gaps in male engagement programming.

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Photo Credit (Left and right): @Cartier Philanthropy

FRAMEWORK OF GENDER NORM TRANSFORMATION FOR GENDER EQUITY

The framework that follows outlines the foundational conditions, program strategies, and change processes through which gender norm transformation takes place. It also provides illustrative examples of the possible outcomes experienced by women, men, families, and communities when this transformation leads to more gender-equitable relationships and division of labor. Male engagement programming can be layered onto this framework and used as a strategic approach to shift gender norms and promote gender equity. This approach also has shown to be effective in contributing to changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors for men and women in the following sectors: violence against women and girls, health, economic empowerment, care work and fatherhood, education, land rights and agriculture, and political participation.

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Ultimate Goal:
Enhanced and Sustainable Gender Equity and Positive Social Development

Benefits for Women (Empowerment)

- Women's increased participation in decision-making (enhanced agency) at the household, community, institutional, and policy levels
- Women's increased participation in income-generation activities
- Women's increased access to resources (e.g., land, financing, justice, health services)
- Women's increased leadership and political participation

Benefits for Men

- Men's enhanced relationships with partners, children, and extended family members
- Men's enhanced life satisfaction with being able to create and fulfill alternative masculinities
- Increased uptake of health services and decreased risk-taking behavior due to reconstruction of masculinities

Benefits for Families and Communities

- More inclusive, productive decision-making at the household, community, institutional, and policy levels
- Increased household and community economic and social stability through expanded ability to earn money and access resources
- Greater resilience to conflict

Gender transformative behavior change and social action

Increase in gender-equitable knowledge and attitudes

Multi-sectoral, Intersectional, Long-term Program and Policy Efforts

Leverage momentum to extend change across societal levels

Individual

Examine, question, and transform definitions of masculinity and femininity

Provide individuals with skills and resources to challenge the status quo

Address harmful gender norms around masculinity and femininity

Community

Create collective action around equitable gender norms and behaviors

Institutional

Create more gender-equitable institutions and service provision in the workplace, schools, health centers, and justice system

Ensure enforcement of laws that promote gender equality

Policies

Engage with authority figures on the importance of gender-equitable policies and reform gender-equitable policies (e.g., around paternity leave or women's property rights)

PROGRAMMING STRATEGIES

FOUNDATIONAL CONDITIONS

» Formative research and participatory program design (including a gendered cultural analysis) to ensure local buy-in and culturally-relevant, context-specific programming

» Conceptualization of gender-transformative approach from inception ➞ initial engagement ➞ intervention

GENDER NORM TRANSFORMATION & DECONSTRUCTION OF THE GENDER BINARY

BEST PRACTICES

Through rigorous research, ICRW discerned a number of **best practices** in how male engagement programming can make significant contributions to wider efforts to achieve gender equity. We identified these through an extensive literature review, key informant interviews, and a convening of recognized global experts in male engagement.

It is critical that male engagement programming **use messaging that avoids a zero-sum game mentality, but that also discusses power imbalances and sets realistic expectations**. While it is essential to emphasize what men stand to gain from gender equity and non-violence, it is equally important to recognize how men benefit from power imbalances, which will diminish as patriarchal structures are reformed. Specifically, it is critical to **be cautious of using a "soft approach"** that stresses the harms men experience due to rigid gender norms and the benefits they stand to gain from more equitable relationships with women. Although this can be an effective method to initially recruit men to participate in a program, it does not address the power structures that subjugate women in patriarchal societies. Therefore, this method should be seen as an intermediary step on the path to gender transformation.

To meaningfully contribute to greater gender equity, programs also must **move from a focus on gender sensitization towards one on gender transformation**. Simply increasing men's knowledge of gender equity and creating more gender-equitable attitudes among men is not enough. To transform behavior, programs need to involve men in reflective activities where they question and discuss gender norms and ultimately decide for themselves how to practice new behavior. Programs also need to be intentional in **acknowledging and addressing the intersectionality of other systems of oppression**. It is critical to explore how racism, classism, heterosexism, etc. may intersect with and reinforce patriarchy and power structures. Programming should **consider the diversity in power and privilege that men experience** in various contexts, and address the ways in which men may feel disempowered. Finally, effective male engagement programming must **be accountable to women**. Interventions should acknowledge women's existing contributions towards gender equity, and create opportunities for leveraging this work and for collaborating with women and women's groups to ensure that efforts are accountable to women's rights and empowerment, women's organizations, and women themselves.

Additionally, our research determined that along with the above overarching best practices, male engagement programming is further strengthened by specific strategies integrated across various ecological levels. It is important for efforts to not only focus on individuals/couples and communities, but also to consider the important implications of working at the institutional and policy levels. As not every intervention can engage at all levels, programs should look to partner with others to fill these gaps.

Below, we offer guidance on how best to approach programming at various levels.

INDIVIDUAL

Start young and adapt through life transitions. Adolescent boys are still forming their social norms, and thus are ripe for reflection on harmful, inequitable gender norms and for forming more positive ones. Additionally, intervening with adolescent boys can have profound impacts, as these boys present a greater likelihood of utilizing more equitable relationships and of positively influencing those around them for the rest of their lives. It is also important to **continue to engage men and boys as they age and transition through life**. Gender transformation programming should target men throughout their lives, involving them in different ways and having different conversations and activities, depending on their stage within the lifecycle. Programs also should consider the diverse roles men play—as partners, brothers, fathers, employees, community members, etc., and how these change over time—and incorporate the multi-dimensionality of a person's existence into discussions about gender.

Use a gender-synchronized approach. Programs should engage with *all* genders in a process of gender transformation. Gender-synchronized programs may choose to work with men and women simultaneously or sequentially and with single-sex groups or mixed-sex groups. When using a gender-synchronized approach, it is important to **provide men and women with safe spaces** where they feel they can discuss gender norms and reflect on the ways in which the patriarchy plays out in their own lives.

Promote alternative, positive masculinities. Positive messaging that promotes men as agents of change instead of "shaming and blaming" them can encourage and inspire men, rather than castigate them for men's bad behavior and for the negative effects of patriarchy as a whole. These messages are most transformative when accompanied by facilitated conversations where men can reflect on how messages apply to their own lives, and acknowledge and take responsibility for their own gendered behaviors, while also recognizing that they are acting within and may be influenced by patriarchy. However, programs must ensure that they do not reinforce messages of men as saviors of women, but rather as equal collaborators in the process of gender norm transformation. Additionally, **promoting positive, nurturing, and collaborative images of men's engagement in care and fatherhood** can be used as an entry point for involving men in care-giving and envisioning alternate masculinities that enable more equitable distribution of household tasks and decision making.

COMMUNITY

Use male role models and advocates. Recruiting male role models from intervention communities is effective in catalyzing norm change and bringing gender equitable views out into the open. Using peer mentors, celebrities, community leaders, and other role models to advocate for gender equality can begin to change overall gender norms that lead to inequitable outcomes for women.

Unpack gender norms among male facilitators and role models. Programming should recruit and train facilitators and role models that are open to fully embracing gender equity and are comfortable with and work effectively under women's leadership. By doing so, they will be able to effectively convey messages about alternative masculinities and gender equity, which should include a continual process of critical reflection and discussion. Part of training male leaders should also include ensuring that they recognize the significant work that has been and continues to be done by women's groups.

Identify and collaborate with community influencers. It is important to engage with men within communities who are perceived as thought leaders and key influencers in creating, shaping, and upholding community norms, including those related to gender.

⛫ INSTITUTIONAL

Acknowledge and address institutional hierarchies. Programs that seek to transform gender norms around masculinity at the institutional level should identify and target the individual men who hold power within these institutions and work to shift their gender norms.

Engage male leaders to create more gender-equitable workplace policies. Men in leadership roles within companies should craft policies and procedures that promote more equitable employment or entrepreneurship environments, such as through equal pay for equal work, parental/family leave, flexible hours, and anti-sexual harassment policies.

📜 POLICY

Promote the voices of female policymakers, but also listen to voices "from the ground". Policy-based male engagement programming should seek to strengthen the visibility and agency of women in decision-making bodies where female policymakers exist. Interventions should also ensure that gender-focused civil society groups are included in policy formation and implementation to avoid a top-down approach.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INNOVATIONS IN PROGRAMMING AND RESEARCH

In addition to the best practices highlighted above, the following **recommendations** provide high-level considerations for male engagement programming and research operating at any level, across any sector.

Fund programs that seek to shift gender norms and that employ innovative measurement techniques to better understand if and how male engagement contributes to gender equity:

→ **Explore and address how aspects of masculinity and femininity play out in people's relationships with one another**. Individual-level gender norm change is related to how men and women relate and make decisions within their relationships. Programming that works with individuals and/or couples should look beyond changes within an individual's attitudes and behavior and also seek to measure changes in how couples interact by looking both at relational changes as well as similarities/differences in data reported by each member of a couple.

→ **Utilize more holistic and intersectional measurement**. Male engagement programs within a particular sector may measure outcomes that are relevant to that sector. However, to understand if this programming contributes to gender norm transformation—and declining rates of gender-based violence (GBV), for example—beyond simple changes in behavior or attitudes, programs should measure broader, equity outcomes. In the case of GBV, a program might also measure outcomes related to decision making, acceptance of GBV, access to resources (beyond those promoted through the program), control over resources, voice, and participation in community leadership and decision making. In addition to measuring outcomes for men who participate in a particular program, it is essential to also measure experienced outcomes among women to know whether the program is actually shifting norms and behaviors.

→ **Include social norm change programming in male engagement initiatives and create mechanisms to better understand how such programming may lead to gender equity**. Programs should measure shifts in gender norms to know whether a program is indeed contributing to sustainable gender norm transformation. This is a complex, nuanced process in which the norm reference groups — groups of people used as a standard for comparison for a particular type of behavior — need to identify and participate in both quantitative and qualitative measurement to capture shifts in gender norms within the community.

→ **Implement long-term programming and conduct complementary longitudinal studies to track incremental progress towards social change**. Social norm change takes time. Therefore, it would be beneficial for donors to consider funding longer-term programming to allow time for sustainable changes to occur. To understand what changes are happening, why, and how sustainable they are, programs should include a rigorous measurement component to allow for panel or longitudinal data that would track norm change among a cohort over time.

→ **Compare the effectiveness of different platforms for male engagement**. Research shows that male engagement approaches are most effective when they are context-specific and leverage existing institutions and platforms. A comparative analysis of different types of institutional platforms (e.g., religion, school, sports, local leaders) could explore the differential impacts and best practices in leveraging these platforms for working with men to enhance gender equity.

Explore the impacts of male (and female) engagement on social movements: Research should explore recent and current social movements focused on women's empowerment and gender equity to uncover the roles of men and women in these movements. This effort could seek to identify examples where male engagement in these movements helped to heighten the voices and concerns of women and achieved outcomes that are beneficial for women—without men dominating the process. These findings could be used to shape programming efforts that gives support to current social movements and provide recommendations and guidance for future movements.

Uncover best practices for gender norm transformation in contexts where gender norms may be under extra pressure or quickly shifting, such as in conflict/post-conflict settings: In conflict-affected contexts, pressure on individuals to ascribe to gender norms or their lack of ability to carry out defined roles related to masculinity or femininity may be accentuated. Therefore, programming in these areas should seek to better understand how gender norms shift in these contexts and how programs and policies can reconstruct more gender-equitable norms.

Create programs that focus on gender norm transformation within the workplace, and seek to understand how this can help prevent sexual harassment: Gendered power inequalities enable sexual harassment to occur at the workplace. To prevent future harassment, companies need to think about gender norm transformation within the workplace by investing in research and training to create more equitable work cultures. Engaging men in this process can foster an environment in which women not only feel safe, but are empowered to excel professionally.

Build coalitions and share knowledge related to male engagement work: Sustainable gender norm change is a complex process and therefore, requires long-term, multi-sectoral efforts across all ecological levels. Over time and across sectors, through partnerships with organizations operating at different societal levels, and with the collaboration of men's and women's organizations and movements, programmatic efforts can build synergies that contribute to broader social norm change. As male engagement is still a relatively nascent field, it is also important for implementers and coalitions to create opportunities for learning and sharing around what works, as well as what doesn't work.

Photo Credit (Left and right): David Snyder

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