

Towards Shared Care

Strengthening Men and
Boys' Roles in Caregiving

Prepared by International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

April 2026



About us

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is a decentralized global network comprising three autonomous regional entities - ICRW-Africa, ICRW-Americas, and ICRW-Asia. For nearly 50 years, ICRW has set the global agenda for gender equity, inclusion, and shared prosperity with action-oriented research and solutions. Our global experts generate groundbreaking insights and develop gender transformative strategies on topics like economic opportunity and security, health and reproductive rights, gender norms, and climate action. Our vision is to create an equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world where women, girls, and structurally excluded populations lead and thrive.

Authors & Acknowledgements

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The authors would like to share their deep-felt gratitude to the participating organizations and all the research participants who shared their valuable time and rich experiences with us. We thank the Gates Foundation team for this opportunity to engage with this understudied and vital piece of work. We acknowledge, with gratitude, our colleagues at ICRW Asia, Ravi Verma for their guidance and valuable inputs through the course of this study, Sandeepa Fanda for grant management, Monica Bhalla for administrative assistance, and Anurag Paul and Pooja Gupta for communication assistance. We are also grateful to Aditi Vyas for copyediting the document and the Roots Advertising team for designing the report.

Suggested Citation

Uppal, R., Wakankar, A., Chakraborty, S. and Achyut, P. 2026. *Towards Shared Care: Strengthening Men and Boys' Roles in Caregiving*. New Delhi: International Center for Research on Women.

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List of Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organization
GBV	Gender Based Violence
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
ILO	International Labour Organization
J-PAL	Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab
KII	Key Informant Interview
MRA	Men's Rights Activist
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NTL	Non-Traditional Livelihood
PLFS	Periodic Labour Force Survey

Executive Summary



Care work, both paid and unpaid, remains deeply feminized, shaped by entrenched gender norms that position caregiving as women's responsibility and men as primary breadwinners. This unequal division of labour sustains economic systems and productive work, yet, it remains largely invisible and undervalued. Such gendered expectations not only constrain women's economic participation and autonomy but also restrict men's emotional engagement, caregiving roles, and broader wellbeing. Addressing caregiving as a gender justice issue, therefore, requires deliberate efforts to challenge and transform these norms for both women and men.

Over the past decades, engagement of men and boys has gained prominence within gender equality programming in India. Drawing on a landscaping exercise comprising a targeted literature review and key informant interviews with practitioners, researchers, donors, and media actors, this evidence brief aims to examine how civil society organizations (CSOs) through fourteen different program models are engaging men and boys in caregiving, the strategies they employ, the pathways of change observed, and the structural and normative barriers that constrain impact.

Across programs, community based interventions anchored in participatory, activity based pedagogies emerged as the most common approach. Interventions that began by engaging men through their own lived realities, work pressures, emotional constraints, and familial roles, were more successful in building trust, reducing resistance, and sustaining participation. Creating safe, non judgmental spaces for reflection enabled men to interrogate masculinity norms and reconsider caregiving not as a loss of status, but as an expansion of their roles. Context sensitive design and gender synchronous programming, where men's engagement was complemented by parallel engagement with women and other key

stakeholders, further strengthened household level change and mitigated backlash.

Evidence from the study indicates that male engagement initiatives have led to observable shifts primarily at the individual and family levels. Participants reported increased awareness of gender norms, greater emotional reflexivity, and gradual uptake of unpaid domestic and childcare responsibilities. In some cases, these shifts translated into improved household relations and expanded support for women's choices around education, mobility, and work. Community level change, particularly collective action to challenge violence against women was less consistent, underscoring the difficulty of translating individual transformation into sustained normative change.

Key enablers of change included the commitment and relational work of skilled facilitators, the presence of role models and peer networks, and long-term organizational embeddedness within communities. At the same time, significant barriers persist. These include limited organizational capacity, short-term and inflexible funding, entrenched breadwinner norms, backlash within households and communities, and the growing influence of digitally mediated anti-gender narratives targeting young men and boys.

Based on these findings, the brief underscores the need for CSOs, funders, policymakers, and media actors to move beyond fragmented or instrumental engagement with men and boys. It calls for purposeful integration of caregiving into gender transformative programming; stronger investment in long term, reflective, and evidence led interventions; and strategic use of media and technology to counter regressive masculinity narratives. Engaging men and boys in caregiving is not supplementary to women's empowerment agendas, but a necessary condition for achieving equitable, inclusive, and sustainable gender outcomes.

Introduction



Care work, both unpaid and paid, is vital for the effective functioning of society, yet it has long been invisible, unpaid or underpaid and disproportionately performed by women. While unpaid care work is largely invisible in economic accounting, paid care work is often underfunded, poorly regulated and carried out under precarious conditions, with women overwhelmingly carrying both these responsibilities. Globally, they undertake 76% of unpaid care work, spending 3.2 times more time than men, and in no country in the world, is this unpaid care work equally shared between men and women (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018). In India, the 2024 Time Use Survey data paints a similar picture. Women’s daily time spent on unpaid domestic services for household members was 289 minutes, while men’s was only 88 minutes (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2025). Additionally, women spent 137 minutes a day caring for their household members compared to the 75 minutes spent by men of the household.

This unequal distribution of unpaid care work is a major barrier to women’s economic participation and retention in the labour market. Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24 showed that 56% of rural women and 63.5% of women in urban areas cite childcare and domestic responsibilities as the primary reason for not participating in the labour force (Chowdhury, 2024). This

constrains the economic opportunities and wellbeing of unpaid carers by creating “time poverty” while undermining their overall enjoyment of human rights. Only 41.7% women are in the labour force in India (MoSPI, 2024). Studies have indicated that the unequal burden of unpaid work borne by women, alongside employer perceptions that women may prioritize domestic responsibilities over work commitments, have negatively affected their career advancement and leadership journeys (Uppal et al., 2024; Dasra, 2024). As women’s career trajectories commonly overlap with motherhood and increased care work, gendered employer perceptions at this life stage leads to the phenomenon of “motherhood penalty”. Additionally, as the proportion of elderly people in India is expected to increase to 20.8% of the population by 2050, where the caregiving burden, largely borne by women, will further intensify (Nikore, 2024). These imbalances are deeply rooted in gender norms prevalent in a patriarchal society where caregiving is largely considered women’s responsibility, while men are primarily seen as breadwinners or financial providers.

Recognizing care as central to inclusive development, gender equality and social justice, the International Labour Organization’s Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work (ILO, 2019) and its recent landmark Resolution on Decent Work and

the Care Economy (ILO, 2024) underscore the need for a more balanced sharing of family responsibilities. These global commitments signal a growing momentum to reposition care as a shared responsibility. Engaging men and boys, therefore, is a critical strategy to advance shared caregiving practices within households and communities.

There is growing evidence that men's involvement in caregiving not only reduces women's unpaid care burden and supports their participation in paid work but also strengthens family bonds and promotes more equitable societies. National and global studies highlight that reducing care-related barriers leads to higher labour

force participation and productivity among women, and stronger outcomes for children and families (Chiplunkar et al., 2024; Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab [J PAL], 2023). A study of a male engagement program in Bangladesh showed that women experienced increased mobility outside the home and greater involvement in household decision making (World Vision Bangladesh, 2022). Feminist scholars and practitioners have long argued that care must be recognized, reduced and redistributed, as both a matter of social justice and as a prerequisite for enabling women to participate in the economy on equal terms with men.



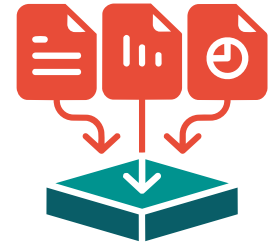
In India, however, prevailing social norms and structures continue to limit men's engagement. A recent study conducted across five states examining the state of fatherhood in India shows that most men and women view care work within gendered division of labour and consider this division sacrosanct (International Center for Research on Women, 2024). Financial provision is seen as central to the role of a "good father," while caregiving inequities are often unrecognized, reflecting deeply ingrained beliefs. For instance, of the 597 men surveyed, three-quarters agreed that men provide care by earning, while women do so by taking care of home and children. Although men self-reported involvement in caregiving for children and elderly parents, women continue to bear most household responsibilities.

Gendered beliefs around division of labour diminish the value assigned to women's work, both paid and unpaid. It is therefore critical to challenge these attitudes and beliefs. When men visibly participate

in caregiving, it challenges entrenched gender stereotypes, creating long-term normative change toward gender equality. An intersectional feminist vision of a care economy needs men and boys to value care work, both paid and unpaid; to share unpaid care work equally at home; and to advocate alongside women for care-responsive policies and workplace equality (van der Gaag et al., 2023).

However, a pathway to changing the unequal nature of gender norms exists in the hypothesis that men's increased participation in care work benefits them as well. Men who spend between one to two hours or more caring for their partners are twice as likely to feel satisfied in their relationships (ICRW, 2024). Similarly, fathers who spend two to four hours or more caring for the emotional needs of their children, are twice as likely to feel satisfied about their caregiving involvement. These findings indicate clear entry points for engaging men and boys in taking on greater caregiving roles.

Study Objective and Methodology



2.1 Objective and Approach

To build on this potential for change, ICRW designed the following study to document, analyze and synthesize strategies that engage men in caregiving in India. For the purpose of this study, care work has been defined as an interpretation of ILO's definition of care work i.e. consisting of direct and indirect activities (ILO, 2018). Direct activities include assisting the elderly, taking care of sick family members, nursing or teaching children, whereas indirect activities include cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, etc. However, over the course of the study, the definition was further expanded to include emotional care for both self and loved ones, an overlooked aspect of care. The specific objectives of this study were to:

- Synthesize evidence on current strategies and models that engage men in caregiving, including approaches, enablers and barriers encountered, and observed pathways of change.
- Develop actionable recommendations for policymakers, private sectors and civil society organizations (CSOs) to promote men's caregiving roles through a gender equity lens.

2.2 Data Collection

A rapid literature scan was conducted to map and analyze the existing evidence on effective models and strategies to strengthen men's engagement in caregiving in India, as well as the effect of the changes observed in men themselves, women, and families at the household level. A total of 23 studies and reports, all based in the Indian context, and published in 2010 or later, were reviewed. Academia, Taylor & Francis, EBSCO, ResearchGate, Inderscience, Bolletino Adapt, Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) websites were accessed to obtain literature. Additionally, reports of organizations engaging men and boys were also reviewed. The data was extracted and thematically analyzed using MS Excel.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted to deepen the understanding of the strategies and mechanisms adopted by organizations to facilitate men's participation in caregiving. A total of eleven KIIs were conducted, including practitioners from eight CSOs, and one representative each from a research institution, a donor agency, and a media organization. Organizations with an intentional focus on caregiving in their approach were selected. There was also a deliberate attempt to maximize diversity

across geography, participant age groups and sites of engagement while choosing these organizations. A total of 14 programs were studied, 8 through KIIs, and the remaining 6 through the reviewed literature.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data extracted from the literature was thematically coded. All KIIs were conducted online and recorded for note-taking purposes. The recordings were transcribed and analyzed using the same thematic approach as the literature review. An overall qualitative analysis of the emerging themes is presented in the following sections of this brief.

2.4 Limitations

This study was conducted entirely as secondary research. The paucity of available evidence on models, pathways of change, and linkages with broader gender equality goals affected the depth of analysis. This study relies heavily on the experiences of practitioners and researchers with extensive grassroots engagement experience. Much of the data is anecdotal and experiential and does not fully capture the nuances in the shifts observed. Most of the evidence centers around changes with respect to household work, with limited data available on linkages to women's economic empowerment. Geographically, none of the organizations covered were operational in the southern part of India. More time and resources are required to conduct a systemic, field-based study that examines these pathways and linkages in greater depth.

Study Findings and Analysis



This section presents a synthesized analysis of findings from both the literature review and KIs. It explores program models implemented by CSOs to strengthen men's engagement in caregiving, along with effective strategies, challenges, enabling factors, and the changes these models have brought about.

3.1 Program Characteristics

This section presents key program characteristics, including male engagement approaches, target populations, intervention strategies, including strategies to integrate care related conversations and thematic emphasis. It highlights how male engagement is operationalized across contexts.

Sites of Engagement: Based on their prior experience of working on issues of gender equality, the organizations chose to engage with men and boys, at the school level, in communities, or in both settings. With the exception of four programs that were integrated into the school curriculum, the interventions were primarily community-based. Boys were more commonly engaged

through school-based or combined school-and-community-based interventions, while men were primarily engaged at the community level. Workplace-based engagement with men was not observed.

Program Objectives: The overarching objective of all the programs was to challenge deeply entrenched gender norms. This included questioning rigid ideas of masculinity, addressing gender-based violence (GBV), and questioning gendered division of labour, particularly norms that position caregiving and domestic responsibilities as women's primary responsibility. Across interventions, there was an intentional focus on reshaping household-level gender relations by promoting men's active participation in caregiving and fostering more equitable norms within families.

Entry Points: While the overall goal of the programs was to advance gender equality, the participation of men and boys in the programs was facilitated through strategic and practical entry points. Organizations aimed to support participants' access to livelihood opportunities and linkages with social protection schemes. In fatherhood focused programs, prioritizing the parent-child relationship functioned as a strategic entry point.

Program Structure & Pedagogy: Most programs were implemented over a one-year period, with two programs with a duration of three years. One of the programs was embedded in the institution itself, allowing longer exposure for students who continued to be in school. The program sessions were

mostly held on a weekly or fortnightly basis. The sessions consisted of various activities which nudged participants to reflect on everyday realities that shape their own ideas of gender and masculinity.

(Regarding an activity used in the sessions) They have to prepare one matrimonial ad for their brother and one matrimonial ad for their sister. So automatically it reflects how the society thinks and it is reflected in their internal thoughts about patriarchy, about the pressure. Then we ask the questions - "Why? Why did you think that? When you are asking for a groom for your sister, why is his own house necessary? Why does the person have to be employed in a government job? We probed that. So, then they started to reflect on that."

- KII Participant

Most programs incorporated a practical action component. In some cases, this took the form of homework assignments that participants completed between consecutive

sessions. In one program, men were trained on designing and implementing an action project in their community.

"The adolescent boys are given a task to do at home. The youth are told how they should react and contribute if the younger brother is doing some task. And the parents are told that when their children are behaving in a certain way, you should not discourage them but instead motivate, encourage and appreciate them."

- KII Participant



Photo Credit: ICRW Asia Photo Bank

Stakeholder Engagement: None of these organizations engaged exclusively with men and boys. Three programs engaged boys within mixed gender groups, while other programs engaged women and girls in the same community, either through a separate program or as stakeholders for the male engagement program. In addition to women and girls, programs also engaged other stakeholders such as parents and teachers.

The table below (Table 1) lists the unique approaches adopted by each of the eight organizations interviewed through KIIs. The table is not intended to comprehensively capture every aspect of each organization's approach but rather to highlight the key strategy or approach that characterizes their engagement models.

Table 1: Unique Approaches of Program Organisations

Name of Organisation	Approach
 Asian Bridge India	Engaging with three generations of men of a family and working with multiple such families.
 Azad Foundation	An approach rooted in gender-just skill building and education that supports women in non-traditional professions and engages men and boys to shift norms around gender equality and address their own issues.
 Mobile Creches	Fostering an organizational culture of care that informs and strengthens engagement with program participants, especially male program participants.
 PHIA Foundation	Working with colleges and partner organizations across states (rural and urban) to engage young men from both privileged and marginalized backgrounds.
 Prayaas	Drawing on legacy of Centre for Health and Social Justice's (CHSJ's) work with men and boys, using lived experiences and real-life situations to facilitate reflection on everyday gender inequities.
 Sesame Workshop	Leveraging digital engagement strategy (WhatsApp chatbot and social media campaigns) to maintain male program participants' (fathers') engagement and reinforce learning, alongside in person workshops.
 Study Hall Educational Foundation	Integrating critical dialogues on gender and masculinity norms, using lived experiences from their own lives, in the official curriculum, in an all-boys school environment by sensitizing all teachers as key facilitators, instead of a standalone intervention.
 Synergy Sansthan	Enhancing the agency of young boys through a youth-centric, ecosystem-level approach by collaborating with multiple institutions at the district level.

3.2 Effective Approaches and Strategies

This section presents strategies that have been effective in promoting positive shifts in the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys by challenging harmful gender norms, especially those related to division of labour and men's role in caregiving.

3.2.1 Approaches

Starting Conversations from Men's Own Vulnerabilities: Programs that initiated engagement by centering men's lived experiences and vulnerabilities, such as work pressures, emotional constraints or identity expectations associated with the breadwinner norm, were more successful in reducing resistance and sustaining participation. This approach framed gender equality and caregiving as a nonzerosum game, in which men do not lose status or power but instead gain emotional wellbeing, stronger relationships, and a sense of shared responsibility. This also helped in creating a space for men to articulate their own challenges in a nonjudgmental environment. Importantly, this framing repositioned caregiving as an expansion of

men's roles and capacities, enabling deeper reflection on privilege, control, and gendered power relations, rather than as a threat to masculinity.

Gender Synchronous Programming:

Programs that engaged men and women in coordinated ways, either through mixed-gender groups or parallel interventions within the same community, were more effective in facilitating broader shifts in gender norms. Organizations often began with men-only groups to create safe spaces for reflection and subsequently introduced mixed-gender dialogues at later stages of the intervention. Such spaces were critical in enabling participants to hear, reflect on, and negotiate differing experiences and perceptions regarding care and household responsibilities. Working with both men and women within the same social context also helped reduce resistance and backlash, while fostering complementary efforts toward change. This gender-synchronous approach recognized that caregiving practices and gender norms are inherently relational, shaped through everyday interactions and embedded within wider social ecosystems. By aligning messaging and expectations across genders, these programs were better positioned to support mutual negotiation, shared accountability, and more equitable caregiving arrangements.

*"Gender work doesn't mean engaging boys for girls' issues
(it has to be towards broader gender equality)."*

- KII Participant

Community Embeddedness: Engaging multiple other stakeholders in the community and creating community-wide visibility for these issues was seen to be critical to reduce backlash and promote change. Many organizations conducted community wide campaigns on shared caregiving and gender-based violence. These were seen as important mitigation measures to visibilize and normalize discussion on these issues, while

addressing resistance from both community and households. In addition, organizations made intentional efforts to integrate conversations with other key stakeholders, such as parents, family members and teachers in the programs, through meetings and/or group discussions. The aim was to create a supportive ecosystem for change within these institutions.

“We worked with school teachers. We told them - ‘when you are teaching them, make sure to use examples that encourage men’s participation in household chores.’”

- KII Participant

3.2.2 Engagement Strategies

Meeting Participants Where They Are:

Initiating engagement with participants by accounting for both their physical contexts and life experiences emerged as a critical strategy for securing sustained participation. Programs were designed with flexibility to accommodate participants’ time constraints, particularly for older boys and men balancing academic commitments or livelihood responsibilities. As a result, program teams often scheduled sessions on weekends, holidays, or late evenings, aligning engagement activities with participants’ availability and lived realities.

Strategic Entry Points: Programs’ pragmatic entry points created incentives and encouraged men to participate and engage with these programs over time.

These included addressing men’s immediate priorities, such as their role in providing for the family, or, in the case of fathers, the overall wellbeing and development of their children. Strengthening parent–child relationships and highlighting positive child development outcomes proved to be effective engagement strategies within fatherhood-focused interventions, through which broader objectives of reshaping parenting norms and increasing men’s involvement in caregiving were achieved. Additionally, facilitating access to rights and entitlements, such as identity documentation and linkages to social protection schemes, served as an important motivator for participation. These practical supports helped build initial interest and trust, creating an entry point for subsequent discussions on gender norms, power relations, and caregiving responsibilities.

“We once took men from the community to a picnic nearby where the participants shared that for many of them it was the first time they had the time for themselves and they were not playing the role of a provider or a father or a husband.”

- KII Participant

Community Based Leaders and Peer

Solidarity: The formation of peer networks or collectives within the community emerged as an effective mechanism for sustaining dialogue, learning and positive shifts within a community. On one hand, these networks facilitated solidarity among participants who were trying to initiate behavioural change at the community level; on the other hand, where alumni members were also present, they enabled participants to view program alumni as relatable role models. Through the sharing of experiences, peer networks

created spaces for mutual support and collective learning. Programs often identified leaders among the participants who became critical changemakers and role models within the community. These leaders also enabled the formation and sustenance of peer groups. In a few cases, these networks functioned as platforms for sustaining change beyond the formal program period, particularly when participants remained connected with implementing organizations in the community, even after project closure, as alumni.



3.2.3 Participatory Pedagogy

Action and Activity-Based: All the programs emphasized participatory, activity-based learning as a core pedagogical approach. Session-based reflection activities were designed to prompt participants to critically examine their internalized gender biases and everyday practices. While several activities were conducted during program sessions, additional action points were assigned as homework between sessions. These acted as conversation starters not only for subsequent sessions but also within households and peer groups. Initiatives such as cooking competitions for men were used as practical entry points to build motivation, encourage skill development related to household work, and normalize men's participation in caregiving and domestic responsibilities. A few organizations also used digital tools to promote learning and facilitate engagement of participants. Embedded within these activities was an emphasis on sustaining incremental behavioural change by encouraging participants to consistently engage in caregiving practices over time.

Creating Safe and Reflective Spaces:

Programs deliberately sought to create safe, non-judgmental spaces that enabled open conversation, self-reflection, and introspection. Such spaces were critical in fostering honest dialogue and avoiding overly prescriptive engagement. Skilled facilitators played a key role in cultivating trust and guiding reflective processes. In some cases, practitioners noted that the

initial program phases focused primarily on listening to participants' challenges and experiences before gradually introducing activities that encouraged deeper reflection on gender norms, power relations, and privilege.

Context Sensitive Design: A few participants highlighted that masculinity is not monolithic and manifests differently across social, cultural, and geographic contexts. Variations were observed based on regional settings as well as participants' socio-economic positions, including differences between boys from relatively privileged and marginalized backgrounds. In one program that engaged both marginalized and privileged youth, the latter often perceived themselves as already well-informed on gender issues. This made it challenging to engage them in discussions that questioned or challenged their existing views. Programs that were effective in facilitating change demonstrated adaptability to these contextual differences by using locally relevant language, examples, and cultural references. For instance, one organization shared that early engagement with boys in an urban city suggested highly egalitarian attitudes toward gender equality. Over time, facilitators recognized that these responses were often performative or politically correct rather than reflective of deeply held beliefs. This insight prompted a shift toward context-specific pedagogical strategies that allowed for more honest expression and deeper engagement with underlying attitudes.

"The boys from one State said "Yes, we do violence. We don't work in the house, it is not our job." In another State, it's we-know-everything and women's-should-have-all-the-rights kind of masculinity. So that's the difference."

- KII Participant

3.3 Shifts Observed

Varying methods of engagement have yielded different changes across organizations. Based on the spheres of the impact, these changes were classified into Self, Family, and Community. This section presents the changes reported across these three levels. It was more common for participants to start demonstrating change gradually at the levels of self and family, where such shifts were more common. On the community level, however, only isolated incidents were reported.

3.3.1 Self

- Participants of the male engagement programs showed an increased awareness of their own emotions, and in the case of fatherhood programs, of their children's emotions as well. The awareness of these

participants also reflected in their endeavour to question hegemonic ideas of masculinity, either through self-contemplation or action, and in their understanding of the meaning of cuss words and critique of such usage.

Family

- The impact of male engagement programs was observed on an attitudinal as well as behavioural level. Participants of Breakthrough's adolescent empowerment program Taaron ki Toli in Karnal, Haryana showed a positive shift in attitudes toward household chores. Among boys aged 11 to 14, the percentage in favour of equitable distribution of cooking increased from 49% to 79% (Breakthrough, 2024). A greater positive shift was seen in boys from the age group 15-19, with the percentage rising from 47% to 94%. In terms of washing dishes

"Now we have participants who report to us -"I raised my voice at my child, I did not like it." They are recognising that their behaviour is wrong."

- KII Participant

and laundry, the percentage of boys with egalitarian views from age groups 11 to 14 and 15 to 19 stood at 37% and 33% respectively. After the program, a considerable shift was observed, with the percentages increasing to 64% and 85% for boys of age groups 11 to 14 and 15 to 19 respectively.

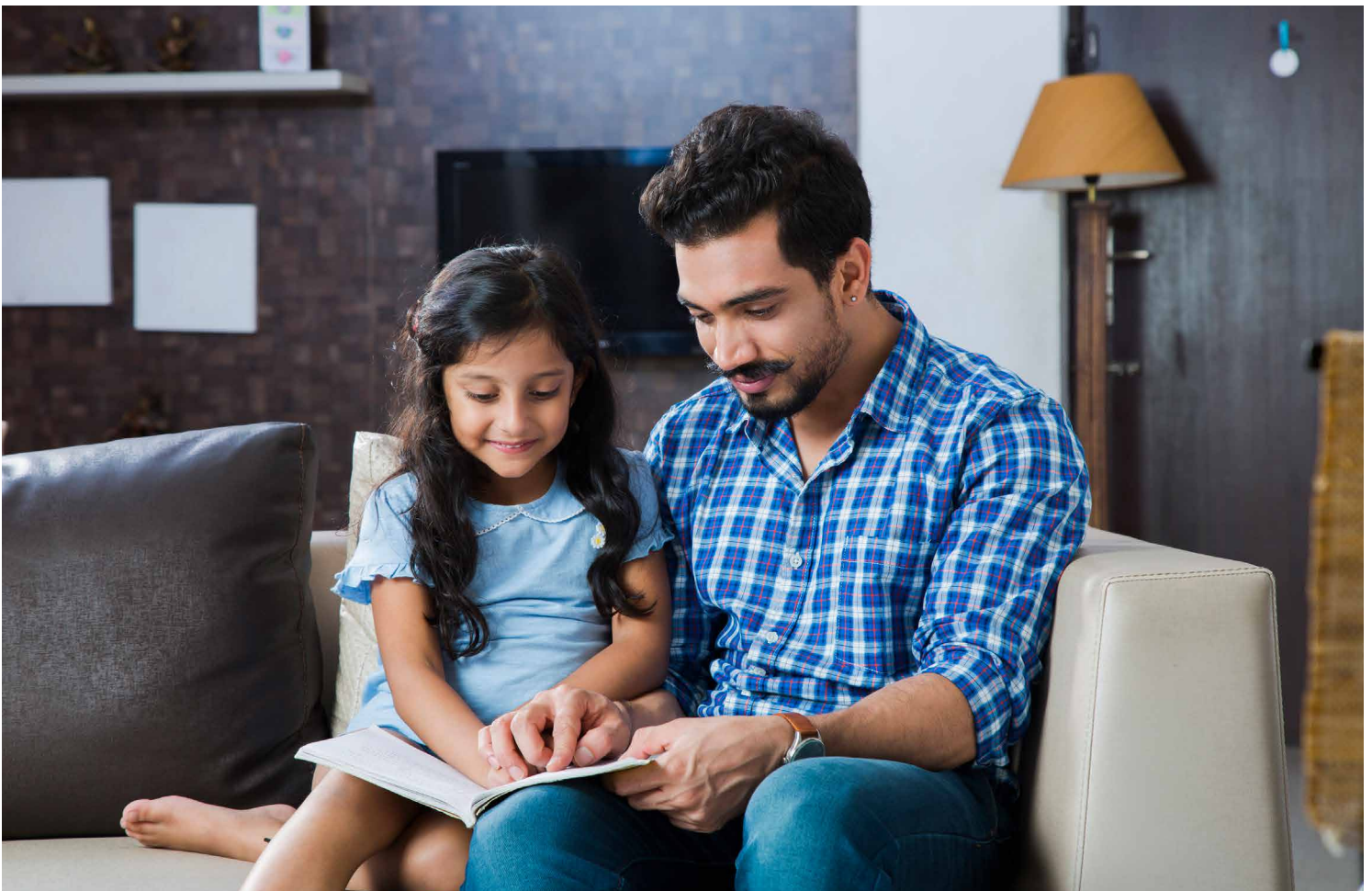
- In interventions emphasizing shifts in household gender dynamics, participants showed a gradual increase in the uptake of domestic unpaid chores. This uptake was observed across activities such as cooking, cleaning, and buying groceries. Cooking and buying groceries were more commonly taken up by participants, followed by cleaning activities. More than 50% of the 194 male participants of the Gender Equity Movement in Schools, self-reported doing more household chores after the program (Achyut et al., 2011). Almost half (101) of these were involved in group education activities and campaigns as part of the program. The rest were exposed only to campaigns.
- Household chores that are typically performed within private spaces, where departures from gendered norms are less visible, were generally the first to be adopted. In contrast, shifting these practices into public or semi-public spaces proved more challenging, as it exposed participants to greater social scrutiny and potential judgment; consequently, such changes took longer to materialize.
- Programs placed a strong emphasis on shifting caregiving practices related to childcare, particularly those with an explicit focus on parenting and fatherhood. Across these interventions, the most common positive shifts were observed in direct childcare engagement, such as playing with children and supporting their educational activities. In some cases, these changes were accompanied by reported improvements in the quality of father–child relationships, suggesting strengthened emotional bonds alongside increased caregiving participation.
- In some cases, the increased awareness of gender norms translated to men becoming more cognizant of the stereotypes that affect and restrict women’s agency and opportunities. As a result, women in some participants’

“A participant shared that in the initial days, he swept the floor behind closed doors. During this time, he not only faced resistance from the community but also experienced feelings of shame himself. However, as he continued the practice, he gradually began sweeping with the door open and eventually started cleaning the area in front of his house. Over time, other men in the community gathered the courage to do the same and began sweeping as well.”

- KII Participant

families experienced greater freedom of choice. In some cases, men began supporting better educational and employment opportunities for their female family members, including mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. For instance, a participant in the Responsible Partners and Caring Fathers program reported in the endline evaluation, “I am now open to shift my base if my wife, pursuing her Phd in English, got a job in Ranchi. She likes to wear salwar-kameez and it is her choice” (Murthy, 2018). In another case, a program participant

convinced his family members to allow his sister to pursue further education and postpone her marriage. In yet another program, a participant openly discussed family planning within his family, so her sister-in-law could continue to pursue her work. Although isolated, these cases highlight the possibilities for transformative change and point to the broader potential of men’s engagement interventions.



“The first fight the participant took up was for his mother to not cover her head.”

- KII Participant

- In only one isolated case did the male engagement model directly lead to women from participants’ households entering the workforce. This outcome was enabled by a parallel program implemented by the same organization, which provided women with access to training and livelihood opportunities. Otherwise, such direct linkages between men’s engagement in caregiving and women’s workforce participation were not commonly observed.
- where marrying outside of the tribe was looked down upon, a program participant stood with his family despite such resistance.
- In a few cases, the interventions generated a ripple effect. Other fathers in the community, regardless of their participation in the program, began taking up household chores after observing changes among program participants.

3.4 Enablers

3.3.2 Community

- KII participants reported that men stood up to violence against women and patriarchal traditions through collective group actions. On two occasions, it was explicitly stated that men reported violations related to dowry and child marriage. In another case, in a community

Beyond the strategies intentionally deployed by organizations, a set of enabling factors also contributed to the shifts observed among program participants. This section outlines these enabling factors and examines how they positively influenced participants to begin questioning and critiquing prevailing gender norms.

“There was an incident of child marriage. The men’s group got the news of the child marriage and it was stopped. They reported it anonymously. I told them that it can be done anonymously to the Childline. I also informed the Childline but I ensured that they also report it.”

- KII Participant

- Program Teams' Passion and Ability to Build Trust:** One of the strongest motivations driving practitioners to engage men and boys was the recognition of men's roles within patriarchal structures and their potential to challenge and transform these systems. This understanding fostered a deep sense of commitment and passion among them, many of whom embodied the principle of the personal being political in their work. Such commitment translated into deliberate efforts to build trust and cultivate personal relationships with participants. These relationships were critical to strengthening participants' engagement and sustained involvement in the programs.
- Skilled Facilitators:** The presence of facilitators with strong technical expertise in concepts of gender, power, patriarchy, and masculinities was identified as a critical enabler across programs. Equally important were facilitators' listening and facilitation skills, which enabled them to navigate complex and sensitive conversations effectively. Participants frequently emphasized the value of having facilitators who could create safe, reflective spaces and actively encourage introspection. Facilitators' personal investment in the work, as well as in building relationships with program participants, further strengthened trust and enhanced the depth and quality of engagement.

"Even if they are not in the cohort anymore, I still wish them Happy Birthday, it may seem like a small gesture but it really helps in staying connected."

- KII Participant

- Role Model Effect:** In some cases, organizations deliberately leveraged the role-model effect to influence a wider group of men and boys within the community. The continued presence of alumni participants who had already demonstrated behavioural change served as visible and relatable examples of alternative masculinities and caregiving practices. In such instances, younger men and boys in the community were observed aspiring to emulate these alumni. In another case, sustained engagement in the community over an extended period contributed to broader change. It was reported that a few men, regardless of their direct participation in the programs, began adopting more gender-equitable caregiving practices after observing others do the same, suggesting a process of normalization of these behaviours within the community.



Photo Credit: ICRW Asia Photo Bank

- **Long-Term Presence in the Community:**

The continued, long-term presence of an organization in a locality helped build trust and familiarity within the community members. This presence made them more receptive to new ideas that

the organization sought to introduce in the community to challenge existing conditioning. On the other hand, it also helped with the sustainability of the shifts observed within the community members.

"To achieve our vision of a gender just world, only working with women in the communities in silos is not going to work."

- KII Participant

3.5 Barriers

Organizations faced various constraints while working to challenge deeply entrenched gender norms of masculinity and caregiving. These challenges emerged in different forms, with varying magnitudes, and across different sites. This section highlights the key barriers faced by organizations in advancing gender norms change among men at two broad levels: the organizational level and the normative level.

Organizational Level:

- CSOs across the globe have been active in the women's empowerment domain for far longer than in the field of masculinities. The impactful approaches, common pitfalls and strategies to overcome them in engaging girls and women have been well documented. However, organizations reported that replicating these approaches to address issues of masculinities with men and boys did not yield results. They described finding it difficult, particularly in the nascent stages, to effectively engage men and boys.
- In two cases, women facilitating the program were met with scepticism from the participants in the male engagement program. Organizations also reported that it has been difficult to recruit more men to work on issues of gender and masculinity.
- Within the education system, schools' focus on academic goals, and the time required to achieve them, makes it difficult for NGOs to run an after school

(or during the school hours) program. A critical challenge is the unlearning of ones' own condition for people who are working in these areas, since they too have undergone the same conditioning and socialization. For instance, programs that engaged with schools and encouraged teachers to challenge their own gendered assumptions faced significant difficulties.

- Limited funding and challenges in securing adequate funders emerged as key constraints for organizations. Even where funding was available, the lack of flexible or unrestricted grants curtailed organizations' ability to experiment, adapt, and learn iteratively during implementation. Additionally, funders' emphasis on output-driven monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks, often even for short-term projects, posed a significant challenge, as expectations to demonstrate measurable behavioural change within limited timeframes were frequently misaligned with the long-term nature of gender norms change.

Norms

- The internalisation of men's role as breadwinners can potentially act as a hurdle in two ways. First, dynamic working conditions make it difficult for them to consistently participate in male engagement programs. Second, some men perceive the breadwinning role as their way of caring for the family, thereby absolving themselves of the responsibility for unpaid caregiving duties in the home.

“I think the biggest barrier is the fact that this men’s role as providers is just so embedded in men, especially in the Indian context.”

- KII Participant

- Resistance and backlash to change within both the home and the community were widely reported. Within the household, women sometimes resisted relinquishing domestic responsibilities, either because these tasks were their only source of perceived “power” in the family or due to internalised gender stereotypes. This resistance hindered men’s efforts to take on domestic responsibilities. At the community level, blatant shaming and ridicule from the community, even the anticipation of such backlash, discouraged men and boys from participating in domestic household work.
- Another common barrier found in the analysis was with the expansion of the

manosphere¹ which is reinforcing harmful gender norms. The world over, a wave of influencer content is teaching youth regressive ideas of masculinity and presenting restrictive gender norms as natural. A common narrative pushed by these content creators is that men are victimized in society and that women are to blame. While many of these creators are based in the Western world, Indian content creators are also repackaging the same messages in localized forms. Young men and boys are absorbing these ideas, making it even more difficult for organizations to engage them on issues such as gendered division of labour and the need to have equitable households.

¹ The manosphere is an umbrella term for online communities that have increasingly promoted narrow and aggressive definitions of what it means to be a man – and the false narrative that feminism and gender equality have come at the cost of men’s rights. These communities promote the idea that emotional control, material wealth, physical appearance and dominance, especially over women, are markers of male worth. (UN Women. (2025, May 15). What is the manosphere and why should we care? <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/what-is-the-manosphere-and-why-should-we-care>)



Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this study and the rich experiences of the KII participants, several key recommendations are outlined below. The recommendations have been classified into specific domains, based on the scope of work and the potential impact of each category.

4.1 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Organizations have made significant progress in programming on masculinities. Drawing on their learnings and the inferences from their work, following are recommendations for other CSOs seeking to integrate a masculinities lens in programs that work on caregiving.

- Programs need to ensure integration in the community as deeply as possible. They should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, consisting of a conscious gender-synchronous component, which is key to creating a long-lasting change in the community.
- While the need for male engagement programs to begin with practical entry points rooted in men's lived concerns is well established, it is equally important that these initial conversations are accompanied by a clear and intentional progression. Programs must move beyond pragmatic entry points toward fostering critical reflection among participants on their own power, privilege, and position within gendered hierarchies. Additionally, there is a need for a systematic assessment of the nature and depth of transformations that participants experience through this process.
- The stories of change shared by the KII participants offered hope and highlighted the potential of working with men and boys. Program teams should systematically document and disseminate these stories. Such archives are essential for the ecosystem of masculinities work, as well as organizations themselves, to reflect and build on the learnings that emerge.
- With the increased prevalence and usage of artificial intelligence and other technologies, especially by entities such as the manosphere and Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), CSOs and other actors need to develop response strategies by leveraging technology to engage men and boys.

4.2 Evidence Building

Structured documentation of the various aspects of the interventions that CSOs implement is another critical step towards ensuring better programming. Below are some key pointers on how evidence can inform practice.

- Across programs, men and boys have self-reported an increase in participation in household chores. In some cases, this

has also been validated by the women in the household. However, key questions regarding the frequency, intensity and consistency of the reported increase in participation still remain - Which tasks are they reluctant to take up? How often do they take up these tasks? How much time do they spend on them? Does the presence of a female sibling or of the spouse's employment status impact the participation in household chores? Evaluation systems should probe further into these nuances, as doing so could yield valuable insights.

"Men and boys saying that they participate more in care work, and to some extent, this being validated by family members is kind of one of the first changes that happens, right? But more research is needed regarding the depth and breadth of this change."

- KII Participant

- It has been well established that household responsibilities act as a barrier to women's participation in the labour force. However, whether men's increased participation in unpaid care work enables women to take up economic opportunities remains undetermined. Similarly, the extent and intensity to which such participation positively affects women's well-being, freedom or agency is unclear. Hence, a dedicated examination of the linkage between the shifts in men's behaviour and the changes in the lives of women in their immediate family should be conducted.
- After the end of program cycles, participants often go back to a patriarchal society that reinforces the very ideas that the programs encourage them to challenge. Hence, it is recommended to examine whether participants are able to retain the learnings from the program and sustain behavioral changes, as well as to identify the forms of peer or social support that enable the sustainability of change, or if they succumb to the influence of peers and adults in the community. This is particularly relevant for young adult men who often migrate in search of better jobs and encounter newer set of

insecurities and peer groups. Whether they are able to sustain these changes in such environments requires further examination.

- Some organizations deliberately create a role-model effect within communities as a strategy. In certain communities and localities, men and boys are already challenging rigid notions of masculinity independently. Documenting their stories, understanding their motivations, and amplifying them as positive practices should be looked at as an alternative way of looking at the role-model effect.

4.3 Policy

Keeping in line with the approach of engaging men at different stages of their lives, involving fathers in conversations on early childhood development is a potent strategy. While such programs can potentially encourage fathers to be more involved in childcare, the persistent expectation that they play the inevitable role of the breadwinner of the house, can hinder their ability to be involved in the child's upbringing. This is where the case for appropriate paternal leaves comes in. The existing paternity leave regulations in India, principally regulated by the Central Civil Services (Leave) Rules, 1972, are restricted to government employees and provide merely 15 days of paid leave (Srivastava & Ghazala, 2025). Additionally, a "single male Government servant may be granted child care leave ... for a maximum period of seven hundred and thirty days ... for taking care

of two eldest surviving children, whether for rearing or for looking after any of their needs, such as education, sickness and the like" (Department of Personnel and Training [DoPT], 2024, p. 37). The fifteen-day leave is not nearly enough for fathers to form any kind of bond with their child. Besides, the rules don't apply to personnel in the private and unorganized sectors, which accounts for the majority of the workforce in India. Evidence suggests that the use of parental leave by fathers prevents mothers from being the only expert parent in childcaring (Rege & Solli, 2013). Some studies also report that the use of parental leave leads to a more significant commitment of men in housework (Bünning, 2015). However, the mere availability of paternal leave is not enough for fathers to take time off work. An overhaul of the current policy is hence overdue. Below are some suggestions for implementing the same.

- Employers are critical players in changing behaviours and perceptions on the value of care activities (Rocha, 2021). A supportive work environment is essential to encourage fathers to take their quota of leave.
- Legislation has the power to address the aforementioned shortcomings and potential challenges. Research conducted in different contexts indicates that enhancing fathers' uptake of parental or paternal leave requires non-transferability, full income compensation, and the compulsory nature of leaves provision (Rocha, 2021). A calculated and well-informed shift in the current policies could have a long-lasting influence on gender dynamics within Indian households.

- Another call to action on a policy level is to include gender-transformative² pedagogies in the school curricula. Just as navigating and learning gender is a continuous, everyday process, the integration of conversations around gender in the school curriculum can simultaneously aid in unlearning gender stereotypes.

4.4 Media

The media has a significant impact on gender socialization. Media messages function both covertly and overtly, influencing everything

from early childhood conceptions of what it means to be a boy or a girl to adult views of relationships, leadership, and beauty (Pirzada, 2025). While CSOs have, to a certain extent, tried to engage with social media, the influence of mass media such as television and films continues to be far-reaching. Below are some recommendations on how media can be used to promote alternate, gender-equitable narratives.

- Organizations should leverage media to promote narratives that show men performing alternate models of masculinity by, say, engaging in care work.
- The pathway to embedding a gender-equitable perspective about issues

² Gender transformative approaches address root causes to redress gender inequalities, remove structural barriers, and empower disadvantaged populations. (UNICEF. (2020). Gender-transformative programming [Technical report]. <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/media/43146/file>)



Photo Credit: iStock

such as unpaid care work into the media is to make it financially rewarding for production houses to make content that promotes such views. Portraying men's participation in care work as "cool," "entertaining," and "compelling" on the screen can not only attract viewership but also help normalize these behaviors. If sports and movie stars, who serve as role models for young men and boys, carry this message, they can have a far-reaching

effect on the viewers. Such a two-pronged approach can complement and support the on-ground efforts of CSOs to challenge deeply entrenched gender norms.

- Promoting existing long form or short form content that discusses these issues should be shared within organizations, during trainings, and further pushed through social media channels for increased visibility.

"Instead of making it (care), you know, a meaningful, empathetic, good thing to do, it is more important (for the media) to make it a cool thing to do."

- KII Participant

4.5 Funding

There is a call to action for greater investment in spaces that enable and promote peer learning within the CSO community. The following pointers outline specific directions that these funding efforts can take.

- A co-learning space to understand the effective strategies and pedagogies, and some of the universal deterrents to this work, will help CSOs design more impactful interventions. Investment in developing knowledge products, such as case studies, proofs of concept, can act as catalysts, encouraging more organizations to assimilate the learnings from implementing such interventions.
- Organizations have expressed the need to engage men and boys for durations longer than a year to inculcate sustainable behaviour change. A long-term and flexible funding approach from funders will allow organizations to conceptualize such engagements, while simultaneously experimenting and learning in the process.
- Investment in evidence building through research and monitoring and evaluation exercises is crucial to inform program development.
- Lastly, these efforts should culminate in further advocacy by the donors who are championing the work on masculinities. Such advocacy can attract additional funders and bring greater visibility to this work.

Conclusion



There is both an enormous need and an untapped potential for shifting gender norms towards an equitable distribution of caregiving roles. These gender norms are known to pressurize men into assuming the role of the provider while confining women to the role of the caregiver. This study highlights several potent pathways that can enable a shift in these dynamics. It also examines the common barriers that hinder progress. The tangible recommendations enumerated in this report are intended to guide organizations, policymakers and donors to better design their strategies of encouraging men and boys to take up caregiving. Below are some key takeaways that emerged from this study.

- Programs that begin from men’s own realities of work pressures, vulnerabilities, and identity struggles, tend to see a higher level of engagement, which ultimately leads to deeper reflection. In addition, greater self-reflection and realization among men and boys around emotions, social conditioning, and its fairness drives the most meaningful changes in caregiving behaviors.
- Efforts embedded in schools, communities, and families create reinforcing environments that make caregiving shifts more sustainable.
- Organizations that tangibly address participants’ pressing concerns through livelihood opportunities and social protection linkages, see their greater involvement in programs. Concentrating on building father–child relationships with expecting or new fathers helps overcome initial hesitation and opens space for broader gender discussions.
- A common pattern of the shifts that men and boys display is that they initially take up small household tasks in a supportive role and, over

time, eventually, move toward taking the lead on certain chores. This progression results in a deeper, more egalitarian distribution of care work.

- The barriers that organizations identified or encountered are not attributed to individuals but instead arise from structural settings. The backlash or resistance in the community, internalized norms of the participants, and challenges with funding are issues that are inherently rooted in the societal structures.
- Television, digital platforms, and popular cultural icons can significantly amplify the normative shifts that the feminist movement is calling for. However, the CSO ecosystem is yet to make inroads into these avenues. The gap could be due to lack of resources or expertise, but the potential of these channels is still untapped.
- A few unanswered questions still remain - How can this work be sustained and scaled? What kind of link exists between men’s participation in caregiving and women’s time poverty? Addressing these queries can lead to more focused and efficient male-engagement models.

Addressing gender norms in the household empowers women and girls, while also benefitting men and boys. This study lays the groundwork for further exploration into the nuances of men’s involvement in caregiving roles. This report recommends specific action points for engaging men and boys towards fostering gender equity. It is hoped that the set of insights offered by this study serve as a valuable resource bank for male engagement programs aiming to advance male participation in caregiving.



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The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is a decentralized global network comprising three autonomous regional entities - ICRW-Africa, ICRW-Americas, and ICRW-Asia. For nearly 50 years, ICRW has set the global agenda for gender equity, inclusion, and shared prosperity with action-oriented research and solutions. Our global experts generate groundbreaking insights and develop gender transformative strategies on topics like economic opportunity and security, health and reproductive rights, gender norms, and climate action. Our vision is to create an equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world where women, girls, and structurally excluded populations lead and thrive.



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