



From Reflection to Action: A Toolkit for Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality

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*JOINT FIRST AUTHORS

Transforming **MEN**'talities

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SHORT SUMMARY

From Reflection to Action: A Toolkit for Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality

This Toolkit is a practical, evidence-based resource designed to support organizations, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in developing gender-transformative programmes that engage men and boys as participants and as accountable allies in advancing gender equality.

Developed by ICRW Asia in partnership with the American Jewish World Service (AJWS), the toolkit draws on decades of research and programming, insights from the ICRW–UNESCO report *Engaging Men and Boys: Pathways to Gender Equality in India* (2024), a review of global resources, consultations with practitioners, and field testing through ICRW's MANthan programme in Jharkhand.

The toolkit combines conceptual foundations with practical guidance across five key areas: programme design and implementation, contextualization and localization, intersectionality, managing backlash and resistance, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL). It offers actionable principles, tools, reflective exercises, case-based learnings, and resources to help users design, strengthen, and review programmes through a feminist and intersectional lens.

While rooted in the Indian context, the toolkit has relevance across South Asia and the Global South, offering adaptable approaches to challenge harmful gender norms, promote equitable masculinities, and contribute to sustainable social change.

Engaging men and boys is not only essential for advancing gender justice; it is also about creating the conditions for men and boys themselves to live healthier, more equitable, and more fulfilling lives.

Almost one in two men in India believe they should have the final say in household decisions, highlighting the persistence of unequal gender norms.



unesco

"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"



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Note on the Illustrations

The Concept: The overarching concept for the illustrations was to visualize, in keeping with the vision of the toolkit, an almost post-gender world where men and boys are no longer conditioned into specific gender roles and are free to explore the meanings and expression of gender themselves. This is captured metaphorically as a tree, where the current generation tends and nurtures the plant representing the work of challenging harmful norms and creating the conditions for change. Over time, this grows into a tree under whose branches present and future generations can find shade, protection, nourishment, and freedom.

The Cover: Much like the rest of the illustrations, the cover uses the tree to represent a future where men and boys are not bound by current gender norms and have taken steps to mitigate the inequalities that arise from them. The tree is shown as the backdrop, while the foreground shows people actively tearing away the facade of patriarchy, revealing what lies beyond it - a freer and more equal world.

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Executive Summary

Gender equality requires transforming the unequal power relations, social norms and institutional structures that shape people's lives. Because men and boys are often socialised into positions of greater power and privilege, they play a critical role in sustaining or challenging these systems. Engaging men and boys is therefore not merely an optional addition to gender equality work, but an essential part of achieving lasting change. Restrictive ideas of masculinity limit men's emotional expression, relationships, health and wellbeing. A gender-transformative approach recognizes that while patriarchy privileges men as a group, it also imposes costs on them, making the transformation of gender norms beneficial for everyone.

Yet engaging men and boys effectively remains challenging. Deeply rooted social norms, cultural resistance, institutional barriers and a shortage of practical, intersectional, context-specific guidance often limit the impact and sustainability of such efforts. This toolkit responds directly to that gap.

Developed by ICRW Asia in partnership with the American Jewish World Service (AJWS), the toolkit draws on decades of research and programme experience across diverse Indian contexts. It builds on insights from the ICRW–UNESCO report *Engaging Men and Boys: A Report on Pathways to Gender Equality in India* (2024), a review of 14 global toolkits and reports, and consultations with practitioners working across sectors. The toolkit was

subsequently field-tested through ICRW's MANthan programme in Jharkhand, ensuring that its guidance is grounded in the realities of programme implementation and community engagement.

The toolkit is intended for individuals and organisations with a foundational understanding of gender who seek to design, strengthen or critically assess programmes through a gender-transformative lens. It serves three primary audiences: programme designers and practitioners; monitoring, evaluation and research professionals; and the broader ecosystem of governments, donors, civil society organisations, UN agencies and community institutions.

Structured to move from the “why” to the “how” of engaging men and boys, the toolkit begins with a foundational section that outlines the rationale for gender-transformative work and introduces key concepts and frameworks. Five practical modules provide detailed guidance for programme design and implementation:

Module 1: Engaging Men and Boys: Tools and Techniques for Programme Design/Integration

Designing effective interventions by understanding community contexts and diverse masculinities, identifying meaningful entry points, creating safe spaces for reflection, using experiential and dialogue-based approaches, and building strategic partnerships.

Module 2: Contextualization and Localisation

Adapting programmes to local realities through culturally sensitive framing, local languages and dialects, peer-mentor approaches, attention to region-specific issues, and context-responsive monitoring.

Module 3: Intersectionality

Understanding how gender intersects with caste, class, disability, sexuality and other identities, and translating this understanding into inclusive programme design, facilitation, accessibility, budgeting and MEL systems.

Module 4: Managing Risks, Backlash and Resistance:

Anticipating and navigating resistance by addressing misinterpretation, supporting staff and facilitators, avoiding the reinforcement of harmful norms, engaging families and communities, and using MEL systems to monitor and respond to backlash.

Module 5: Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning:

Approaching MEL as an ongoing process of learning and adaptation by measuring behavioural and normative change, grounding indicators in local realities, employing qualitative and participatory methods, and prioritising transparency, care and accountability.

The toolkit also includes stakeholder-specific recommendations and a range of practical resources, including reflective exercises, sample theories of change, conceptual frameworks and implementation tools.

Rooted in India's social realities yet designed for adaptation across contexts, this toolkit offers a feminist, intersectional and evidence-informed framework for engaging men and boys in ways that contribute to sustainable, gender-transformative change. While grounded in Indian experience, its lessons and approaches hold relevance across South Asia and the wider Global South.



Introduction

Achieving gender equality is not solely about empowering women and girls; it also necessitates a fundamental shift in how men and boys perceive and act within the framework of gender norms. Men and boys hold substantial influence over the social structures, relationships, and attitudes that perpetuate inequality. At the same time, engaging men and boys is not only instrumental to the lives of women, girls and gender-diverse people; it also matters for men and boys in their own right. Patriarchy inflicts a shared, if unequal, harm across all genders, constraining the emotional lives, relationships and wellbeing of men and boys even as it grants them privilege and power. Work on masculinities therefore aspires for genuine, transformative change in men's attitudes, behaviours and relationships, rather than treating men solely as a means to improving outcomes for others. By engaging them first as participants and as active stakeholders in challenging harmful stereotypes, reshaping power dynamics within relationships, and fostering equitable behaviours in private and in public, we can lay the foundation for sustainable and inclusive change. Yet effectively engaging men and boys towards gender equality remains a challenging endeavour, complicated by deeply rooted societal norms, cultural resistance, and the scarcity of practical tools and resources tailored to address these complexities.

Recognizing these challenges, several organizations like Equimundo, MenEngage, Sonke Gender Justice, CEQUIN, The YP Foundation, The Gender Lab, Equal

Community Foundation, UNESCO, and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), among others, have been at the forefront of advancing gender equality through innovative strategies to engage men and boys. Their work has demonstrated the transformative potential of reimagining masculinities and cultivating gender-equitable attitudes. Through research and programmes, these organizations have tackled critical issues such as gender-based violence (GBV), reproductive health, education, and economic empowerment, consistently emphasizing the pivotal role of men and boys as active participants in the journey towards equality.

Rooted in local context and rigorous evidence, this work has shown that transformative change is achievable, while underscoring the urgent need for structured tools to guide practitioners, educators and policymakers in engaging men and boys effectively.

Building on this legacy, ICRW Asia in partnership with the American Jewish World Service (AJWS), has developed this toolkit to advance gender equality by engaging men and boys. This resource represents the culmination of decades of research, programmatic interventions, and advocacy efforts in diverse Indian communities. It also draws on insights from ICRW's recent publication with UNESCO on *Engaging Men and Boys: A Report on Pathways to Gender Equality in India* (2024).



About the toolkit

The toolkit is a practical and user-friendly resource tailored to India's unique cultural, social, and economic realities. Drawing on past work and the lived experiences of men, boys, and their families, it offers strategies to challenge harmful norms, foster dialogue, and promote equitable practices.

It provides guidance on engaging men and boys as participants and active stakeholders in advancing gender equality. It combines practical insights and expertise from leading practitioners working in India, focusing on both broad gender equality goals and targeted interventions to prevent gender-based violence, improve sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) outcomes and address issues like early, child, and forced marriages.

While developed with a focus on India's diverse socio-cultural dynamics, the toolkit has been designed with an intentionally adaptable format that broadens its relevance beyond national borders. The comprehensive approach makes it well-suited for South Asia and other regions across the Global South, where similar challenges persist in promoting gender equity and addressing shifting social norms. That said, some specific contexts, particularly humanitarian and conflict-based settings, will require significant customization for implementation.

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is designed for users who already have a foundational understanding of gender, gender roles, sexuality and masculinities and are looking to strengthen, design, or critically review programmes through a gender-transformative lens. It serves both as a benchmark and a practical learning guide.

1. Programme Designers and Practitioners

The primary audience is programme designers and practitioners seeking to create, build, or refine interventions. The toolkit combines nuanced theoretical and conceptual insights with practical implementation guidance, helping translate gender-transformative principles into concrete programme strategies. It can be used across the programme cycle - from design and contextual analysis to implementation and review. The toolkit also supports practitioners in identifying gaps, strengthening programme quality, and ensuring alignment with feminist and intersectional principles and approaches.

It is ideally used collaboratively by at least one programme designer and one practitioner, to bridge design thinking with on-ground realities and execution.

2. Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Experts

This toolkit serves as a valuable resource for PMEL (Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning) experts and processes, offering a comprehensive checklist to understand the

essential principles and approaches to working on gender and masculinities. It can be used to guide programmatic evaluations, develop and strengthen MEL systems, review the quality of existing programmes, and promote continuous learning. It also helps identify critical data and research gaps, paving the way for further evidence generation that can deepen and strengthen gender-transformative programming.

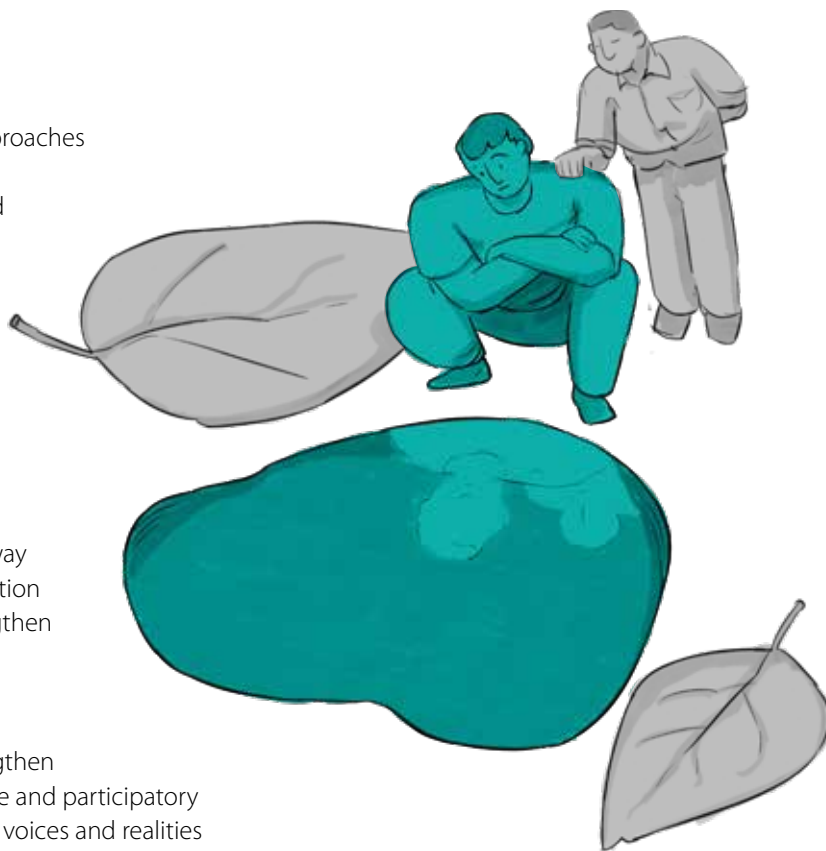
The toolkit also helps strengthen the integration of qualitative and participatory methods, ensuring that the voices and realities of diverse groups are meaningfully reflected. For researchers, it offers conceptual clarity and programmatic insights to guide contextually grounded, ethical, and action-oriented research on gender, masculinities, and social change.

3. Stakeholders across the ecosystem:

The toolkit is relevant for a wide range of stakeholders including governments, donors, civil society, academia, UN agencies, researchers, and community institutions such as faith-based organisations; who play a critical role in shaping the broader ecosystem in which programmes

operate. It supports them in becoming active contributors to gender justice by:

- ◆ Understanding their distinct roles in influencing norms, policies, knowledge, and resource flows
- ◆ Identifying opportunities for collaboration and cross-sectoral partnerships
- ◆ Contributing to a holistic, ecosystem-based approach where multiple actors act as mutually reinforcing pillars



Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
AJWS	American Jewish World Service
APC	Association for Progressive Communications
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other identities
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MGTOW	Men Going Their Own Way
MRA	Men's Rights Activist
PMEL	Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
RTI	Reproductive Tract Infection
SHG	Self-Help Group
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
TFGBV	Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence
ToC	Theory of Change
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VC	Village Champion
WHO	World Health Organization



Methodology

Driven by and Based on Evidence

This toolkit is the culmination of extensive secondary research, local knowledge generated through primary research with practitioners, and lessons learned from past initiatives. It builds on the findings of the *ICRW and UNESCO report on Engaging Men and Boys: A Report on Pathways to Gender Equality in India*. With support from UNESCO and the American Jewish World Service (AJWS), ICRW conducted two workshops with implementers from programmes focused on men, masculinities, and grassroots organizations working on gender equity. These workshops generated valuable recommendations and mapped out a path forward for the toolkit.

Additionally, ICRW reviewed 14 global toolkits on engaging men and boys for gender equality and conducted four online consultations with organizations that participated in the ICRW-UNESCO study. These consultations provided in-depth insights and practical suggestions, shaping the toolkit's content and design.

Field-Tested and Strengthened

To ensure effectiveness and relevance, the toolkit was tested within ICRW's ongoing programme 'MANthan' in Jharkhand. Over the past three years, MANthan has been implemented across 12 panchayats and 30 villages in Jamtara district, Jharkhand, addressing entrenched gender norms that limit opportunities for adolescent girls. Jharkhand faces high rates of child marriage and school dropouts, particularly in rural areas such as Godda and Jamtara.

With support from Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies (RnP), MANthan engages men and boys to challenge and transform norms of masculinities that reinforce gender inequality. The project has fostered a commitment to gender equality, with male Village Champions (VCs) leading initiatives such as intergenerational dialogues on issues of gender roles, engaging with government functionaries and local key influencers (religious and traditional leaders, SHG groups etc.) supporting the re-enrolment of girls who have dropped out of school, establishing free tuition centres, engaging with their peers for taking on household responsibilities and opposing early and child marriage. These efforts reflect a growing recognition among men and boys of the need to question gender stereotypes and roles, as they demonstrate a shift from traditional roles towards active involvement in supporting the rights and opportunities of women and girls.



The testing period of the toolkit was over a six month period, therefore, it was not possible to test every component of all the modules, however we covered essential aspects in discussion with the programme team. The testing was designed as a practice-based, iterative process aimed at understanding how the toolkit functions in real programme settings, rather than as a controlled pilot or evaluation exercise. The testing focused on:

- ◆ Clarity and feasibility of toolkit concepts and steps
- ◆ Identification of assumptions requiring reassessment
- ◆ Practicality of implementation
- ◆ Additions/subtractions to be made

The testing included the following steps:

- ◆ **Internal Team Orientation and Preparation:** The testing process began with intensive internal preparation. The full programme and field team read the complete toolkit in its entirety. This was followed by a structured three-day orientation focused on understanding key concepts, facilitation principles, sequencing of tools, and the underlying feminist and gender-transformative approach of the toolkit. These sessions emphasised reflection, discussion, and clarifications
- ◆ **Selection of Villages:** Toolkit testing was conducted in three new villages that were geographically close to, but programmatically distinct from, existing MANthan intervention sites. This allowed the team to test the toolkit

in contexts that were familiar in terms of socio-economic and cultural patterns, while ensuring that Village Champions, community members, and institutions in these villages had not been previously exposed to MANthan's approaches. These three villages included Pagradih village and Patharchapra village in Jamtara Block and Lachuraydi village in Nala Block, Jharkhand.

- ◆ **Formative Research:** After team orientation, formative research was conducted in the selected villages. The research explored gender norms related to education, early marriage, masculinity, livelihoods, mental health, violence, and decision-making. Both structured tools and informal conversations with parents, adolescents, teachers, community leaders, and frontline workers were used. Findings from the formative research directly informed the selection of entry points, framing of issues, and sequencing of village-level engagement.
- ◆ **Selection and Training of Village Champions:** Six Village Champions, two per village, were identified based on their willingness to engage with issues of gender and social norms, and their availability to commit time to sustained engagement. The team identified them based on interactions during the formative research. Selected Village Champions then participated in a three-day training session focused on perspective building around gender, power, masculinities and preparation for village-level activities based on the principles of the toolkit. The training was borrowed from MANthan's training modules for village champions.

- ◆ **Village-Level Implementation:** Following training, Village Champions implemented toolkit-informed activities in their respective villages over a period of approximately three months. Implementation typically included a series of meetings and engagements with different groups, including parents, adolescents, and mixed community groups. Across villages, Village Champions facilitated multiple sessions per village (generally between four to six structured meetings), using a combination of discussions, participatory games, role plays, and reflection exercises. Issues such as education, early marriage, masculinities, division of labour and mental health were revisited across sessions rather than addressed in single meetings.
- ◆ **Ongoing Support, Review, and Reflection:** Throughout the testing period, the team held regular review and reflection meetings to discuss field experiences, challenges, and adaptations. In addition to in-person support, two structured online meetings were conducted with Village Champions to collectively reflect on implementation experiences, share challenges, and refine facilitation strategies. Village Champions also visited the project office during the testing period for in-depth reflection, documentation, and learning exchanges.

Learnings from the testing phase have been integrated throughout the toolkit and through highlighted boxes placed across different sections.

These learnings capture practical insights, questions, challenges, and adaptations that emerged during field testing and consultations. They reflect how facilitators and project teams engaged with the tools in real settings, what worked well, and where adjustments were needed.

Reviewed by Technical Experts

Peer review was a key component of the toolkit development process and was designed to triangulate insights from writing, field testing, and practitioner engagement. The toolkit was reviewed by gender experts as well as practitioners working specifically on gender and masculinities, with the intent of strengthening both its conceptual rigor and practical applicability. Reviewers were asked to focus on the ease of use, clarity of articulation, overall flow, relevance, and the adaptability of the toolkit for organizations that are either beginning to work with men and boys or seeking to deepen and strengthen existing gender equality programming. They were also invited to identify gaps, suggest areas that could be streamlined or shortened, and flag any elements that required further clarification. Feedback from this peer review process has been systematically incorporated to refine the structure, content, and usability of the toolkit.

How to Use the Toolkit

This toolkit is grounded in a few ways of thinking and working. It is designed to be used not as a fixed manual, but as a flexible guide, one that can be adapted, questioned, and built upon across different contexts. Work on gender norms and power is rarely linear; it involves learning, resistance, reflection, and course correction. We hope this toolkit functions as a **living document**, one that can be revisited and periodically updated as insights emerge from practice and as contexts evolve.

Guiding Approaches

At the core of the toolkit are three guiding approaches.

1. Direct Engagement and Customization

Effective engagement with men and boys depends on how well programmes respond to their lived realities. Approaches should be tailored to different ages, life stages, cultures, and social contexts. Using familiar and respectful language, participatory methods, and locally grounded examples helps build trust and relevance. When participants feel seen and understood, engagement becomes deeper and more meaningful.



2. Reframing Men and Boys as Participants and Accountable Allies

The toolkit is anchored in a shift in how men and boys are engaged in gender equality work. Rather than viewing them only through the lens of perpetration, it positions them first as participants and then as active and accountable allies in the pursuit of gender justice. This approach acknowledges that patriarchy harms all genders, including men themselves, and creates space for reflection, responsibility, and action. Through this reframing, men and boys are supported to challenge harmful norms and contribute to more equitable and inclusive communities.

3. Working across Levels and with Multiple Stakeholders

Sustainable change does not happen in isolation. The toolkit emphasizes collaboration across community leaders, civil society organizations, government programmes, women's rights groups, and marginalized communities, including LGBTQIA+ groups. These intersectional partnerships help address structural inequalities and strengthen collective accountability for change.

Key Focus Areas

Insights from a review of global toolkits (Annexure 4), along with workshops and consultations, highlighted several recurring gaps. Responding to these, the toolkit places particular emphasis on the following areas: each taken up in its own module: contextualization and localization, intersectionality, monitoring, evaluation and learning, and managing risks and backlash.

The toolkit begins with laying the rationale for transforming gender norms and for engaging men and boys as part of that process. These sections introduce core concepts, along with key conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches, to guide programme design and implementation.

Across the modules, the toolkit offers guiding principles, good practices, tips for facilitators,

learnings from the testing, examples and so on. It encourages critical reflection and adaptation rather than rigid prescriptions and includes curated resources for deeper exploration.

Users are encouraged to move through the toolkit in ways that make sense for their work. Each module is complete in and of itself and does not need to be followed linearly, however all are holistically integral to the success of any programme; they can be revisited as programmes evolve and as learning from practice deepens. By bringing together what has worked, what has not, and the gaps that remain, the toolkit offers a practical roadmap for driving meaningful and sustainable change, while leaving space for learning, iteration, and growth.

Section:

1

The Foundation

A.

WHY CHANGE GENDER
NORMS? WHAT DO
MEN AND BOYS HAVE
TO DO WITH IT?



Understanding Gender Norms

When discussing gender norms, it's important to distinguish **between sex and gender**:

- ◆ **Sex** refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define humans as male, female, or intersex. These include chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive anatomy. Sex is assigned at birth and is generally categorized based on physical traits. Sex may also change through the life-course, as biology itself can be modified through medical interventions like hormone therapy or surgery, as well as natural life changes such as menopause or hormonal shifts.
- ◆ **Gender**, on the other hand, is a social construct that encompasses the roles, behaviours, expectations, and identities associated with being male, female, or non-binary within a given society or culture. While there are commonalities in perceptions of gender roles¹ globally, their understanding, expression and interpretation vary across cultures and continues to evolve over time.

While sex is rooted in biology, **gender is influenced by societal norms, cultural expectations and economic and political contexts**. For example,

while a person's sex might determine certain physical traits, gender norms dictate how individuals are "expected" to dress, behave, and interact based on their perceived or self-identified gender. Recognizing this distinction is crucial because gender norms, not biological sex, drive the unequal power dynamics, discrimination, and violence that create barriers to gender equality.

Why Change Gender Norms?

Gender norms are socially constructed expectations about how individuals should think, act, and interact based on their gender. These norms define concepts of "masculinity/masculinities" and "femininity/femininities" and shape the ways people experience their roles in society.

Gayle Rubin (1975) coined the phrase "sex/gender system," to describe, "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity."² The system refers to the set of social, cultural, economic, and political arrangements through which biological differences (sex) are interpreted and organised into socially constructed roles, expectations, and hierarchies (gender). It explains how societies assign meaning, value, and power to perceived differences between men, women, and people of diverse gender identities.

1 Gender roles are the socially constructed norms and behaviours that shape how individuals are expected to act according to their perceived gender. These roles influence responsibilities, expectations, and access to opportunities across different spheres of life, including work, family, and community. They often reinforce existing inequalities and can restrict the choices and possibilities available to individuals who do not conform to dominant societal expectations.

2 Rubin, G. (1975). The traffic in women: Notes on the "political economy" of sex. In R. R. Reiter (Ed.), *Toward an anthropology of women* (pp. 157–210). Monthly Review Press.

Within this system, gender norms shape how resources, responsibilities, and opportunities are distributed based on what individuals are assumed to need or contribute because of their perceived gender role. For example, norms that position men as primary earners and women as caregivers can influence access to education, employment, income, property ownership, mobility, and decision-making spaces. These patterns are not neutral; they are embedded in institutions, policies, and everyday practices, often reinforcing unequal power relations and limiting the life choices of those who do not conform to dominant expectations. These norms reinforce power imbalances and perpetuate discrimination, limiting opportunities and fostering violence, particularly against women, girls, and diverse sexual and gender identities.

Transforming these norms is essential for:

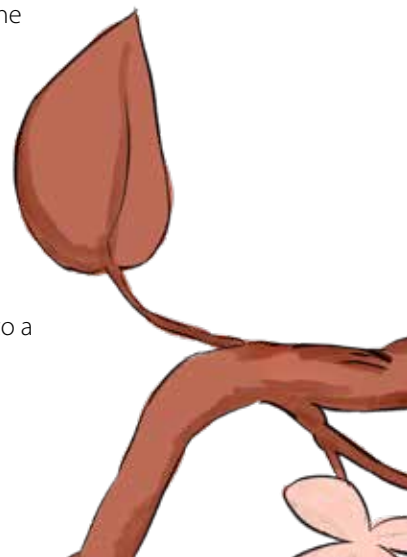
- ◆ **Reducing Inequalities:** Ensuring equitable opportunities for all genders.
- ◆ **Promoting Healthy Relationships:** Breaking stereotypes to foster mutual respect and collaboration.
- ◆ **Creating Inclusive Communities:** Where all individuals can live free of restrictive expectations and discrimination.

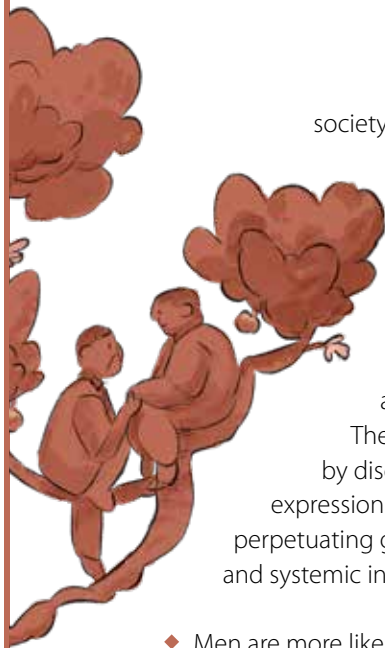
Addressing gender norms involves more than shifting personal attitudes. It requires challenging systemic forces - such as policies, laws and traditions - that sustain these inequalities.

Why Engage Men and Boys in Transforming Gender Norms?

Rigid ideas about what boys and girls should be like harm many children and make them feel alienated and confused, not just those who identify as gender diverse. Boys are conditioned to reject behaviours associated with femininity and encouraged to embody traits like toughness, emotional restraint, and competitiveness. These expectations vary across ethnicity, caste, class, religion, disability, age, and gender identity, but they are often enforced through criticism or mockery when boys stray from traditional ideals of 'being a man.'

Masculinity refers to the roles and behaviours that society sees as suitable for boys and men. It is not something biological, but rather shaped by social, historical, and political factors. In simple terms, it describes the expectations and norms of being a man - ideas reinforced everyday by people and institutions like families, peers, educational systems, religion, online and offline media, etc. Similarly, the term 'femininity' refers to a





society's ideas about the roles, behaviours and attributes considered appropriate for girls and women. Many cultural norms around "manliness" promote dominance over women, aggression, and homophobia.

These norms harm men by discouraging emotional expression and empathy while perpetuating gender-based violence and systemic inequality. For example:

- ◆ Men are more likely to engage in risky behaviours like smoking, excessive drinking, and violence, contributing to poorer health outcomes and shorter life expectancy.
- ◆ Societal stigma often deters men from seeking mental health support or openly discussing personal struggles.
- ◆ Although many men aspire to play a more active role in parenting, rigid norms and workplace policies often hinder their ability to balance work and family responsibilities.

These restrictive definitions/understanding of 'masculinity' limit boys' emotional and social development while reinforcing systems of inequality and uphold narrow expectations of how men should behave, often centred around dominance, emotional suppression, and physical strength. It is also important to understand that these expectations

are not upheld up by men alone, but by people of all genders. Using this term in a singular sense also runs the risk of incorrectly insinuating that there exists only one kind of masculinity. The notion that only one kind of masculinity exists is both inaccurate and exclusionary. Many men have long defied traditional ideas of 'masculinity', and different forms of masculinity have always existed shaped by culture, language, class, caste, ability, geography, and generational experiences. These different expressions together form what we now refer to as "masculinities", acknowledging the plural nature of how gender is experienced and lived. Even within the same context, men may perform their masculinity differently depending on the group they are in. This further affirms that masculinity is not a stable or singular identity, but a dynamic and often inconsistent performance.

Transforming these norms is essential for gender justice and broader social justice. Social injustice persists because it fosters a sense of entitlement in privileged groups and instils feelings of inferiority in marginalized ones. Additionally, there are very real advantages to conforming to dominant ideas of masculinity. Men who display socially accepted "strong" or competitive behaviours are often given more respect, authority, and opportunities at work. This can influence pay levels, hiring decisions, the kinds of jobs that are valued and better paid, and who has control over household or institutional resources. In a patriarchal society, these patterns are reinforced across systems, for example through competitive business cultures, market-driven

priorities, and acceptance of forceful leadership styles. As a result, social and economic rewards tend to favour those who perform dominant masculine norms. This results in significant institutional bias, where non-normative behaviours are penalized while traditional ones are rewarded with higher recruitment rates, faster promotions, and greater social admiration.

Transforming masculinities means empowering oppressed groups to assert their rights and dignity while encouraging those with privilege to use it to challenge oppressive systems.³ When we challenge dominant notions



of masculinity, we simultaneously confront patriarchy, casteism, ableism, class hierarchies, and other forms of marginalization. Evidence shows that promoting gender-equitable and flexible masculinities is associated with improved mental health outcomes for men, healthier intimate relationships, and reductions in gender-based violence (Barker et al., 2007⁴; Courtenay, 2000⁵; Jewkes et al., 2015⁶). Hence, embracing more inclusive and flexible models of masculinity opens the door to healthier relationships, more equitable communities, and greater emotional well-being for people of all genders.

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- 3 Tumursukh, U., Chanthavysouk, K., Uysingco, P., Hernandez, L., Hasyim, N., Muttaqin, F., Trang, Q. T. T., Sananikone, S., Nakagawa, K., Greig, A., & Pawar, A. (2013). Regional curriculum on transforming masculinities towards gender justice. Regional Learning Community for East and Southeast Asia.
 - 4 Barker, G., Ricardo, C., & Nascimento, M. (2007). Engaging men and boys in changing gender-based inequity in health: Evidence from programme interventions. World Health Organization.
 - 5 Courtenay, W. H. (2000). Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: A theory of gender and health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 50(10), 1385–1401.
 - 6 Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes in social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: A conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 1580–1589.

Engaging men and boys to challenge harmful gender norms can pave the way for profound societal change:

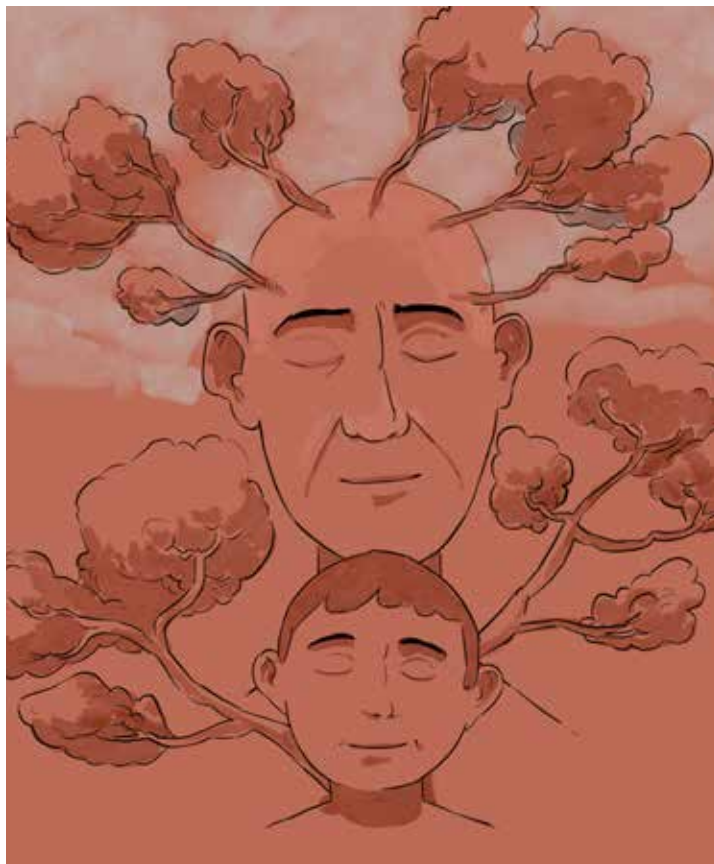
- ◆ A world where men and boys question patriarchy, recognizing it as regressive and divisive for all genders.
- ◆ A world where empathy becomes a driving force, enabling men and boys to realize the oppressive nature of gender norms.
- ◆ A world where men feel safe expressing emotions, speaking out about abuse and mental health challenges, and sharing their vulnerabilities.
- ◆ A world where diverse masculinities are recognized instead of just dominant versions of masculinity
- ◆ A world where patriarchal power structures are dismantled, fostering mutual respect and equity among men, women, and gender-diverse individuals.
- ◆ A world where kindness, non-discrimination, and collective care become cultural priorities.

Beyond this lies a more radical vision:

- ◆ A world where gender is no longer tied to bodies, allowing masculinity and femininity to exist in unique proportions within any individual, regardless of their sex assigned at birth.

- ◆ A world where gender becomes a choice, a form of expression, or perhaps ceases to exist entirely as we celebrate individual personalities unbound by societal norms.

Working towards social change requires holding onto a dream, a vision that inspires and sustains our efforts. It is this dream of a more inclusive, equitable, and liberated world that drives the commitment to transforming gender norms and redefining masculinities.



B. ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS WHILE WORKING WITH MEN AND BOYS

Patriarchy

'Patriarchy' can be defined as the systematic organization of the power of the male/masculine over the female/feminine. It is an unjust system based on the idea that power is about domination and control - about having power over people and things (see the box). As a 'power over' system, patriarchy enforces the binary of sex, gender and sexual identity, neither of which are 'natural' and/or rooted in biology. In claiming that gender inequality between men and women is 'natural', patriarchy becomes a foundation for the belief that other forms of inequality, such as economic exploitation or ethnic discrimination, are also natural and normal. In this way, the 'power over' model of patriarchy is a template for the more general belief that societies are naturally unequal and that the only form of power is to have power over someone else.



Sex

A person's 'sex' is defined as female or male according to certain identifiable physical features. Babies are assigned a sex on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth. As it is defined in relation to characteristics of the body, a person's sex is usually taken to be a biological fact. But it is important to remember that the idea that there are only two sexes, female or male, is a cultural and not a biological fact.

Gender

Refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions, identities, and expectations associated with being a woman, man, or a person of diverse gender identities. It also includes how people relate to one another within social, cultural, and institutional contexts. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

Intersex/Person with Intersex Variations

While individuals may be born with clearly discernible male or female genitalia, there are also many who are born with intersex variations, with both female and male biological features or with genitalia that cannot be easily categorized as female or male. So, there is a greater biological diversity than simply maleness

and femaleness. Intersex is an umbrella term for natural variations in reproductive and/or sexual anatomy. These variations can occur in a person's chromosomes, genitals, or internal reproductive organs, such as testes or ovaries. For example, a person assigned female at birth and raised as a girl may not begin menstruation as expected. Upon medical examination, they may discover that they do not have ovaries, or some conditions that impact hormone production and/or their reception by the ovaries. Intersex variations are diverse, with some estimates suggesting there are 30 or more types. UN human rights bodies have expressed concern that medically unnecessary sex-assignment surgeries on intersex infants and children, conducted without their informed consent, may violate rights to bodily integrity, autonomy, and freedom from harmful practices.⁷ Additionally, medical interventions on intersex people are known to result in trauma, chronic pain, sexual dysfunction, a loss of sexual sensation, infertility, lifelong hormone treatment, repeated surgeries, and inaccurate legal sex/gender assignment (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights et al., 2016).⁸ Asserting their identity has been important for intersex activists who are critical of traditional medical approaches that conduct sex assignment surgeries at birth, and who are fighting for the right of intersex people

⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2019). Background note on human rights violations against intersex people. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Discrimination/LGBT/BackgroundNoteHumanRightsViolationsagainstIntersexPeople.pdf>

⁸ Human Rights Research Centre. (2024). Intersex bodies, surgery, and the pursuit of normality. <https://www.humanrightsresearch.org/post/intersex-bodies-surgery-and-the-pursuit-of-normality>

to be able to choose their own gender identity when they grow up and also the right to choose whether or not they want to undergo any medical procedures to affirm the gender identity they grow up to identify with.

Cisgender

“Cis” (often abbreviated) – refers to people whose sex assigned at birth, their body, and their gender identity match with each other. For example, a person who identifies as a man and who was assigned the male gender at birth. In other words, people whose gender identity and gender role align with the expectations that society associates with their sex.⁹

Transgender

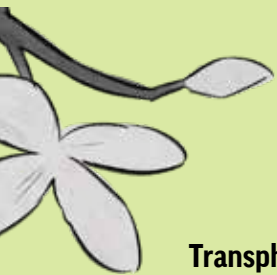
Transgender is a complex term, whose precise and agreed-upon definitions have not yet been reached. It does not refer to a single identity or experience but is used as an umbrella term to refer to the many and diverse ways in which some people do not conform to the socially dominant norms of the two-gender system. This includes a range of cross-gender (those that transcend gender) practices and identifications, which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means and other expressions of

gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth. People who choose to undergo any such medical interventions/modifications may be referred to as transsexual too; however, they very much come under the overarching transgender umbrella. Many trans people adopt a new name and discard their pre-transition name (often referred to as the ‘dead name’), they may also wish to have their preferred name and gender legally recognized and reflected on official identity documents. Transgender people may be heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. Transgender people may identify as male or as female or with an alternate gender, a combination of genders or no gender. Given the complexity of this term transgender, it is important to remember that the only way to find out how exactly people identify themselves is to ask them.

Like all individuals, trans people have the right to legal recognition as persons, including acknowledgement of their self-identified gender. For many, transitioning plays an important role in enhancing their well-being and overall quality of life.

⁹ TARSHI. (n.d.). शब्दावली [Glossary]. Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues. Retrieved June 2, 2026, from <https://www.tarshi.net/hindi-srhr-glossary/>





Transphobia

Described by the United Nations¹⁰ as any form of prejudice or hostile attitude towards transgender people based on their gender identity or expression. Transphobia may be targeted at people who are trans or who are perceived to be trans, and may manifest as criminalization, violence, discrimination, pathologization, harassment, exclusion, stigma, or denying someone's identity. Transphobia contributes to a widespread culture of violence and discrimination against trans people.

Hijra/Kinnar

Hijras are often described as neither strictly men nor women or as a “third” gender in South Asia. This cultural community is found primarily in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and is known by various regional terms, such as aravani in South India. The term “hijra” refers to a diverse group of individuals, including those who do not identify strictly as male or female, as well as people who identify as women but were assigned male at birth. While legally recognized as a third gender today in India, hijras have existed in South Asian culture for centuries, holding a significant yet marginalized place in society. However, the term

“hijra” should be used thoughtfully, as some community members find it offensive and prefer terms like kinnar. The Hijra community operates within a distinct set of customs, traditions, membership structures, familial systems, and traditional forms of livelihood. It is a cultural community that individuals may choose to join, live within, or leave. Importantly, when a person leaves the community, they are no longer considered Hijra in the traditional sense. This illustrates that Hijra is a community-based identity rather than an independent gender identity, even though it was formed as a safe space for those with non-normative gender identities.

Although nonbinary identities may appear as a recent phenomenon in Western cultures, they have deep historical and cultural roots elsewhere. In India, the identity of hijra has long been intertwined with mythology and history. While hijras are commonly known in Indian society, they are often met with fear, dislike, or pity. This familiarity, however, has made South Asian societies somewhat more open to recognizing trans identities than some Western contexts.

¹⁰ UN Free & Equal. (n.d.). Challenges and solutions: Transgender. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Retrieved May 20, 2026, from <https://www.unfe.org/en/know-the-facts/challenges-solutions/transgender>

Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person's sex assigned at birth. A person can identify in many ways, for example as a woman, a man, as non-binary, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, gender fluid, etc.

Gender-diverse

Gender-diverse people is an umbrella term used to describe transgender people, as well as other people whose gender identity and/or expression are perceived not to align with gender norms and stereotypes in a given context. Trans and gender diverse people have existed throughout history and have played an honoured part in many cultural traditions.¹¹

Gender diversity has been present across different cultures and historical periods. The term "gender queer," which gained visibility in the 1990s, broadly refers to gender identities that do not fit neatly within the categories of male or female, and may include experiences of being a mix of both or neither. While genderqueer identities are varied, they often share a

distancing from rigid gender binaries and, at times, actively challenge social norms and institutions that reinforce these divisions. Similarly, "non-binary" is an umbrella term for identities that exist outside or between male and female categories. This can include people who experience aspects of both genders at different times, or those who do not identify with any gender at all.¹²

Sexual Orientation¹³

Sexual orientation is about who one is attracted to and feels drawn to romantically, emotionally, and sexually. It is different from gender identity, which is not about who one is attracted to, but about who one identifies as - man, woman, transgender, non-binary, etc. Hence, this means that being transgender (feeling like your assigned sex is very different from the gender you identify with) isn't the same thing as being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. **Sexual orientation is about who you are sexually attracted to. Gender identity is about who you are/identify as.** There are many identities associated with sexual orientation, some of them are:



11 UN Free & Equal. (n.d.). Challenges and solutions: Transgender. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Retrieved May 20, 2026, from <https://www.unfe.org/en/know-the-facts/challenges-solutions/transgender>

12 Monro, S. (2019). Non-binary and genderqueer: An overview of the field. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20(2–3), 126–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1538841>

13 Planned Parenthood Federation of America. (n.d.). Sexual orientation. Retrieved June 10, 2026, from <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/sexual-orientation/sexual-orientation>

- ◆ **Heterosexual/Straight:** People who are attracted to a different gender, such as women who are attracted to men or men who are attracted to women.
- ◆ **Homosexual/Gay:** People who are attracted to others of the same gender. Gay women may also use the term lesbian.
- ◆ **Bisexual:** People who are attracted to both men and women.
- ◆ **Pansexual:** People whose attractions span across many different gender identities, including male, female, transgender, genderqueer, and intersex.
- ◆ **Questioning/Curious:** People who are unsure about their sexual orientation and are exploring their attractions.
- ◆ **Asexual:** People who do not experience sexual attraction towards anyone.

Note: *Except the sexual identity of heterosexuality and gender identities beyond the male/female gender binary, other identities may also be referred to as 'queer' as an umbrella term.*

Gender Norms¹⁴

Gender norms are informal, deeply entrenched and widely held beliefs about gender roles, power relations, standards or expectations that govern human behaviours and practices in a particular social context and at a particular time. They are ideas or 'rules' about how girls and boys

and women and men are expected to be and to act. These 'rules' get internalized and learnt early in life through multiple messaging from family, society, media, etc. They sustain the patriarchal hierarchy of power and privilege that typically favors what is considered male or masculine over that which is female or feminine, reinforcing a systemic inequality that undermines the rights of women and girls and restricts opportunity for women, men, and gender minorities to express their authentic selves.

Gender as a Cultural Concept

While gender is often seen as a personal identity, it is equally important to understand it as a cultural concept. The meanings, expressions, and roles associated with masculinity and femininity vary widely across societies and historical contexts. It is important to remember that our conceptions of gender identities and expressions and how they are defined vary greatly, so the definitions of the following terms often vary as well.¹⁵

Just as South Asia recognizes the **Hijra** community as a distinct and culturally rooted gender identity, many other societies around

14 United Nations Population Fund, & United Nations Children's Fund. (2020). Technical note on gender norms. <https://www.unicef.org/media/65381/file/GP-2020-Technical-Note-Gender-Norms.pdf>

15 George, J. (2023, June 8). Celebrating gender diversity around the world. Outright International. <https://outrightinternational.org/gender-diversity>

the world have their own understanding of gender diversity. To reflect this global breadth, **OutRight Action International** has compiled definitions of various sexual orientations and gender identities that exist across cultures and regions, offering valuable insight into how people experience and express gender in diverse ways. These can be accessed through their comprehensive glossary of global gender and sexuality terms here.

Masculinities and not ‘masculinity’

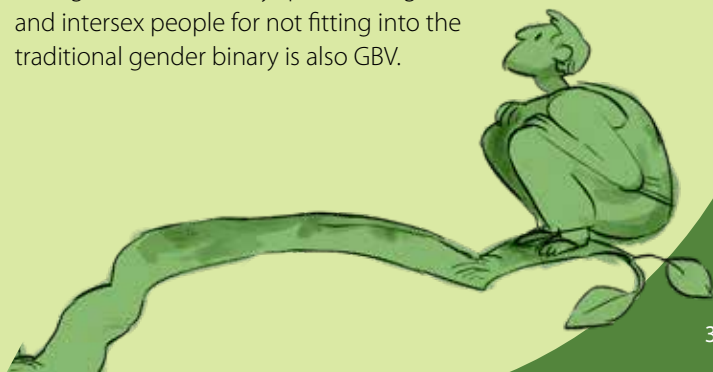
We use the term **masculinities** (plural) instead of **masculinity** (singular) because there is no one fixed way to be a man. Ideas about manhood are shaped by society and can change over time, across cultures, and between generations. This means there are many kinds of masculinities, not just one. While some forms of masculinity are linked to dominance, emotional control, or physical strength, others emphasize equality, care, and respect between people of all genders. The narrow idea that there is only one kind of “real man” limits boys’ emotional growth and reinforces inequality. It’s also important to remember that these expectations are upheld not just by men, but by everyone in society, for instance the pressure on men to be the breadwinners for their family. Different masculinities are shaped by factors like culture, class, caste, race, ability, and age and even within the same context, men may express their ‘masculinity’ differently depending

on who they’re with. Recognizing this diversity helps us see masculinity as something fluid and changing, not fixed or uniform.

Challenging harmful and rigid ideas of masculinity is key to achieving gender and social justice. When we transform masculinities, we help dismantle patriarchy and other forms of oppression such as casteism, classism, and ableism. Embracing more open and inclusive ways of being men allows for healthier relationships, more equal communities, and greater emotional well-being for everyone.

Gender-based Violence (GBV)

When people are denied their dignity and human rights because of their gender, that is ‘gender-based violence’. The term ‘gender-based violence’ identifies neither victim nor perpetrator but suggests that gender inequality is the cause of the violence. Any form of action or inaction that denies people their human dignity and human rights constitute violence. Violence against women is a form of gender-based violence (GBV), that is violence that is based on gender hierarchies and inequalities. Similarly, violence faced by men for not being ‘man enough’ or that faced by queer, transgender and intersex people for not fitting into the traditional gender binary is also GBV.



Models of Power

Power is not necessarily about control and domination. Power can mean many things - for individuals, groups, institutions and society. Patriarchy and other oppressive systems of power are based on a 'power over' model: 'Power over' means the power that one person or group uses to control another person or group. This control might come from direct violence or more indirectly, such as from the community beliefs and practices that position men as superior to women. Using one's power over another is unjust. In order to challenge patriarchy and other 'power over' systems of control and domination, we need to work with and build on other models of power, including the 'power to' challenge injustice and inequalities and the 'power with' that we can use to work together to make systemic change: 'Power to' are the beliefs, energies and actions that individuals and groups use to create positive change. 'Power to' is when individuals proactively work to ensure that all community members enjoy the full spectrum of human rights and are able to achieve their full potential. 'Power with' means the power that we have when two or more people come together to do something that they could not do alone. 'Power with' is about our collective power to respond to injustice and make systemic changes.¹⁶

Disability

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines persons with disabilities as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. As of 2023, WHO estimated that about 16% of the world population have some form of disability. This number is understood to be increasing due to other factors such as climate change, war, conflict, an aging population etc.

While countries which are signatories to the Convention are obligated to ensure that national laws and policies define disability within the said framework, oftentimes these definitions overlook a few vital concerns. Not all forms of disability are visible. People with psychosocial (a disability that arises from long-term mental health difficulties, characterized not by a diagnosis, but by the significant impact these difficulties have on a person's life) or intellectual disabilities, people who have chronic pain, people who are neurodivergent (those who are autistic, or have other social challenges in how they interact with the world), for example - their disabilities may not be visible in the same way

¹⁶ VeneKlasen, L., Miller, V., (2002) Power and empowerment.

as a person with a physical disability might be. This does not mean that they do not identify as people with disabilities. It is important to understand that disability is a social construct when an impairment or divergence- visible or invisible - interacts with social barriers. If we create an environment which is accessible to everyone, then disability does not become a limitation.

Disability is also socially constructed, meaning that social and cultural conditions often make people more “disabled” than the actual limitations of their disability. For example, people with hearing impairments are considered “disabled” mainly because the majority of society does not know or use sign language, preventing effective communication and participation.

TAB (Temporarily Able-Bodied) is also a commonly used term which is a way of saying that most people experience disability at some point in their lives - it could be due to aging, illness, or accident/injury. It’s a powerful term used in disability activism to shift perspectives and remind us that disability is not just about “others” but a shared human experience that may affect most people sooner or later. This language is used with the intention of building a sense of community and inclusion, reinforcing that accessibility and disability rights benefit everyone, not just a specific group.

Ableism/Ableist:

Ableism refers to a system of beliefs, attitudes, and practices that value certain kinds of bodies, minds, and abilities as “normal” or superior, while marginalising or discriminating against people with disabilities. It can operate at personal, social, and institutional levels, shaping how individuals are perceived, included, and given access to opportunities. Ableism can be expressed through stereotypes that portray persons with disabilities as less capable, dependent, or in need of fixing, as well as through environments, policies, and systems that fail to accommodate diverse needs.

This form of discrimination is not limited to overt exclusion; it is also embedded in everyday assumptions about productivity, independence, communication, and physical or cognitive performance. For example, workplaces, schools, public spaces, and technologies are often designed with able-bodied and neurotypical users in mind, creating barriers that restrict participation and access to opportunities for others.



Mental Health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO): “Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.” Mental health is hence a foundational dimension of overall health and human well-being. It underpins our capacity, both individually and collectively - to think, feel, make decisions, build relationships, and contribute meaningfully to society. Recognized as a **fundamental human right**, mental health is indispensable to personal fulfilment, social cohesion, and sustainable socio-economic development. It extends beyond the mere absence of mental disorders, along a complex continuum, experienced uniquely by each person, and marked by varying levels of emotional resilience, difficulty, or distress, resulting in diverse social and clinical outcomes.

Mental health issues can affect how we think, feel, and act, and they can show up in many ways. Some people struggle with **stress and anxiety**, feeling constantly tense or worried; others face **sadness or mood problems** like depression or mood swings. Some may experience **thinking or reality problems**, such as hearing voices or confusion, while others may find it hard to manage emotions or relationships due to **behaviour or personality issues**. There are also **body and eating problems**,

where food and body image become linked to emotional pain, and **addiction issues**, where people depend on alcohol, drugs, or other habits to cope. **Trauma or loss** can also leave lasting emotional effects, while **learning and thinking differences or disabilities** such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, ADHD, or the autism spectrum that can make reading, focusing, or socializing more difficult but do not mean someone is less capable. All of these are part of mental health, and support through counselling, community care, or medical help can make a big difference.

Note: *Mental health conditions encompass mental disorders, psychosocial disabilities, and other mental states associated with significant distress, functional impairment, or risk of self-harm. While such conditions can diminish well-being, this is not always the case; many individuals living with mental health conditions continue to experience meaning, productivity, and quality of life when supported by inclusive environments and appropriate care.*

Neurodiversity

It is a concept rooted in disability justice and anti-ableist thinking, which recognizes neurological differences - such as autism, ADHD, and other cognitive variations, as natural and valuable forms of human diversity rather than deficits that must be “fixed.” This perspective challenges long-standing histories of eugenics,

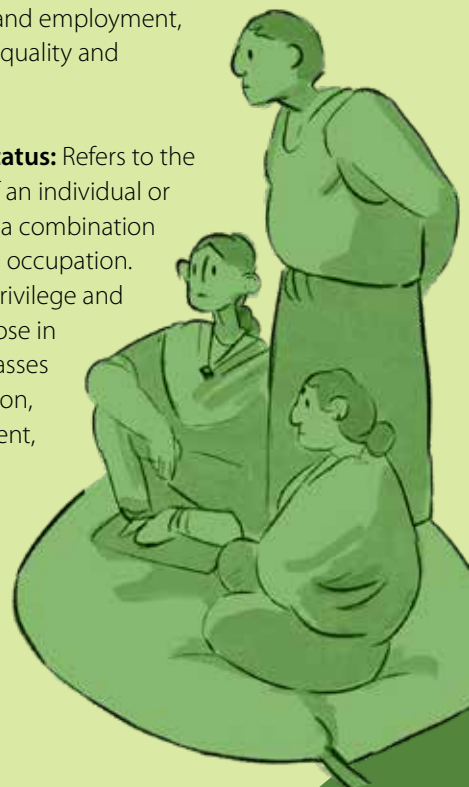
medicalisation, and charitable approaches to disability that have shaped societal expectations around normalising disabled minds and bodies.

From a neurodiversity lens, it is important to centre the knowledge, experiences, and choices of neurodivergent people themselves, including their views on support, care, and the use of technology. While technological and medical interventions are often presented as inherently empowering, this approach highlights that exclusion is frequently produced by social, cultural, and structural barriers rather than by neurological difference alone. Neurodiversity therefore offers a way to rethink ideas of progress, expertise, and whose lives and futures are prioritised in systems of innovation and development. Ultimately, this framework encourages recognising neurodivergent existence as creative, meaningful, and politically significant. It aligns with disability justice principles that emphasise acceptance, accessibility, and collective social change, shifting the focus away from individual “improvement” towards transforming the environments and attitudes that shape inclusion and well-being.¹⁷

Caste

It is a deeply rooted social hierarchy often defined by birth and associated with specific occupations, where hereditary groups are ranked in social status and opportunity. This system, prevalent in South Asia and other parts of the world, frequently results in severe discrimination, violence, and social exclusion against lower-caste communities, particularly Dalits. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights¹⁸ notes that caste-based discrimination subjects these communities to violations of basic rights, widespread poverty, and restricted access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and employment, perpetuating cycles of inequality and exclusion.

Class/Socio-economic status: Refers to the ‘social standing’ or ‘class’ of an individual or group, often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation. Classes often determine privilege and marginalization, where those in higher socio-economic classes may access better education, healthcare, and employment,



¹⁷ Heumann, J., & Shew, A. (2023). Against technoableism: Rethinking who needs improvement. W. W. Norton.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch. (2016, March 11). UN Human Rights Council: General Debate on Ending Discrimination Based on Caste and Descent.

while lower socio-economic groups may face systemic barriers. This hierarchy can result in discrimination and perpetuate cycles of poverty, further entrenching inequalities across generations.

Ethnicity

A shared identity among a group based on language, culture, history, or national origin. In South Asia, examples of ethnic groups include the Punjabis, Tamils, Bengalis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, and Gujjars, as well as Indigenous groups like the Adivasis in India and Janajatis in Nepal. Ethnic identity in these communities is often a source of cultural pride but can also expose them to specific forms of marginalization and

discrimination, limiting access to resources and opportunities in various socio-economic contexts.

Intersectionality

The term intersectionality, introduced by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989¹⁹, explains how different forms of oppression and power, like gender, class, caste, and race, overlap and influence each other. This concept helps us see how people's unique identities shape their experiences and interactions with power and privilege. Today, intersectionality is widely used to understand how systems of oppression create social hierarchies and shape individual experiences. By acknowledging these intersecting experiences, intersectionality ensures that activism and programmes are more inclusive and effective. It also encourages constant reflection on how our privileges and vulnerabilities interact. This approach, hence, helps us view justice and inequality holistically, fostering stronger solidarity and more equitable solutions.

Misinformation

Misinformation refers to the unintentional spread of false information without any deliberate intent to mislead. This can occur when individuals or organizations unknowingly



19 Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

share incorrect details. Often, misinformation surfaces during breaking news events when facts are not fully confirmed, or when people share information without verifying its accuracy. An example might be a rumour about a celebrity couple, shared widely on social media before it's clarified as untrue. Even though it spreads unintentionally, misinformation can have significant consequences, such as eroding trust in reliable information sources and undermining the credibility of the news ecosystem. This mistrust, much like the classic "boy who cried wolf" fable, can lead people to doubt even factual and crucial information.

Disinformation

Disinformation, unlike misinformation, is deliberately crafted and spread with the intent to deceive. Its purpose is to manipulate truth and fact, often through conspiracy theories, edited images, or misleading audio and video. This tactic is used by those who aim to influence elections, spread propaganda, or manipulate public opinion. Unlike misinformation, disinformation is initially shared with harmful intent, even if others who pass it along do so unwittingly.

A person's intersectional Identity

An individual's intersectional identity encompasses the multiple facets of their identity, such as race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, which intersect to shape their unique experiences and perspectives and also how they experience discrimination and/or privilege.

Intersectionality beyond Identity

It is also important for us to remember that Intersectionality is bigger and broader than just looking at diverse identities. As the purpose of the intersectional lens is to identify and work with different intersecting forms of oppression, it is crucial to keep in mind other differences/factors in the lives of people such as, socio-economic status and socio-political context (humanitarian/conflict context, high climate change/environmental disaster risk zone, geographical accessibility, civic status (migrant/refugee), religious influence, progressiveness of the local governance, etc.). In this context, work on masculinities also benefits from an intersectional approach. It involves recognising how gender norms can create pressures and



vulnerabilities for men in different social and economic contexts, while at the same time acknowledging that men may continue to hold certain privileges and may contribute to unequal power relations or violence. An intersectional lens therefore helps programmes respond to men's lived realities without losing focus on the broader goal of promoting accountability and advancing gender justice.

Manosphere

The manosphere refers to a diverse collection of websites, blogs, forums, and online communities that promote certain ideas of masculinity, often including misogyny, opposition to feminism, and rigid gender roles. It can be thought of as a networked ecosystem: different groups with overlapping but not identical beliefs and audiences, linked by shared language, themes, and rhetorical strategies. The manosphere is often associated with a “red pill” philosophy - a worldview which claims that society (especially feminist ideas) has misled men, and that “waking up” to this reality is necessary.²⁰

Digital media and gender scholar Debbie Ging has mapped the loose confederacy of interest groups that make up the so-called “manosphere,” identifying five primary hubs: men's rights activists (MRAs); men going their own way (MGTOW); pickup artists (PUAs); traditional Christian conservatives (TradCons); and gamer/ geek culture (although unlike the other categories listed, only a subsection of the gamer/geek culture is part of the manosphere).²¹

MRAs position themselves as advocates for men's legal and social rights, often framing men as victims of systemic bias in areas such as divorce, custody, domestic violence laws, and affirmative action. While some MRA discourse highlights legitimate concerns about gendered systems, much of it frequently devolves



20 A Brito, P., Hayes, C., Lehrer, R., Mahler, J., & Salinas Groppo, J. (2024). The Manosphere, Rewired: Understanding Masculinities Online & Pathways for Healthy Connection. *Equimundo*.

21 Ging, D. (2017). Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere. *Men and Masculinities*, 22(4), 638-657. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401>

into anti-feminist rhetoric that blames women and feminist movements for men's perceived disempowerment. For instance, in India, MRAs are organising around issues such as anti-dowry laws, divorce, and child custody, which they believe are biased against men. MGTOW, on the other hand, takes this resentment further by promoting the idea that men should disengage

entirely from relationships with women and from what they view as a "feminized" society. MGTOW communities encourage male self-sufficiency, isolation, and rejection of romantic or social ties with women, often grounded in deep mistrust and hostility. Together, MRAs and MGTOW exemplify how the manosphere functions as both a coping mechanism for men's anxieties about shifting gender norms and power rather than challenge it.²²

Hate crime/speech

Offences that are motivated by hate or by bias against a particular group of people. This could be based on gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, age or disability. Similarly, hate speech refers to any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are - in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. Its motive is to spread, incite, promote or justify hatred, discrimination or hostility towards any individual/group, mostly minorities.²³

22 Brito, P., Hayes, C., Lehrer, R., Mahler, J., & Salinas Groppo, J. (2024). The Manosphere, Rewired: Understanding Masculinities Online & Pathways for Healthy Connection. Equimundo.

23 United Nations. (2019). United Nations strategy and plan of action on hate speech. https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf

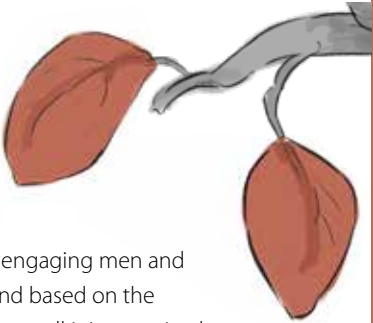


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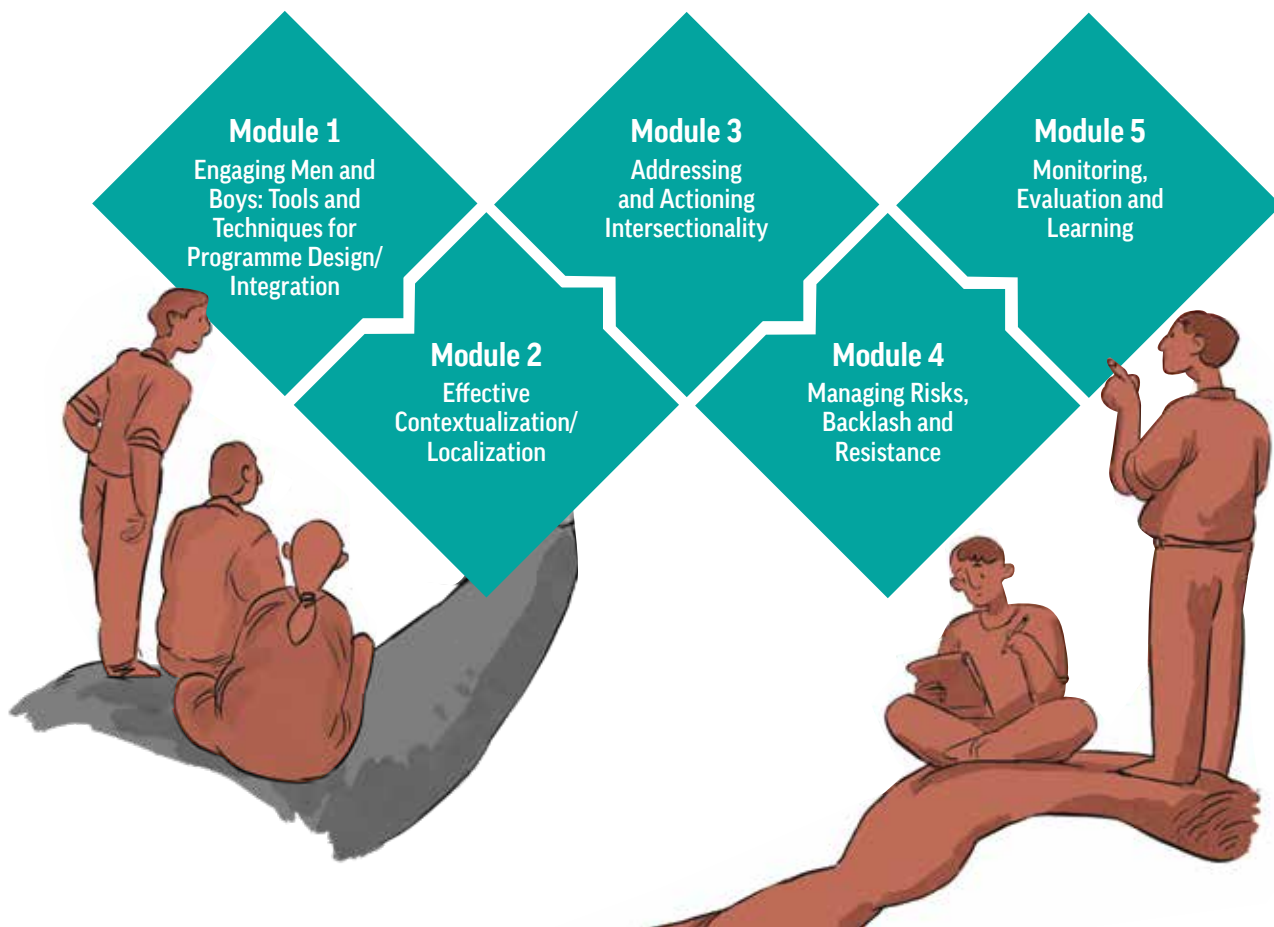
2

TOOLKIT MODULES





While the concepts and frameworks outlined earlier guide the *why* and *how* of engaging men and boys, practitioners often need clarity on the *what*. Responding to this need, and based on the ICRW–UNESCO study, consultations, global evidence, and testing feedback, the toolkit is organized into a set of core modules. Each module addresses a critical aspect of designing and implementing gender-transformative work with men and boys. These modules include:



1.

Engaging Men and Boys: Tools and Techniques for Programme Design/Integration

This module focuses on practical ways to meaningfully engage men and boys in gender equality work. It supports practitioners to design or integrate activities that question harmful gender norms, encourage reflection, and promote positive behaviours, while ensuring programmes remain inclusive and relevant.

2.

Effective Contextualization/ Localization

Gender norms and power relations vary across communities. This module helps practitioners adapt programmes to different cultural, social, and local contexts so that interventions resonate with participants and reflect their lived realities, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all approaches.



3.

Addressing and Actioning Intersectionality

Gender does not operate in isolation. It intersects with caste, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, age, and other social identities. This module helps practitioners recognize these intersections and design programmes that are inclusive, responsive, and attentive to unequal power and exclusion.

4.

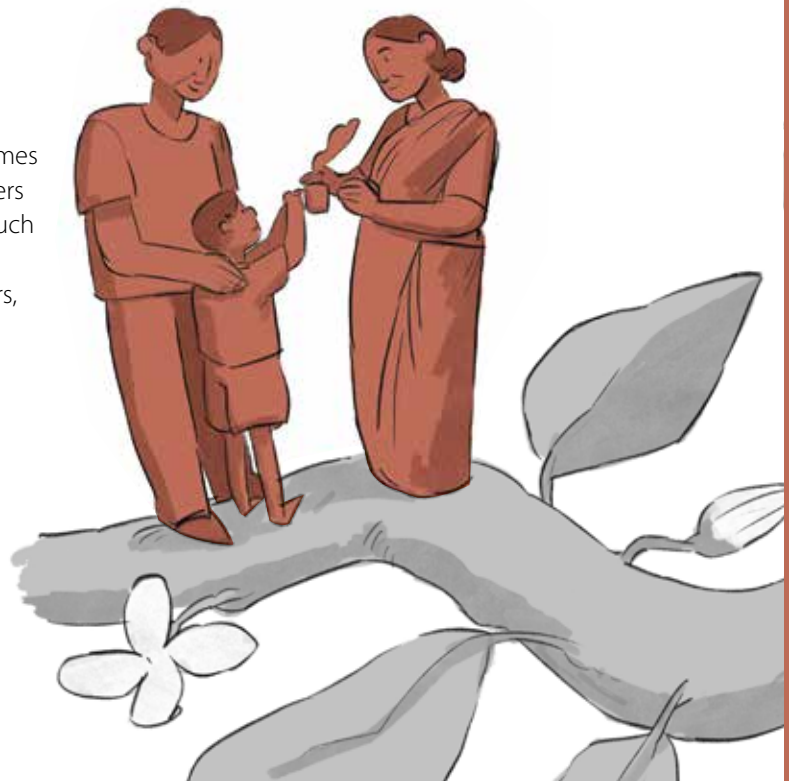
Managing Risks, Backlash, and Resistance

Efforts to challenge gender norms can sometimes lead to resistance or backlash. This module offers guidance on anticipating and responding to such challenges, managing risks, and ensuring the safety and well-being of participants, facilitators, and organisations.

5.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

This module supports practitioners to track progress, understand change, and learn from implementation. It introduces practical MEL approaches that help teams reflect on what is working, adapt strategies, and strengthen programmes over time.

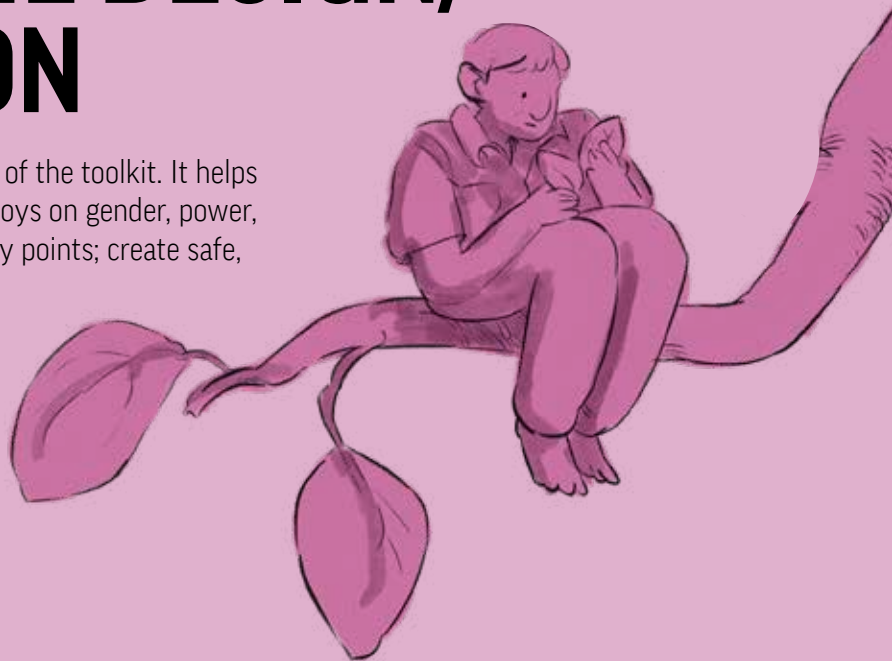


Module

1

ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS: TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR PROGRAMME DESIGN/ INTEGRATION

At a glance: Module 1 is the design backbone of the toolkit. It helps you read your community; engage men and boys on gender, power, masculinities and related issues; identify entry points; create safe, welcoming spaces; use experiential and reflective methods; build practical skills; form partnerships; and anticipate challenges. Use it when designing a new programme, or when integrating work with men and boys into an existing one. Modules 2-5 build on the choices you make here.



Module 1 is intentionally more detailed than the modules that follow. This is because it forms the core foundation of the toolkit, bringing together programme design principles, key content areas, facilitation approaches, and ways of working with men and boys.

Effective engagement with men and boys cannot be reduced to a set of activities or sessions. It requires careful attention to context, power, facilitation, sequencing, and readiness. Module 1 therefore focuses on the thinking, preparation, and design choices that shape the quality and impact of all subsequent programme work.

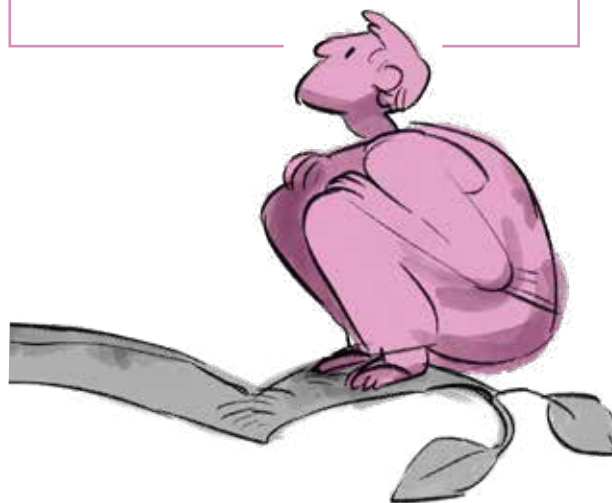
This module brings together guidance on understanding the population and community context; engaging with gender, power, masculinities, and related themes; identifying relevant and context-specific entry points; creating safe and inclusive spaces; and using experiential, discussion-based, and reflective approaches. It also emphasises the importance of building practical skills for gender-equitable behaviours, developing partnerships and collaborations with key stakeholders, and anticipating challenges and risks in this work.

The subsequent modules build on this foundation. They deepen, operationalise, or support what is laid out here, whether through facilitation, contextualization, risk management, or monitoring,

evaluation, and learning. Practitioners are therefore encouraged to view Module 1 as a reference framework that informs decision-making across the entire programme lifecycle.

Note: Remember to refer to the essential concepts in section 1 of the toolkit.

It can help to skim the relevant terms before each module, and then come back to the guiding principles below, which are the practical heart of the toolkit. Particularly relevant for this module are: gender, sex, gender norms, patriarchy, masculinities, gender-diverse, transgender, intersex, disability, mental health, models of power, and in Annexure 2 - theory of change.



Guiding Principles

1.

Know your population, community, challenges and opportunities

It is important to begin any programme by understanding the local context. Through this, programmes can be tailored to address specific cultural and social contexts, enhancing their relevance and effectiveness. Some guiding principles in this process should be:

Know Your Community

Start by understanding the local culture, social structures, and power dynamics. This helps you know who the key influencers are (like community or religious leaders), what norms shape gender expectations, and where you might face resistance or support. This way, you can design a programme that fits the community.

Identify Men and Boys' Interests

Get a sense of what topics resonate most with the men and boys in your community. What do they care about? What are their interests? What physical spaces do they occupy in the community for sports/leisure? etc. This helps you find entry

points to engage them, such as sports, use of technology work, family life, or community roles.

Understand Masculinities

Look at how masculinities are understood in your community. These insights help you understand what shapes men's identities, choices, and attitudes and where there may be space to intervene. What are the expectations placed on men? Do they feel pressured to be tough, financially successful, or hide their emotions? Understanding these expectations helps reveal the roots of certain behaviours and beliefs, so you can address harmful stereotypes in ways that fit the local context. Ask questions like: What do boys and men see as success? How do younger boys' aspirations differ from those of older or married men? Who are their role models or favorite influencers? At the same time, explore the boundaries that gender norms create - such as whether men and boys feel able to express themselves freely, pursue interests of their choice, or engage in certain tasks, occupations, or hobbies that may be seen as 'inappropriate' for them. Understanding both the expectations placed on men and the restrictions they experience can help reveal the deeper roots of behaviours and beliefs, enabling more contextually relevant strategies to challenge harmful stereotypes and promote more equitable and flexible masculinities.

Testing Insight: Regarding Role Models

This turned out to be a complex and sensitive issue. The toolkit was tested in a context where cybercrime is common, and many young boys, often from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, face significant pressure to earn for their families. As a result, several boys admired peers or older youth involved in cybercrime, viewing them as successful because of the money they made and the lifestyles they led. This required careful handling within the programme, as it highlighted how perceived role models can sometimes embody harmful or risky behaviours. Facilitators had to thoughtfully guide discussions around these perceptions to help participants question and redefine what positive role modelling means.

Introducing “positive” role models who had completed their education or demonstrated gender-equitable behaviour also posed challenges. Village Coordinators (VCs) struggled to identify any such individuals in their communities, which sparked rich debates around the question of who counts as a role model. Eventually, the team agreed to define role models as those who embody **“aspirational lived realities”**, i.e. people whose choices or attitudes reflect possibilities for growth, respect, and equality, even if they are still on their own journeys. Practitioners found this framing far more relevant and effective in the local context.

Involve Local Stakeholders

Work with local leaders, health providers, women's groups, and others who are trusted in the community. Their support is crucial for the programme's credibility and can help you get better insights into local norms. Some influential stakeholders whose ideas align with the objectives of the programme, may even prove to be a valuable entry point for conversations in their community. They can also help spread the word and support the programme's goals.

Gauge Sensitivity on Tough Topics

Sensitive issues like violence, reproductive health, sexuality and gender roles may be difficult to talk

about. Through simple surveys or focus groups, find out how open the community is to discuss these topics. This will help you approach these discussions carefully and in ways that respect local values.





Explore Awareness and Attitudes on Inclusion

Before introducing topics like disability, gender and sexual identity, transgender people - it's important to understand how the community currently perceives and talks about them. Use simple discussions, interviews, or observation to learn what people already know, what misconceptions exist, and how comfortable they feel engaging with these subjects. This will reveal both awareness levels and possible resistance or curiosity. Identifying this early on will help design activities and messages that are inclusive, respectful, and grounded in the community's existing understanding, while slowly expanding it toward greater acceptance and empathy.

It is important to use this understanding as a foundation for intentionally planning interventions that challenge harmful or oppressive norms. If the exploration shows that the community holds negative attitudes, this should not be taken to mean they are not "ready" for efforts to promote change. While it is necessary to respect current comfort levels, the idea of "readiness" should not become a reason to avoid engaging with sensitive but important issues, since the overall aim is to transform harmful norms. Instead, this understanding should guide the use of context-specific approaches that encourage dialogue and help minimise backlash or disengagement.

Ensure the Intervention is Designed to be Age-appropriate

A helpful way to understand the difference between working with men and boys across the life-span is to think about where they are in their journey of learning and internalising gender norms.

Younger Boys (up to mid-adolescence)

- ◆ Focus on shaping attitudes early as at this stage, beliefs about gender are still forming, so interventions aim to build positive and equitable understandings of masculinity before harmful norms take root. This is a critical window for prevention.
- ◆ Develop emotional and social skills by encouraging boys to express emotions, build empathy, and understand respect and consent.
- ◆ Challenge stereotypes gently by introducing alternative ways of thinking - questioning ideas like "boys must be tough" in ways that are age-appropriate and encourage curiosity and reflection.

Older Adolescents & Young Men (late teens - 20's)

- ◆ While some gender beliefs are already shaped, they are not fully fixed, hence it is best to combine attitude formation and unlearning. Interventions therefore work both to reinforce positive attitudes and to challenge harmful norms that may already be internalised.

- ◆ This age group is navigating relationships, sexuality, identity, and mental health pressures. Programmes can create space to critically examine these experiences and the role masculinity plays in shaping them.
- ◆ Conversations begin to shift toward personal responsibility and accountability, for example, how one's behaviour affects partners, peers, and others, and the importance of making equitable and respectful choices.
- ◆ Peer groups are highly influential at this stage so interventions can leverage these dynamics to shift group norms, encouraging collective reflection and reducing pressure to conform to harmful ideas of masculinity.

Adult Men (30 years and above)

- ◆ By adulthood, gender norms are usually deeply internalised and are expressed through lived behaviours and social roles as partners, fathers, colleagues, or community leaders. Men are also more likely to hold and exercise power within households, institutions, and society at large. As a result, programmes with this age group focus on unlearning entrenched norms and shift towards equitable behaviours.
- ◆ As men are more likely to hold power and privilege, interventions focus on enabling critical reflection on how these are exercised in everyday life, and how they can be recognized, challenged, and used in more equitable and just ways.

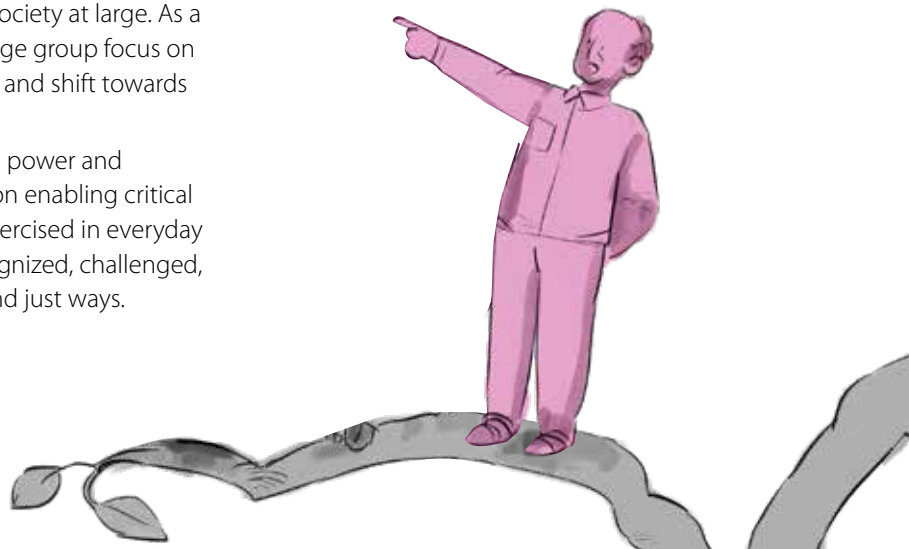
- ◆ Interventions emphasise accountability for one's actions and their impact, particularly on women and marginalized groups, while also linking individual change to broader gender justice efforts and movements.

Note: Above listed age groupings are indicative rather than fixed, and may shift depending on social, cultural, and contextual factors that shape how masculinities are formed and experienced.

Map Available Resources and Gaps

Take stock of existing programmes or services in the community, such as health services, schools, or local groups. Identify what's missing or what could be improved, such as gender-sensitive services or programmes that challenge stereotypes. This ensures your programme complements what's already there.

During the testing phase, we developed a formative research tool to enquire about the issues mentioned above. Probes from the tool can be found in Annex 1.



Testing Insight: Programme Design Begins with the Team

Toolkit testing clearly demonstrated that programme design for engaging men and boys should not begin at the community level alone. It must start with the internal team and how they relate to the toolkit's concepts, language, and assumptions.

During internal orientation sessions, teams engaged with the toolkit through collective readings. These discussions revealed uneven comfort levels around topics such as masculinity, patriarchy, sexuality, non-physical violence, mental health, disability, and transgender identities. This further re-iterated the importance of sustained facilitator preparation, internal reflection, and safe learning spaces before introducing sensitive themes in community settings.

Formative research questions were intentionally used during team orientation to prompt self-reflection. Questions such as who is considered an "ideal man," whether men share emotional distress, and which forms of violence are recognized beyond the physical helped team members confront their own socialisation and blind spots. This process was critical in building facilitation readiness. Team members reported that addressing discomfort at this stage reduced fear and hesitation later when facilitating similar conversations in communities.

Create a Simple Theory of Change

Based on the information you've gathered, develop a simple Theory of Change (ToC). This is a roadmap that outlines the goals of your programme and how you plan to achieve them. Make sure these goals align with what the community sees as successes. This helps ensure your programme is relevant and meaningful to the people you're working with. A Theory of Change lays out detailed steps on how a programme aims to create change. A theory of change must be driven by sound analysis, consultation with key stakeholders and learning on what works and what does not in the given context. A simple ToC includes identifying the Problem/Goal, specifying the community to be worked with (adolescent boys, older men from ages 30 to 45,

boys and men with disability, etc.), listing out the programme Components/strategies that will be used to achieve the desired change (immediate outputs and long-term Outcomes), while also mapping out any risks and assumptions that the intervention is based on. A ToC hence, requires clearly outlining how particular strategies/activities will drive change to achieve some immediate and ultimately long-term goals. A ToC must also consider the social and political context and intersectional lens in its analysis to map out any entry points, risks, opportunities, threats, etc. that could impact the programme. Annex 2 provides an example of a ToC for a programme that works with men and boys on any aspect/overall on gender equality (feel free to refer to this while adapting your ToC to engage men).

2. Address issues of gender, power, and related topics^{24,25,26}

The topics mentioned below are fundamental for creating fairer, healthier communities. They encourage a shift towards alternative masculinities, respect for all genders, and the building of strong, equitable relationships. While these suggestions can guide your work, it's important to adapt and tailor them to the unique context of your community.

Gender Role Pressures

Many men and boys face societal pressure to conform to narrow definitions of masculinity, such as always being strong, unemotional, and dominant, or show only some emotions like anger and aggression but not those that might be seen as a vulnerability or weakness. These expectations can cause significant emotional strain, making it difficult for men to express vulnerability, seek help, or connect with others on a deeper level. Programmes should help participants recognize how these societal expectations limit their emotional well-being and relationships. By challenging these gender norms, men and boys can explore healthier, more flexible models of masculinity. This opens the door for expressing a wider range of emotions, fostering deeper, more respectful

relationships, and living authentically without being bound by stereotypes of what it means to “be a man.” For instance, while women may still occasionally be spoken to about topics like menstruation or maternal health (even if the information shared is limited or inaccurate), men are rarely given space to discuss their own experiences related to gender, sexuality, mental health or their bodies. This silence leaves many men uninformed and isolated, reinforcing harmful stereotypes about what it means to “be a man.” It is another clear side effect of patriarchy, which not only restricts women’s freedom but also denies men the opportunity for honest self-understanding and emotional growth and must be challenged.

An example of how it restricts women’s freedom - In some communities, there are beliefs that certain important tasks, such as ploughing the land, are only meant for men and are forbidden for women. These kinds of gender stereotypes are not just symbolic traditions; they can limit women’s ability to farm independently, earn a livelihood, or make decisions about land and resources. As a result, women become more dependent on men for survival and may even risk losing control over their property or economic security. At the same time, this places greater pressure on men to be the primary providers, reinforcing rigid gender roles and continuing a cycle that sustains patriarchal systems.²⁷

24 MenEngage Alliance, & Sonke Gender Justice. (2018). IMAGINE toolkit for engaging boys and young men to prevent sexual harassment and sexual violence against women and girls. MenEngage Alliance.

25 White Ribbon. (2021). Allies for gender equality toolkit: Enhancing intersectionality in engaging men and boys. White Ribbon, Toronto, ON.

26 Burrell, S., Ruxton, S., & Westmarland, N. (2020). Engaging with men and boys about gender norms: Engagement toolkit. Durham University for the Government Equalities Office.

27 Kumari, A. (2021). The gender politics of plough: Asymmetrical taboos and Santal women. *Sociological Bulletin*, 70(2), 234–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920970302>

Power Dynamics and Accountability

In any community, power dynamics shape relationships and social structures. Understanding how power is distributed and used - whether in families, communities, or society - is crucial in creating a more just and equal world. Programmes should help men reflect on how they may unconsciously support systems that perpetuate inequality. A key focus should be on understanding privilege and how it affects others, as this awareness encourages men to take responsibility for their actions. Engaging in this reflection helps men make better choices, promoting fairness and equality in their relationships and communities.

Think Intersectional! - It is also important to understand power through the lens of intersectionality. While men hold power in a patriarchal society, all men do not hold equal power. The power and influence men have is shaped by and changes based on intersectional factors like their caste, education levels, location, financial status, whether they can speak English, height, if they have a physical or intellectual disability, etc. In practice, thinking intersectionally should change how a programme is designed and delivered, not only how power is talked about. For a practitioner, this means asking concrete questions before and during the work: which men are in the room, and which are missing; whose voices dominate and whose are silenced; and how caste, class, religion, age, disability and sexuality shape who feels able to speak or disagree. It may mean rethinking who is grouped together, how facilitators are chosen, which examples and stories are used, and how the safety and dignity

of the least powerful participants is protected, for instance, being alert to who sits where, who speaks first, and who is expected to stay quiet. Facilitators can also draw attention to the relational dimensions of masculinity, that is, how men relate to other men, and how men of one identity (of a particular caste, religion, class or age) relate to and exercise power over men of another. Simple prompts can open this up, such as: Who are you expected to defer to, and who is expected to defer to you? Whose presence makes you feel you have to prove that you are a man? When have you seen men treat other men as lesser, and on what basis (caste, money, language, sexuality, disability)? These relational questions help men see that masculinity is not only about power over women, but also about hierarchies and pressures between men themselves. (See Module 3 for detailed guidance on applying an intersectional lens to programme design.)

Patriarchy: Pressure and/or Privilege?

It is essential to engage men in conversations about how patriarchy shapes gender roles and affects everyone's lives. Patriarchy often places a heavy burden on men, pressuring them to be constant providers, to suppress emotions, and to equate strength with dominance. These expectations can lead to stress, loneliness, and poor mental health, showing that patriarchy also harms men in profound ways. At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that patriarchy gives men certain privileges and social power that women and gender-diverse people are often denied. Men's voices are more easily heard and accepted in private and public spaces, giving them the opportunity and

responsibility to use that power to advocate for change. Recognizing both the costs and privileges of patriarchy helps men see that dismantling it is not about losing power, but about creating a more equal, humane, and freeing world for everyone.



participants may be struggling to understand themselves or may know peers or family members who are. These conversations help build empathy, reduce stigma, and encourage men to extend support to women and gender-diverse people. This helps create a healthier social environment and partnerships - strengthening the broader movement toward gender equality.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

Sexual and reproductive health education is not only essential for promoting healthier relationships but also for encouraging men to actively participate in family planning, decision-making, and consent. Topics that must be included when working with young men and boys on SRHR are reproductive systems, masturbation, menstruation, consent, relationships, body image, stress and mental health, violence and child sexual abuse, contraception, sexual and reproductive health, abortion and how gender roles relate to and impact these. A common mistake made is to not talk about issues of menstruation, contraception, painful sex, miscarriage, abortion, etc. with men and boys as they are primarily seen as issues relevant to women. Teaching men and boys about these helps them make informed decisions that respect their partners' rights, and well-being and also increases joy/pleasure in the relationship. It also challenges harmful gender roles by encouraging men to take on a supportive role in sexual and reproductive decision-making, thus reducing incidents of gender-based violence and unintended pregnancies. Equally important is creating space to talk about gender and sexual identity, as some

Tip!: A good resource to access age appropriate SRHR information TARSHI's **The Red Book** (ages 10-14) and **The Blue Book** (ages 15 and above).

Ensuring an Affirmative and Pleasure-based Approach

When discussing topics such as gender roles, consent, sexual health and infections, and reproduction, it is essential that the desired change be approached through an affirmative and pleasure-oriented lens, rather than a disease-prevention or fear-based one. Positive and affirming messages are more likely to be understood and accepted by people, while fear-based messages can make them feel ashamed or uncomfortable and stop them from engaging further. This emphasis is important on both fronts, the **approach** as well as the **content** of the programme.

To illustrate this approach, consider the example of contraception. An affirmative approach would, without bias, present all contraceptive options to people, explaining the pros and cons of each, including methods that only prevent pregnancy and

those that also protect against certain STIs and RTIs. In contrast, a fear-based approach would focus solely on sharing information about infections and risks, and end up unintentionally misrepresenting sex as something that is “wrong” and “bad”. The latter often discourages young people from asking questions or seeking accurate information, and as a result, they may end up making unsafe decisions.

In terms of content, an affirmative approach ensures that work on gender equality and SRHR goes beyond information on child sexual abuse, gender-based violence, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases. It also includes the positive, real, and pleasurable aspects of sexuality - such as masturbation, attraction, love, and relationships. Integrating these dimensions makes discussions more relatable and engaging, thereby increasing young people's interest, comfort, and overall learning.

Emotional and Stress Management

Traditional views of masculinity may allow for emotions like anger or possessiveness but often encourage men to suppress their vulnerable emotions to appear strong and resilient, which can have a detrimental impact on their mental health. Programmes should focus on helping men recognize and manage their emotions constructively. Teaching emotional awareness and stress management techniques, like mindfulness, coping strategies, and emotional expression, can significantly improve mental and physical health. This approach helps men unlearn harmful norms and adopt healthier behaviours.

For instance, dealing with rejection is an important aspect of coping with stress for men. Conversations should address how rejection - e.g. love interest being turned down by a woman - is often portrayed in popular culture as a threat to a man's worth or masculinity. Such portrayals can negatively impact men's mental health and, in some cases, are used to justify anger or violence. Exploring ideas like “*friendzoning*” or entitlement to women's attention can help participants recognize how these beliefs harm both men and women. This makes it crucial to work with men on **stress management and positive coping mechanisms**, since traditional views of masculinity often frame anger and aggression as the only acceptable emotional responses. Sustained engagement is crucial, as men may need time and repeated discussions to feel comfortable with these changes. As they become more emotionally aware, men can improve their relationships and reduce aggressive behaviours.

Mental Health and Well-being

When talking about mental health, it's important to first understand that **stress, distress, and mental disorders are different**. Everyone experiences stress, but if it remains unaddressed for long, it can turn into distress, a deeper emotional strain that affects how we think, feel, and function. Some mental health disorders may be genetic or linked to physiological causes, but many also develop from prolonged, unchecked distress. Learning how to manage everyday stress before it escalates is therefore crucial. This makes it essential to help men learn how to manage stress before it escalates, by creating safe spaces for conversation, normalizing emotional

expression, and encouraging help-seeking behaviours. There is a significant stigma around mental health, especially among men. Programmes should encourage men and boys to seek help and support when facing mental health challenges, showing them that it is okay to be vulnerable and that it's not something to be made fun of. Many men are taught to "tough it out" rather than talk about what they're going through, which can lead to isolation or harmful coping mechanisms such as anger, alcohol use, or substance abuse.

Programmes should promote the idea that mental health needs everyday care, just like eating well or brushing one's teeth. They should also help participants explore where their stress comes from, whether from individual pressures, family or institutional expectations, or broader social systems. This helps men realize that their frustration is not about a single person or situation (for instance, blaming women), but about structural pressures that shape everyone's lives. Uncritically accepting dominant ideals of masculinity and the expectations and pressures that come with them can intensify the stress men already experience due to challenges such as unemployment, low income, or the perceived inability to provide for their families. Masculinity norms not only push men to hide their emotions or avoid seeking help but also add to the pressures and stress they experience. Addressing and challenging rigid, patriarchal notions of masculinity is therefore important for reducing gendered pressures on men and encourages men to develop positive coping strategies, support one another, and build emotionally healthier, more equitable communities.

Care Work and Household Responsibilities

Gender is inherently relational as gender roles shape how people of different genders connect, share responsibilities, and express care within families and communities. These roles influence not just how individuals see themselves, but also how they divide and value work, particularly within the home. When care and household tasks are seen as "women's work," it reinforces unequal power dynamics and limits emotional connection across genders.

Gender equality isn't just about addressing external social norms but also about changing practices within households. Men often view domestic tasks as primarily women's responsibilities, but sharing care work helps create more balanced and equitable households. Programmes should emphasize the benefits of shared care work, including reducing the burden on women and promoting mutual respect. Providing men with practical skills for household chores and caregiving tasks ensures they can contribute meaningfully. This not only fosters equality but also builds healthier family dynamics and supports broader gender equity efforts in the community.



Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence is a critical issue that affects people of all genders, and it is often rooted in rigid gender norms. Programmes should educate men about the root causes of GBV, how to recognize it, and how to intervene safely - whether as survivors, bystanders, or allies. It's essential to understand that GBV can affect anyone - men, women, transgender individuals, and gender diverse people. By recognizing the links between harmful gender expectations and violence, men can become advocates for respectful relationships and active contributors to ending GBV in their communities.

It is also useful to look at how violence and aggression operate beyond gender-based violence itself. In many settings, violence and aggression are treated as the norm, and an expected way for men and boys to resolve conflict, assert dominance, command respect and defend 'honour'. This shows

up not only in violence against women and gender-diverse people, but also in violence between men, in bullying and ragging, and in the physical and emotional abuse and harsh 'disciplining' of children, who are often treated as legitimate targets of a man's authority. Naming these patterns explicitly, that aggression is being used as the default language of conflict and control, helps practitioners and participants notice them during community analysis, and helps programmes address the everyday normalisation of violence rather than only its most visible or severe forms.

Online GBV/Technology-facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV)

In today's age of technology and constant internet connectivity, violence and abuse have extended far beyond physical spaces. TFGBV is not a new issue, but a structural problem rooted in patriarchy, sexism, and long histories of inequality extending into the online and tech space. The online world has increasingly become a site of gender-based violence, making it essential to move beyond an exclusively offline understanding of GBV. Technology-facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) refers to a wide range of harmful acts carried out through digital tools and platforms. These include online harassment (sending threatening or abusive messages), cyberstalking (repeated monitoring or contact intended to intimidate), image-based sexual abuse (non-consensual sharing of intimate photos or videos), doxxing (publishing someone's personal information online such as their address or phone number to harm or humiliate them), hacking (unauthorized



access to personal accounts or data), surveillance and GPS/location tagging (tracking or monitoring someone's movements digitally), hate speech (spreading misogynistic, homophobic, or transphobic content), trolling, and defamation.

These acts violate privacy, threaten safety, and create an atmosphere of fear that discourages women and gender-diverse people from freely expressing themselves or participating in public, social, and political life. The impacts are far-reaching. TFGVB silences voices, restricts access to professional and leadership spaces, and reinforces existing gender inequalities. Online abuse often spills over into offline harm, escalating to physical violence or coordinated attacks. It is therefore crucial that men and boys understand the implications of technology-facilitated violence - both the individual harm it causes and how it sustains wider systems of gender inequality. By recognising these impacts, men and boys can take responsibility to ensure that other men do not engage in such behaviours and can stand in solidarity with and support women and gender-diverse people when they become targets of online abuse.

Think Intersectional! Marginalized groups such as human rights defenders, women with disabilities, adolescent girls, indigenous women, and those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities face even higher risks and have fewer pathways to protection and justice.

Testing Insight: Challenging Notions of Strength

A common point of disagreement in gender discussions often revolves around the idea of strength. During toolkit testing, one participant remarked, "What two men can do, it would take four women to do because they are soft," and argued that women cannot work the hal (plough) during farming. Such beliefs reflect how physical strength is narrowly defined and used to justify unequal divisions of labour.

When asked, "What heavy work do women do?" participants listed collecting firewood and water - tasks that involve long hours, endurance, and physical strain. Yet, these forms of strength are rarely acknowledged as "hard work." This is where the conversation needs to shift: by highlighting how capability often depends on **opportunity and practice**, not biology. If women had the same access to training, tools, and social permission, they could perform many of the tasks seen as "men's work." Disrupting this idea of strength helps participants see that both men and women contribute essential labour, just in different, often unequally valued ways.



Decision-Making and Agency

Traditional gender roles often place men in positions where they hold all the decision-making power, especially in households or communities. Programmes should promote shared decision-making and encourage men to respect the opinions, needs, and rights of others, particularly women and marginalized groups. Teaching men to value and share authority leads to more equal relationships. When men understand that decision-making should be a collaborative process, they help create more balanced partnerships. This not only strengthens families but also encourages mutual respect, promoting fairness, equality, and consent in both personal and community relationships.

*Think Intersectional! - However, it is also important to recognize and address that **not all men experience power in the same way**. Intersectional factors such as disability, class, caste, and sexual orientation shape how men experience and exercise decision-making power. For instance, **men with disabilities** may not have the same level of autonomy or authority due to the nature or degree of their disability, which can affect their self-esteem, mental health, and sense of identity - especially when they receive mixed messages about masculinity and capability.*

Critical Reflection on Dominant Masculinities and Stereotypes

The concept of masculinities has been shaped by patriarchal and societal expectations, which can be limiting and harmful, such as being strong, dominant, unemotional, or always in control. However, there is not just one form of masculinity. There are **many masculinities**, shaped by factors like culture, class, caste, sexuality, and disability. Despite this diversity, society often promotes a narrow and rigid version of masculinity that expects men to act in certain ways that suppresses emotions, avoids showing vulnerability, and proves their strength through aggression, control, or financial success. These expectations can be deeply limiting and harmful, both to men themselves and to those around them.

Programmes should hence encourage men and boys to critically reflect on and question these stereotypes. A useful framework for this is the idea of **the “man box”**.²⁸ Men who step outside this “box” (for example, by expressing care, fear, or sadness) are often judged or ridiculed. By understanding how the “man box” shapes their lives, men can begin to see that these norms are not natural or fixed, but socially constructed and changeable.

28 “The man box” is an idea initially conceived in the 1980s by Paul Kivel that refers to the set of societal norms and expectations that place pressure on boys and men to think and act a certain way if they want to “fit in,” such as being strong, successful, tough, and in control and limiting emotions. These heterosexist norms and expectations can be communicated through families, peer groups, school, work, and the media, starting from a young age. Consequences for not subscribing to these social pressures can include bullying and ostracism from groups.

Challenging these restrictive norms allows men to explore **alternate and diverse masculinities** - healthier, more inclusive ways of being that value empathy, care, and equality. It helps men move away from destructive behaviours such as violence, dominance, or emotional repression, and towards greater self-awareness, emotional well-being, and mutual respect in relationships. When men are free to define masculinity on their own terms and beyond the limits of the “man box”, they not only improve their own lives but also contribute to building safer, more equitable, and compassionate communities.

Building Healthy Relationships

Healthy relationships are built on communication, empathy, and respectful conflict resolution. Programmes should focus on helping men and boys understand these values and develop the skills needed to navigate relationships in healthy and supportive ways. These relationships include not only those with wives or girlfriends, but also with parents, siblings (especially, sisters), friends, colleagues, and community members.

Teaching conflict management and the importance of empathy enables men to build trust, listen better, and communicate more effectively across all these relationships. When men learn to express emotions in non-violent ways and to respect the feelings and boundaries of others, it promotes healthier and safer interactions within families and communities. Ultimately, fostering these skills helps reduce violence, strengthen emotional bonds, and create more caring and equitable environments for everyone.

Supporting the Transgender Community

In many South Asian communities, hijras and transgender individuals face stigma, discrimination, and violence. Programmes should promote understanding of hijra identities as part of the broader conversation on gender equality. Educating men and boys about hijras and their human rights helps dismantle harmful stereotypes and fosters solidarity with the transgender community. By challenging transphobia and advocating for transgender rights, men can help create a more inclusive and supportive society for people of all gender identities.

Diverse Masculinities

Masculinities are not uniform; they are shaped by diverse social locations, identities, and lived experiences. Scholars note that the category of “men” includes individuals whose gender identities and expressions vary across cultures and contexts, and that recognising this diversity is essential for understanding how power, privilege, and marginalisation operate within gender systems.²⁹

Within this diversity are **trans men** - people who were assigned female at birth but identify and live as men - as well as those who identify with **trans masculinities**, an umbrella term that can include trans men and other individuals who align with masculine identities or expressions outside traditional cisgender norms.³⁰ Research highlights that trans

29 Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859.

30 Monro, S. (2019). Non-binary and genderqueer: An overview of the field. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20(2–3), 126–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1538841>

masculinities challenge rigid gender binaries and expand dominant understandings of what it means to be masculine, while also drawing attention to the unique forms of discrimination and exclusion trans people may face. Recognising diverse masculinities therefore helps create more inclusive gender justice approaches that address both privilege and vulnerability across different groups of men.

Impact of Patriarchy on LGBTQI+ People

Patriarchy not only harms women but also deeply affects anyone who does not fit into traditional gender roles, including people from the LGBTQI+ community. Programmes should address how patriarchal systems fuel violence and discrimination against LGBTQI+ people, while also recognising that some men participating in trainings, workshops, or policymaking spaces may themselves belong to the LGBTQI+ community. It is therefore important not to assume that all readers, participants, or policymakers are heterosexual or cisgender. Facilitators and programme designers must also avoid using “us versus them” language that separates or “others” LGBTQI+ people, especially in spaces where members of the community may be directly involved. Instead, discussions and materials should model inclusivity and respect, framing gender and sexuality as diverse spectrums rather than rigid categories.

Encouraging men to understand how patriarchal structures marginalize and criminalize non-binary and non-heteronormative identities, and to actively challenge these injustices, can help create safer and more affirming environments for everyone. When men consciously use inclusive language, advocate

for equality, and challenge discrimination, they contribute to breaking down systems of exclusion and building communities grounded in respect, empathy, and human rights for all.

3. Identifying key entry points

How to: It is important to begin the engagement with men through relevant entry points and relatable experiences that resonate with their roles and interests, otherwise it can be challenging to convince them to allocate their time for participation. Community discussions and contextualized needs assessments are a good way to identify entry points for your specific programme. Some of the salient strategies may include forming new age-wise groups of men and boys or leveraging existing groups, such as sports teams, reading clubs, or cultural organizations. For example, a sports group can be a powerful entry point, where team discussions evolve into conversations about gender norms and equity.



Sometimes intergenerational discussions may also be valuable where different age groups hear each other's perspectives.

Creative approaches such as campaigns, nukkad nataks (street plays), theatrical performances, or community radio programmes can also effectively bring men into groups while sparking meaningful dialogue. Using entry points that interest men but also challenge gender roles are especially helpful (depending on the community context and acceptability) in building a pathway toward understanding and embracing gender equity. For example, instead of using sports which are widely considered a male domain, men could be engaged through interests and activities that are not traditionally considered masculine. Within the context of sports, this can be achieved by selecting a sport that is not considered to be specific to men. Such interest-based entry-points can be used as a foundation for discussions on gender norms, power, and masculinity in a supportive and non-threatening environment.

Example:

Economic Responsibility: Engage men by linking gender equity to their roles as family providers, illustrating how family planning and nutrition can ease economic pressures. For instance, show how shared decision-making around finances and health reduces strain and improves family well-being.

Storytelling with Relatable Role Models: Invite cis male mentors or facilitators who share relatable stories that challenge stereotypes and promote equity. This peer-led approach can inspire participants to reconsider rigid norms around masculinity in a way that feels accessible and relevant.

Relationships as a Conversation Starter: Develop programmes that begin with topics like relationships, which men often find personally relevant. From here, discussions can progress naturally to issues of power dynamics, gender roles, and masculinities, promoting deeper understanding in a relatable context.

Interest-Based Community Mapping: Map the interests within the community, such as sports, and use these as a gateway to bring men together. From shared activities, facilitate discussions that gradually lead to reflections on masculinity and gender equity.

Creative Outreach: Form new groups of men and boys based on age, or utilize existing groups like sports teams, reading clubs, or cultural organizations. Use creative methods such as campaigns, street plays (nukkad nataks), theatrical performances, or community radio to reach and engage men in a meaningful way. These platforms not only bring people together but also spark conversations on masculinity and gender equity in a way that feels inclusive and engaging.

Testing Insight: Change is Iterative, Not Sequential

At the village level, activities were iterative rather than sequential. Issues such as education, early marriage, masculinity, and stress had to be revisited across multiple sessions using different tools and with various groups. One-time engagements consistently produced surface-level agreement but limited reflection. Deeper questioning emerged only through repetition, varied methods, and sustained presence. This reinforced the need for flexible design, longer engagement, and multiple entry points.

4.

Creating safe spaces

Establishing a safe and supportive environment where participants feel free to discuss sensitive topics like masculinity, sexuality, and gender roles without fear of judgment is crucial for the effectiveness and success of the programme. Safe spaces foster open communication and allow participants to challenge norms in a respectful setting.

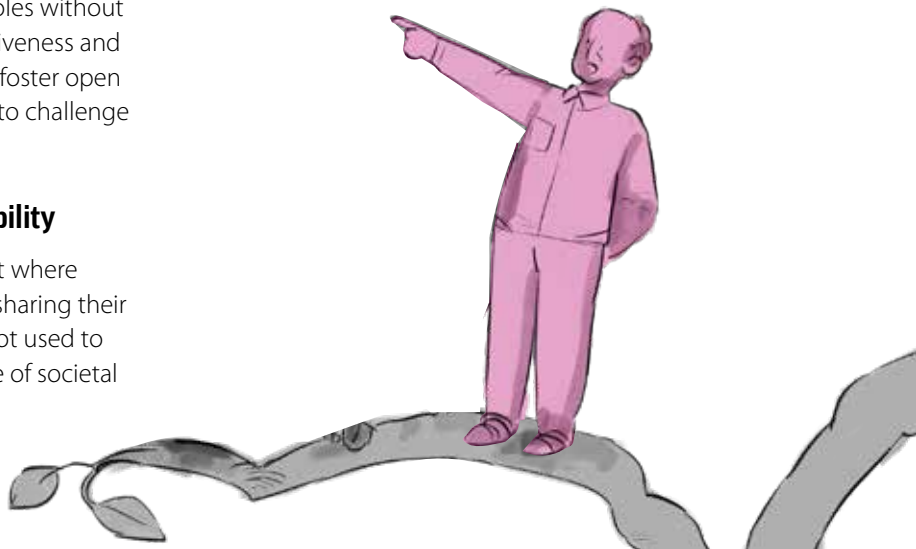
Encourage Expression and Vulnerability

It is important to create an environment where participants feel safe and supported in sharing their thoughts and feelings. Many men are not used to openly expressing vulnerability because of societal

expectations that they always need to appear strong and in control. Programmes should focus on breaking down this barrier by showing participants that it's alright to share their experiences, emotions, and challenges without fear of being judged.

Facilitators play a key role in setting this tone.

They can start by sharing their own personal stories, struggles, or moments of vulnerability to show participants that it's regular and healthy to open up. When facilitators model this kind of openness, it encourages participants to feel more comfortable doing the same. They must strictly reduce any scope of men being mocked who do end up sharing a vulnerability. For instance, a way of ensuring this alongside ensuring confidentiality would be to use anonymous chits for participants to share individual stories instead of saying them out aloud. Over time, this helps men explore their emotions, recognize the importance of being honest about their feelings, and begin to see vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness.



Adapt Safe Spaces for Same-Gender and Mixed-Gender Groups

When addressing sensitive topics like gender, relationships, or emotional struggles, men often feel more comfortable in same-sex groups. These spaces create a judgment-free environment where participants can share their thoughts and experiences with others who may face similar pressures or challenges. Same-sex groups are especially valuable for initiating conversations on topics such as masculinity, emotional expression, and gender roles. However, it's equally important to eventually transition to mixed-gender groups. Mixed-gender spaces provide an opportunity for men to hear and understand the perspectives of women and others, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of how patriarchal norms impact everyone, not just men. These discussions can uncover shared societal pressures while also exploring how issues like caste, class, and sexuality affect people differently.

Choosing the right group composition is critical to a programme's success. Same-sex groups allow men and boys to explore sensitive topics related to masculinity and gendered experiences openly, without fear of ridicule as peer relationships and approval is an important factor, especially when working with men on attitude change. These groups help participants dive deeper into their own challenges and assumptions. Mixed-gender groups, on the other hand, help foster empathy and mutual understanding between genders. They provide a space for diverse perspectives, promoting respect for

different viewpoints and encouraging more inclusive attitudes and behaviours. Programmes can begin with same-sex groups to build comfort and trust, and then gradually introduce mixed-gender sessions for collaborative learning and shared understanding.

This two-step approach, starting in same-sex groups and moving into mixed-gender discussions, ensures that men have the time and space to process their thoughts before engaging in broader conversations. It helps build mutual respect and encourages collaboration in addressing harmful norms, ultimately leading to more equitable and empathetic relationships.



Tips for Facilitators on Handling Disagreements

Participants are likely to have strong views about the issues raised and some group members may even disagree with the main messages. It is important for the facilitators to welcome this disagreement as an opportunity to discuss the issues further and to help people better understand their own and each other's points of view. There may, however, be some members of the group whose views make the problems worse. A common example is blaming the victims of violence. A group member might say, "If a woman gets raped, it is because she asked for it. The man who raped her is not to blame." This point of view is very harmful because it blames the victim of violence and excuses the perpetrator of violence from any responsibility. This point of view helps to create the conditions that allow violence against women to continue.

Everyone has a right to their opinion, but they do not have the right to oppress others with the views that they express. It is essential for the group facilitator to challenge harmful points of view. This can be difficult but it is vital in helping group members to work towards positive change. The following process is one suggestion for dealing with such a situation – this is an example of dealing with a group member who blames the victim of rape for being raped:

Step 1. Ask for clarification

"I appreciate your sharing your opinion with us. Can you tell us why you feel that way?"

Step 2: Seek a different point of view

"Thank you. So at least one person feels that way, but others do not. What do the rest of you think? Who here has a different opinion?"

Step 3: If another point of view is not offered, provide one

"I know that a lot of people completely disagree with that statement. Most men and women I know feel that the only person to blame for a rape is the rapist. Every individual has the responsibility to respect another person's right to say 'no.'"

Step 4. Offer facts that support a different point of view

"The facts are clear. The law states that every individual has a right to say 'no' to sexual activity. Regardless of what a woman wears or does, she has a right not to be raped. The rapist is the only person to be blamed."

It is important to remember that changing deeply held views is difficult. Even after the group facilitator has used these four steps, it is unlikely that the group member will openly change his or her opinion. However, by challenging the statement, the group facilitator has provided another point of view that the group member will more likely think about and, probably, adopt later.³¹

31 Tumursukh, U., Chanthavysouk, K., Uysingco, P., Hernandez, L., Hasyim, N., Muttaqin, F., Trang, Q. T. T., Sananikone, S., Nakagawa, K., Greig, A., & Pawar, A. (2013). Regional curriculum on transforming masculinities towards gender justice. Regional Learning Community for East and Southeast Asia.

CHECKLIST FOR SAFE SPACES

- ◆ confidentiality and respect: set ground rules for confidentiality and mutual respect.
- ◆ trained facilitators: use facilitators skilled in handling sensitive topics with empathy and tact.
- ◆ inclusive language: choose language that is inclusive and supportive, avoiding terms that might reinforce stereotypes.
- ◆ safety signals and check-ins: use signals or periodic check-ins to gauge participant comfort.
- ◆ space setup: arrange the physical environment (e.g., circle seating, soft lighting, disability accessibility like wheelchair friendly infrastructure/sign language interpreter, etc.) to promote a welcoming and informal atmosphere.
- ◆ opening and closing rituals: begin and end sessions with consistent rituals to create a sense of continuity and security.
- ◆ making the space feel informal and welcoming: small choices matter, for example sitting together on a mat on the floor rather than at desks, sharing tea or a snack, beginning with a light game or a song, and removing hierarchies of seating so there is no 'head' of the room. Where possible, meet in a place the group already feels at ease in, such as a familiar courtyard, club, field or shaded spot, rather than a formal office or classroom, and let participants choose where and how they sit.
- ◆ prompts that open space for vulnerability: gentle, concrete questions invite men to share without feeling exposed, for example 'When was the last time you cried, and what was it about?', 'Who is the one person you can be completely yourself with?', 'What is something you were told a 'real man' should never do?', or 'When did you last feel afraid, and who did you tell?' Facilitators answering honestly first often makes it easier for participants to follow.

5. Use an experiential, discussion-based and reflective approach

The approach to engaging men in gender equity programmes must be experiential, discussion-based, and reflective so it empowers men to take ownership of their actions and contribute positively and with accountability towards reducing gender-based discrimination and promoting equality. By creating

a non-judgmental environment that encourages open dialogue, the programme will allow men to explore their beliefs and experiences in a way that feels constructive and supportive. This approach not only respects their perspectives but also fosters accountability and agency, motivating them to embrace changes in attitudes and behaviours. Through interactive activities, relatable local examples, and collaboration with trusted community stakeholders, the programme should build trust, relevance, and buy-in, ultimately promoting sustainable and meaningful progress toward gender equality.

Balance Individual vs. Group Activities for Solution Creation

How to: Use a mix of individual and interactive group activities to encourage both personal reflection and collective solution-building. When working with men and boys, the group format has been found to be most effective as discussing the issues with fellow male peers, makes it easier for the participants to be open about new ideas and helps in feeling safe that others are also taking this journey together with them. Incorporating fictionalized case studies from local contexts and drawing on culturally relevant stories and examples for this purpose, would be most helpful from the lens of both - reflection and also contextualization.



Example:

- Stories told by community elders/community specific folk tales can be used and adapted into fictional scenarios, to provide relatable, culturally grounded examples that help participants discuss local issues and collectively brainstorm on arriving at solutions. However, it's important to ensure that these stories are inclusive and do not reinforce stereotypes related to gender, disability, caste, or any particular community. Using such stories through an intersectional lens and not just a gender-sensitive one. This will help participants see how multiple identities and experiences shape people's lives.
- Identify common community challenges and invite men to collaborate on solutions. This also helps to build and solidify trust with them.

Emphasize Co-Creation and Respectful Engagement

How to: To encourage co-creation, it's important to involve men in conversations by listening to their thoughts and ideas. When men feel heard and valued, they are more likely to engage and contribute meaningfully to discussions. Instead of focusing on what they may be doing wrong, the discussions should be framed in a positive and constructive way, highlighting how they can play an important role in creating change. Care must be taken to avoid placing blame, as this can make participants defensive or resistant. Instead, focus on mutual understanding and collaboration, showing respect for their experiences and perspectives. This approach helps men feel like partners in the process of change rather than being criticized, making them more open to challenging harmful norms and contributing to solutions.

Example: Start sessions by affirming that the programme values men's perspectives and is committed to collaborative change, creating a respectful environment for open dialogue.

Use Real-Life Examples for Problem Solving

How to: When leading discussions, it's important to focus on finding practical solutions that participants can relate to and act on. Instead of leaving decisions entirely up to them without direction or making them feel like they're being told what to think, guide the conversation using clear and logical reasoning. This way, participants feel supported in exploring new ideas without feeling pressured or judged. At the end of the session, it's helpful to wrap up by suggesting specific, actionable steps that participants can take in their daily lives. These steps should be based on real examples or situations from their own community, so they feel relevant and achievable. This approach ensures that participants leave with a clear understanding of what they can do next and feel motivated to apply what they've learned.

Example: In discussions on gender roles, real-life examples of men in the community who have successfully adopted equitable practices may be shared as motivation, if available. If not available, stories of celebrities/local heroes may be used instead.

Address Pressures Shaping Men's Behaviours While Encouraging Responsibility

How to: Balance addressing societal pressures on men with promoting personal responsibility. This dual approach helps men recognize their agency to contribute to gender equality, despite societal constraints. Encouraging shared responsibility across genders can foster healthier relationships, reduce violence, and dismantle stereotypes that restrict. This approach helps create a society where men, women and gender diverse people can escape the constraints of traditional gender roles, promoting equity and inclusion in all aspects of life.³²

Example: Facilitate group conversations that acknowledge that there are external societal expectations that influence men's behaviours, such as being primary providers or adhering to traditional masculine norms. By addressing these pressures, the programme can foster empathy and understanding, while also empowering men to take ownership of their actions and make intentional, positive choices, promoting gender equity as a shared community goal.

32 Esplen, E. (2006). Engaging Men in Gender Equality: Positive Strategies and Approaches – Overview and Annotated Bibliography. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Prepared for Irish Aid.

Experiential and Personal Reflections

How to: Personal reflection activities can be powerful tools to begin conversations on sensitive topics such as stress, emotions, and gender roles. When participants are invited to connect issues to their own lived experiences, it helps move discussions from abstract ideas to genuine understanding. Reflections can be done individually, in small groups, or as simple “homework” to spark dialogue at home. Such exercises show that reflection is not only about awareness but about transformation and help participants connect emotionally, question social conditioning, and begin to practice equality in everyday life. However, care must be taken to avoid asking deeply personal or potentially triggering questions. The goal is to open up reflection, not to push participants into sharing painful memories or trauma that facilitators may not be equipped to handle.



Testing Insight: Regarding personal reflections

Example 1: During the toolkit testing, initial conversations about men’s stress and mental health were met with silence and denial. To gently open this topic, participants were asked to reflect on and share about “the last time they cried and why”. This simple question created an unexpected emotional breakthrough. Participants spoke about failing exams, losing crops to climate disasters, falling ill, breaking up with a romantic partner, being hit by parents, suffering a bone fracture after an accident, or feeling helpless during domestic violence at home. The room shifted from denial to recognition that everyone had felt pain and everyone had cried. Many young men said it was the first time anyone had ever asked them such a question, and they felt relieved and seen.

Example 2: Another powerful exercise involved asking participants: “What is your mother’s favorite food?” Not a single participant could answer. Many admitted they had never thought about it, since their mothers usually cooked what their fathers or sons liked. Without prompting, several participants later went home and asked their mothers this question. They shared that it led to heartfelt family conversations, in some families, the fathers also joined in. The activity revealed how small moments of reflection can uncover deeply ingrained gender norms and inspire empathy and care within families.

Gentle and Informal Dialogue Space to Foster Openness

How to: Maintain a casual, non-judgmental tone (for example, conversations over tea), to make discussions feel approachable and relaxed.

Example: The YP Foundations Mardon Waali Baat programme found that beginning sessions with “Chai pe Charcha” (informal conversations over tea), aided participants to open up gradually, reducing defensiveness and encouraging honest sharing. Practitioners can employ this learning by setting up an informal chat hour integrated into the programmatic intervention.

Testing Insight: Facilitation and Dialogue related

Village Champion training reinforced that effective programme design must prioritise facilitation skills over technical expertise. VCs came from diverse educational, caste, and economic backgrounds and often held the same gender norms the programme sought to challenge.

Training therefore emphasised role plays, mock village meetings, film-based discussions, and guided reflection. VCs openly expressed beliefs such as fearing that educating girls leads to loss of control or prioritising boys’ earning over schooling. Rather than correcting these views, facilitators encouraged reflection on consequences, contradictions, and lived outcomes. This approach supported deeper engagement and reduced defensiveness.

6. Focus on developing practical skills for gender-equitable behaviours

Skill building is a foundational element in engaging men and boys toward healthier behaviours and more equitable practices. Programmes should focus on developing practical and actionable skills in communication, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, empathy, and, importantly, gender-equitable skills. For example, men may be taught household skills, enabling them to actively support women in their households. It is equally important to build and practice negotiation skills, especially for pushing gender-equitable practices within families, peer groups, and communities. Learning how to navigate resistance, initiate sensitive conversations, and advocate for fairness helps men become active agents of change in everyday spaces.

Another key area is helping men understand how to challenge and question harmful behaviours among their peers without alienating them - how to push back without losing

connection. This balance is vital to sustaining influence within social circles while modeling positive change else the fear of losing peers or losing respect by their peers deters them from speaking up for gender equality. Hence, focusing solely on changing attitudes, without building these practical skills, will fall short in achieving the intended impact.

For communities with limited employment opportunities, employability skill building also becomes especially important as it benefits them in accessing employment opportunities too, making it an important intersectional and non-extractive practice. In such cases, it may be useful to identify/map potential partners who can support employability training and, where possible, facilitate placements, while also allocating dedicated resources to enable these efforts. Addressing skill gaps provides participants with pathways to employment and also offers constructive alternatives to harmful behaviours, like substance abuse and violence. Skill development creates a sense of purpose, trust, and community, which are essential for long-term engagement. Moreover, providing men and boys with

opportunities to learn and practice new skills on positive coping will aid to build resilience and enable them to act as positive role models within their communities.³³

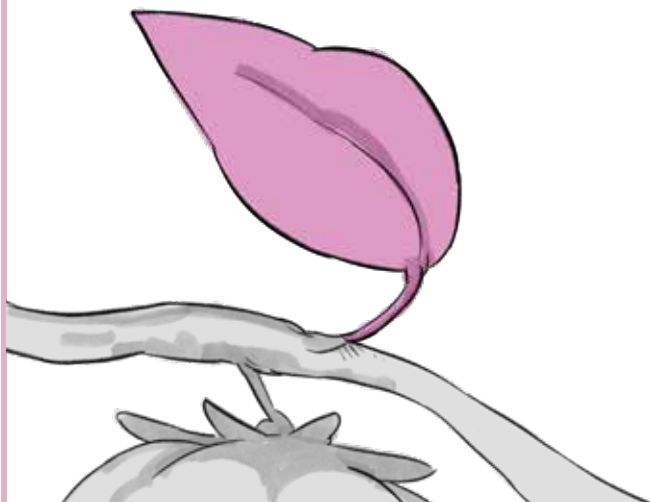
7. Develop partnerships and collaborations with key stakeholders

Engage Healthcare Providers, Educators, and Community Leaders

How to: Work together with local healthcare providers, teachers, and community leaders to make the programme more effective. These people are trusted in the community and can help spread your message to more people. Their involvement also makes the programme feel more credible and reliable.

Example: Teachers can include discussions about gender equality in their lessons, and healthcare workers can talk about these ideas during health check-ups or community health events. This way, the programme's messages reach people in their everyday lives, not just during formal sessions. It also helps reinforce the importance of gender equity in a way that feels natural and relatable to the community.

33 Promundo, United Nations Population Fund, & MenEngage Alliance. (2010). Engaging men and boys in gender equality and health: A global toolkit for action. United Nations Population Fund.



Foster Partnerships with Civil Society and Government Agencies

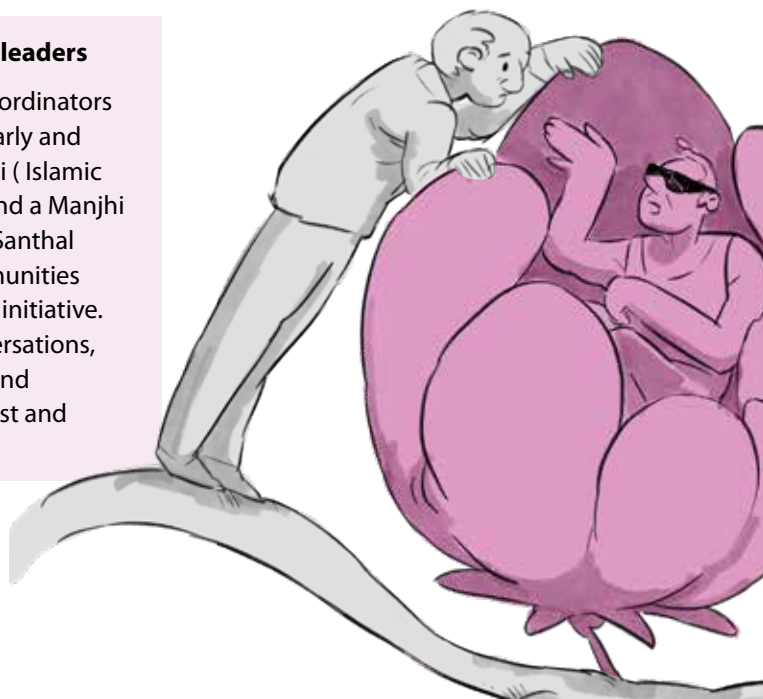
How to: Build partnerships with civil society organizations and government agencies to ensure programmes create lasting change. This approach recognizes that men and boys are not only members of communities but also play significant roles in civil society and as state duty bearers. By training male government representatives and civil society actors in gender-transformative approaches, we can address their personal behaviours while also influencing broader systems. This dual impact fosters individual growth and supports long-term systemic change by embedding gender equity principles into policies, institutions, and community practices. Partnering with women's rights organizations and ministries, such as Education, ensures accountability to feminist values while embedding gender discussions in schools.

How to: Engage influential religious and cultural leaders who can advocate for gender equity within the community. Religious leaders can promote family health and respect-based discussions, framing gender equity as beneficial for community strength and well-being. Their voices carry authority and can help challenge harmful norms while lending credibility and acceptance to the programme. While such engagement can build powerful alliances, it can also be a double-edged sword, especially on topics like contraception, abortion, or LGBTQIA+ rights, where some leaders may openly disagree with a rights-based approach.

Collaborate with Religious and Cultural Leaders

Testing Insight: Engaging with Religious leaders

In the toolkit testing pilot, where Village Coordinators worked on reducing school dropouts and early and forced marriages - religious leaders, a Maulvi (Islamic religious scholar or teacher) in one village and a Manjhi Haram (traditional village head among the Santhal community one of the largest Adivasi communities in India). in another, actively supported the initiative. They even participated in community conversations, emphasizing the importance of education and collective well-being, helping build local trust and acceptance for the programme.



Leverage International Organizations for Support

How to: Collaborate with international and UN agencies to strengthen both the technical and financial foundation of your programme. Such partnerships can provide access to global best practices, training materials, and evidence-based tools that help improve programme design and implementation. International organizations can also offer capacity-building opportunities for staff and partners, connect you to regional networks, and help document and amplify successful local models for wider impact. These partnerships not only enhance credibility but also ensure long-term sustainability through shared learning and visibility.

Example: ICRW's ongoing partnership with UNESCO under the *Transforming Mentalities* initiative has helped bring global attention to the issue of engaging men and boys for gender equality. The collaboration has strengthened the existing evidence base through a flagship research study. UNESCO's convening power has also helped amplify learning from country-level work and enhancing visibility and credibility at a global level. As a result, wider attention is being drawn to the issue, practical resources are being created for organizations to use, and interest among larger institutions is being generated.

Establish Formal Partnerships through Agreements and Regular Collaboration

How to: Create clear and formal agreements with partners that explain everyone's roles, responsibilities, and what is expected from them. This helps avoid confusion and ensures everyone knows what they need to do. Staying in regular contact with partners, organizing training sessions together, and evaluating progress as a team is suggested as it helps build trust, strengthen teamwork, and make sure everyone stays focused on achieving shared goals.

Example: Formal agreements with regional bodies and joint training sessions keep stakeholders aligned and committed, enhancing the programme's cohesion and effectiveness.



Challenges³⁴

- ◆ A significant challenge in work with men and boys for gender equality has been the strong focus on individual behaviour change rather than broader social change. The dominant approach has emphasized changing personal behaviours and “social norms,” which has limited the field’s ability to examine and address larger systemic issues and power dynamics. While there is recognition on paper of the need for social action - such as building coalitions, advocating for policy change, community mobilization, and holding leaders accountable - many interventions still centre on small-scale education and awareness-raising. Larger-scale social actions often go undocumented or fall outside formal evaluations, as they don’t fit into the “project-based” model that donors typically expect, which favours short-term, measurable outcomes. This approach has restricted the field’s capacity to drive lasting, systemic change.
- ◆ Gender norm transformation is a long-term process, making it difficult to convince stakeholders to invest in this work given the lack of immediate visible impact. This work can often appear to be abstract and intensive, leading to reluctance from government and civil society organizations due to fears of backlash and existing biases. Additionally, men’s daily realities, including economic pressures and societal expectations, often lead to disengagement from programmes when immediate benefits are not evident.

- ◆ Men’s involvement in gender equality efforts, particularly in the care economy, has often been limited to individual behaviour changes, such as improving parenting skills or taking parental leave, typically framed within fatherhood programming. This narrow focus on personal behaviour within the context of the heterosexual nuclear family has overlooked broader structural factors, such as men’s varied positions within systems of social reproduction. As a result, work with men on issues of gender, power, and social responsibility has become domesticated and depoliticized.
- ◆ This same individualizing tendency extends well beyond the household. Performing dominant masculinities ‘well’ carries real-world rewards, status, recognition, advancement, and those rewards are actively produced and celebrated by competition - and individual-valour-based narratives that run through education, business and other social institutions, as well as through public and cultural life (the self-made achiever, the fearless leader, the lone winner). When men’s conduct is treated purely as a matter of personal choice while these reward structures and narratives go unexamined, the systemic drivers of inequality are left intact. Addressing gender justice therefore means engaging men beyond the individual level: not only supporting equitable behaviour at home, but also questioning the institutional and cultural narratives that keep rewarding dominance, competition and individual valour.



34 UN Women. (2021). Working with men and boys for gender equality: State of play and future directions [Policy brief]. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Policy-brief-Working-with-men-and-boys-for-gender-equality-en.pdf>

Highlighted Case Study/Good Practice

AWARE: With fathers and family members, there was a generational gap of 20 years, so AWARE identified younger role models. When the age gap was bridged, AWARE was able to create enough role models, and called this the big brother 'Anna Concept'. Young boys were able to reciprocate with the young male role models as these college students held candid discussions about how they have been harmed by patriarchy, their struggles with it, and ways they have navigated it in a healthy and dignified manner. With these conversations AWARE also curates books, movies, and 10-day camps where the college students create experiential learning programmes with sessions, modules, games and videos. In this way they can look up to 'Annas' and reach out to them for their future problems.

What drove the results and the principles behind them: AWARE began from a clear reading of its context (*know your population*), recognising that the 20-year gap left fathers and elders unable to serve as relatable role models. Its entry point was therefore *near-peer* 'Annas', close enough in age to be credible (*identify the right entry points*). By having Annas speak openly about their own experience of patriarchy, the programme built safe spaces for vulnerability and addressed *gender, power and masculinities* directly rather than abstractly. The books, films and camps reflect an experiential, participatory approach, and the continuing 'big brother' relationship boys returning to their Annas over time created the *sustained mentorship* that carried change beyond any single session.

Hope to Achieve

- ◆ Programmes are designed with a clear understanding of the men and boys being engaged: their everyday pressures, aspirations, relationships, influences, vulnerabilities, and positions of power within families, peer groups, institutions, and communities.
- ◆ Engagement with men and boys moves beyond awareness-building to sustained reflection on gender, power, masculinities, violence, care, sexuality, mental health, and equality, using entry points that feel relevant to participants' real lives.
- ◆ These strategies ensure that programmes adopt community-specific theories of change and responsive MEL processes to ensure that solutions are not imposed but organically developed in collaboration with participants.
- ◆ Skill-building in communication, emotional management, and household responsibilities equips men and boys to support gender equity practically and professionally. The hope is for these skills to encourage healthier personal relationships and also open pathways for sustainable livelihoods, particularly in rural areas with fewer job opportunities.

Things to Keep in Mind



With boys, initial examples shouldn't be the ones in which women are at forefront, instead focus on impacts of gender inequality on men to connect with them.

A stronger and clearer focus on how power and injustice operate through gender is essential, particularly on how masculinities are used to uphold social hierarchies, so the programme addresses long-term structural change, in addition to working on men's attitude and behaviour change.

Introducing sports/games among young boys, like cricket clubs, to have discussions post-match with peer mentors. This addresses the challenge of 'time' among communities by building engagement into activities the group already values and enjoys, rather than asking for time over and above their daily lives. Play itself can also be used to challenge gender: organising mixed-gender games where possible and reflecting afterwards on who was 'allowed' to play, who took the lead, and how it felt, can cultivate empathy and gently bridge gendered divides between children who are usually kept apart.

Designing and employing interactive sessions that encourage open discussions on sensitive topics like sex, sexuality, and gender identities works well with younger boys. Young people are eager to engage in these conversations, and creating spaces that foster dialogue will help them explore these topics meaningfully.

Digital access is growing, but programme materials often feel less engaging than the content people already consume online. Activities should therefore include more creative digital tools and resources.

Gender attitudes are easier to shape with young boys and men. With older men, however, it may motivate them if we communicate that these changes will help them gain respect among their peers, young people and women.

Engaging men as agents of change for 'women's empowerment' is not advised. Instead adopt the approach of questioning patriarchal gender norms through the lens of gender equality and/human rights. Interventions that focus on questioning the pressures of patriarchy on masculinity are key to unlocking men and boy's mind on deconstructing gender.

Do not perpetuate the idea of any one kind of masculinity/manhood. Emphasize that masculinity is diverse and it is what the person chooses to be and perform, and that such expression is separate from their gender identity of a 'man' and it keeps changing and evolving.

As far as possible, avoid essentialising behaviours or qualities as belonging to a particular gender. In practice, this means being careful with language: rather than sorting masculinities into 'healthy and unhealthy' or 'positive and toxic', it is more useful to talk about individual traits, behaviours and qualities, any of which may be positive or negative in their effect and to convey that people, including men, can choose to cultivate positive qualities regardless of whether those qualities are conventionally seen as 'masculine'. The underlying message is that no quality is inherently masculine or feminine; what matters is the choice to practise qualities that are respectful, caring and equitable.

Avoid use of language that leaves men feeling blamed for things they have not done or for things they were taught to do or feeling guilty for the violence of other men to prevent them from feeling alienated. Engage men with positive messages and coping strategies, instead.

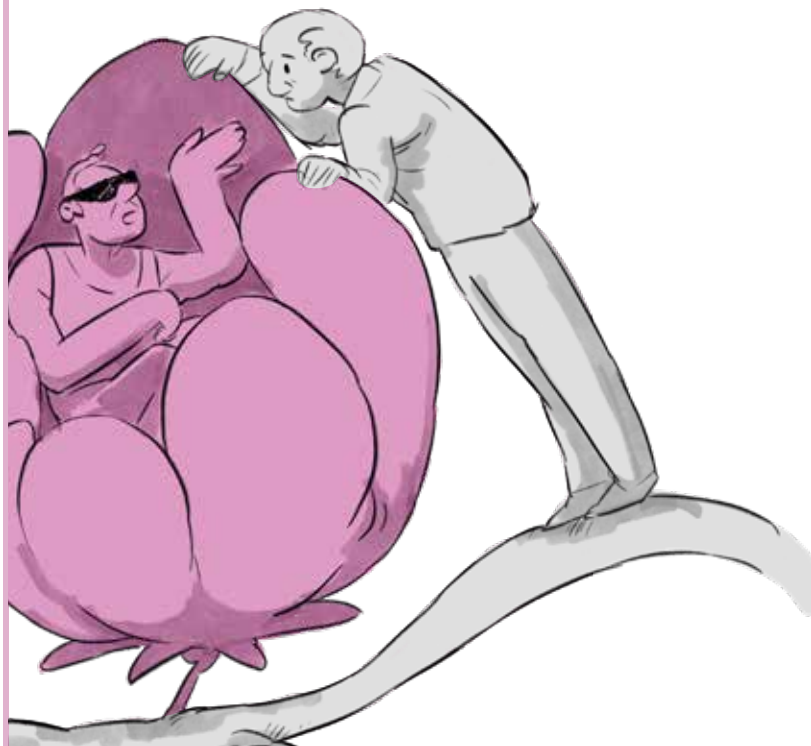
While engaging men and boys is essential, focusing on young boys is particularly impactful, as attitudes, values, and behaviours are largely shaped during childhood. Evidence-based approaches, such as after-school programmes and sports clubs, are effective platforms for reinforcing these values.



Resources

- ◆ **E-course on Power, Patriarchy and Feminism (MenEngage Alliance)** Available at: <https://menengage.org/resources/power-patriarchy-and-feminism-online-course/>
- ◆ **Regional Curriculum on Transforming Masculinities Towards Gender Justice (East and South-East Asia)** — Activity resources on gender and sexuality, patriarchy and power systems, human-rights and social-justice frameworks, hegemonic masculinity, masculinities and violence, and organizational and social transformation. Available at: <https://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Regional-curriculum-on-transforming-masculinities-towards-gender-justice-2013-eng.pdf>
- ◆ **IMAGINE Toolkit (MenEngage Alliance)** Available at: <https://menengage.org/resources/imagine-toolkit/>
- ◆ **Handbook on Strategic Approaches to Engage Men and Boys (MenEngage Alliance)** — Sets out the core values and principles that should underlie this work. Available at: <https://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MenEngage-Handbook-of-what-we-see-what-we-believe-and-our-strategic-approaches.pdf>
- ◆ **Working with Men and Boys (Sonke Gender Justice)** — Detailed activities and facilitator notes on knowing yourself, healthy relationships, “under the influence” (alcohol and contributing factors to poor health), gender, power and health, taking action towards change, and practical education on women’s reproductive health. Available at: <https://genderjustice.org.za/publication/working-with-men-and-boys-2/>
- ◆ **Addressing Men’s Violence (Zero Tolerance)** — On how to strategically communicate with men, particularly those who hold a ‘conflicted’ mindset — broadly supportive of equality but not actively engaged in thinking about, discussing or acting on women’s equality issues. Available at: <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Addressing-Mens-Violence-Report.pdf>
- ◆ **Masculine Norms and Violence: Making the Connection (Equimundo)** — A deep dive into masculinity and how it relates to violence. Available at: <https://www.equimundo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Masculine-Norms-and-Violence-Making-the-Connection-20180424.pdf>
- ◆ **Prevention Collaborative Knowledge Hub** — A range of resources for those working to end gender-based violence, including a practical toolkit to support practitioners in preventing violence against women and children. Available at: <https://prevention-collaborative.org/>
- ◆ India-based organizations offering valuable support on mental-health capacity building, resources and online support include Sangath, Babu Trust for Research on Mind & Discourse, the TISS iCALL helpline, The Banyan and Jan Sahas, among others.

- ◆ In India, several helplines offer accessible and confidential mental-health support. For direct counselling and emotional assistance, contact iCALL at 022-25521111 (Tata Institute of Social Sciences), the Vandrevalla Foundation Helpline at +91-99996 66555, and Snehi at +91-95822 08181. For suicide-specific support and crisis intervention, AASRA at +91-22-27546669 and the 1Life Suicide Prevention Helpline at +91-78930 78930 provide round-the-clock assistance. iCALL has also developed a collated national and state-wise directory of mental-health and suicide-prevention helplines that serves as a comprehensive resource for individuals and practitioners.
- ◆ **TARSHI – Publications on Sexuality Education** — Accessible guides for different age groups and audiences: Available at: <https://www.tarshi.net/>
- ◆ **The Red Book (TARSHI, ages 10–14)** Available at: <https://www.tarshi.net/site/product/the-red-book-2015/>
- ◆ **The Blue Book (TARSHI, ages 15 and above)** Available at: <https://www.tarshi.net/site/product/the-blue-book-2013/>
- ◆ **The Yellow Book: A Parent's Guide to Sexuality Education (TARSHI)** Available at: <https://www.tarshi.net/>
- ◆ **The Orange Book: A Teachers' Workbook on Sexuality (TARSHI)** Available at: <https://www.tarshi.net/>



Self-check for Module 1

Use these as a quick go-to list to review your programme. If you cannot answer 'yes' or 'we have a plan for this' to a question, it is worth revisiting that part of your design.

- ◆ Have we understood the local context – community structures, power dynamics, key influencers, and who holds power over whom?
- ◆ Do we know what the men and boys here care about, and have we identified realistic entry points?
- ◆ Have we chosen diverse facilitators and planned for their capacity-building?
- ◆ Is the intervention designed to be age-appropriate for the specific group (younger boys, older adolescents, or adult men)?
- ◆ Do we have a clear, simple Theory of Change, with our assumptions and risks written down?
- ◆ Does the design address power, privilege and accountability and not only attitudes?
- ◆ Have we planned safe, welcoming spaces and an experiential, reflective approach rather than a lecture-based one?
- ◆ Are we building practical skills (care work, emotional expression, bystander action), not only awareness?
- ◆ Have we identified allies and partners (women's groups, local leaders, services) and how we will work with them?
- ◆ Have we anticipated likely challenges, resistance, and our own positionality before entering the field?



Module

2

EFFECTIVE CONTEXTUALIZATION/ LOCALIZATION

At a glance: Module 2 helps you adapt content, language, examples and methods to a specific place and people, so the work feels rooted rather than imported. Use it alongside Module 1 whenever you move into a new context, dialect or community, and treat its examples as prompts to find the local equivalent.



Contextualization and localization are essential strategies in community-based programmes, particularly when addressing sensitive topics like gender and masculinities. Contextualization involves tailoring programme content to align with the specific cultural, social, and linguistic nuances of a community, while localization ensures that the language, examples, and approaches used resonate with the local population's everyday realities. Together, these practices make programmes more relevant, relatable, and effective.

In diverse communities, understanding and adapting to local contexts builds trust, encourages openness, and fosters genuine engagement. By focusing on local dialects, culturally sensitive language, and role models, programmes can ensure inclusivity and avoid reinforcing stereotypes. Moreover, when programmes include peer mentors, community discussions, and partnerships with local educators, they not only meet participants' needs more closely but also strengthen community involvement and support for the programme's goals.

The following essential concepts, guiding principles and examples provide a roadmap for meaningful and effective contextualization and localization at different stages of programme design and implementation, ensuring that initiatives are

impactful and respectful of the communities they aim to serve.

A note on the examples that follow: Many are drawn from North Indian contexts (for instance, the use of terms like 'mardaangi' in Rajasthan and Bihar). These are illustrative, not universal. Languages, dialects, social structures and ideas of masculinity differ significantly across South India, the Northeast, and the wider South Asian region, and the equivalent words, role models and sensitivities will be different. Users are encouraged to treat each example as a prompt to ask, 'what is the version of this in our context?' rather than as a template to apply directly.

Notes: Remember to refer to the essential concepts in section 1 of the toolkit. While all are relevant for all modules, particularly useful for Module 2 are: masculinities, gender-based violence and gender as a cultural concept.



Guiding Principles

1.

Use Local Language and Dialects

How to: Start by researching the specific dialects spoken in the area of intervention. Engage with local community members to find out which words and ideas are familiar, and which are not. Ensure the facilitators undergo training on how to communicate these terms sensitively with the participants, ensuring that the programme remains inclusive and effective in engaging participants from diverse backgrounds and identities. Take feedback from participants to refine difficult words or concepts so everyone understands what is being talked about in the session.

Example: A practitioner shared that in their work in South Rajasthan, they worked in two districts, both of which had unique dialects. Words like “mardaangi” (masculinity) did not translate easily, so the words were then replaced with local alternatives. A list of terms was co-created with the participants with simple meanings and sentences to ensure everyone was on the same page and then used for programme delivery.

2.

Ensure Culturally Sensitive Language

How to: Avoid words that may have a negative or stereotypical meaning in the local culture. Instead of single words, use phrases that feel respectful and inclusive. Continuously check with community members to ensure translations are not alienating anyone.

Example: In Bihar, the term “mardaangi” was found to not be ideal, as it carried certain negative connotations. It was instead replaced with phrases like “purush jaisa vyavhaar” (behaving like a man), which conveyed a similar idea without making anyone uncomfortable. This approach allowed for communication without reinforcing stereotypes.



3.

Peer Mentor Model

How to: Group participants by age, and when possible, pair them with mentors who are close to their own age. Younger participants often feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics with peers. For this approach to work, it's essential that mentors stay involved over a long period; building trust takes time, and without it, boys may not open up or be honest. Mentors should also be approachable and supportive, helping participants feel safe. Regular check-ins with mentors are important to ensure they're guiding the boys positively and not, even unintentionally, reinforcing negative stereotypes. Sometimes, as programmes progress, space can be created for inter-generational spaces where older men hear what younger generations think and feel and vice versa.



Example: In the “Do Kadam Barabari Ki Ore” programme in Jharkhand, younger participants felt more comfortable discussing issues like sexuality with peer mentors closer to their age. This approach fostered openness and made the programme more effective. Whereas in ICRW’s ‘MANthan’ programme, inter-generational spaces have proven to be very effective in opening up conversations between generations, building rapport and creating avenues for discussions that are otherwise very difficult to have.

4.

Region-specific Issues to Build Programme Content

Identify the issues that matter most locally - economic stability, education, health. As noted in Module 1, these entry points link immediate community needs to broader gender-equality goals and create openings to embed equity into existing priorities.

Testing Insight on Identifying Local Stories

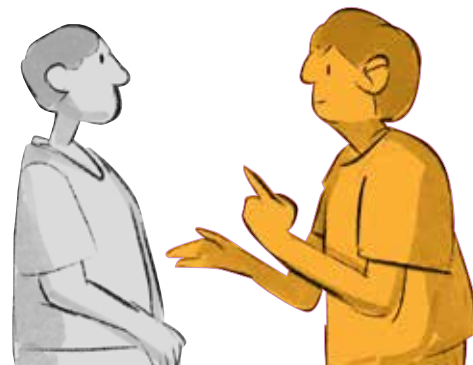
During the testing of this toolkit, the formative research mapped local and folk stories/songs to assess if any of them could be used in the programming to explain and deconstruct gender. However, the identified stories were discussed and found to be tricky in the way they could be interpreted, pertaining to different cultural connotations among the different groups in the area. The idea to use them as is, was thus discarded, and instead they were used as a reference to develop case studies/stories or contextual news stories were identified which resonated with the participants culturally but also had clear messaging for the activities concerned.

How to: Conduct initial research (this should be incorporated within the formative research in Module 1, for maximum effectiveness) to understand common challenges and cultural nuances of the community. This information should then be used to shape training materials and programme content that resonate with local needs as it will encourage participation and engagement.

5.

Map contextual safety and security threats and needs

How to: Before starting programme activities, assess the safety and security risks that exist in the community - both online (such as cyberbullying, data misuse, exposure to harmful content, or scams) and offline (like gender-based violence, community backlash, or political tensions). Use this information to design your programme in a way that minimizes harm, such as by setting up safe reporting mechanisms, ensuring confidentiality, and training facilitators on trauma-informed practices. Based on these insights, prepare a risk mitigation plan that outlines preventive actions, clear response protocols, and referral pathways for participants' safety. This proactive approach helps create a secure and trusting environment for all involved.



Testing Insight on Identifying Local Needs

During the toolkit testing, formative research explored the points mentioned above. Although initial insights were limited, the in-person training with Village Coordinators (VCs) revealed a significant gap and need for information on mental health. While mental health was originally only a minor component of the project, this finding led us to address it more deeply, integrating it into VC trainings, community discussions, and by sharing key mental health helpline resources.

Formative research during testing revealed that masculinity in the project villages was closely tied to earning, migration, debt, and the pressure to provide. Boys often dropped out of school early to engage in wage labour, while girls' education was constrained by domestic labour, distance to school, safety concerns, and expectations of early marriage. These realities shaped how gender norms were lived and experienced and therefore had to be analytically understood before programme content could be meaningfully designed.

6.

Tailor Interventions to Reflect Local Examples and Role/Aspirational Lived Reality(ies) Models

How to: Adapt toolkit examples to reflect the specific social realities of the region/community. 'Role models/Aspirational Lived Reality(ies) models' and scenarios familiar to the community can be used to make the content relatable and actionable. Traditional storytelling methods, which are often well-received in many communities, can make sensitive topics more relatable and engaging. Using familiar formats and examples ensures the programme resonates deeply with participants.



Example: A programme working with a community in Jharkhand observed that men often maintained control through behaviours such as drinking and aggression, and even though women had some mobility, they often felt afraid to step out of their homes. Using this insight, the programme developed an approach centred on relatable examples from the community itself. Instead of relying on abstract statements like “this is the right way,” the messaging was tailored to reflect real-life situations, making it more meaningful and impactful for participants.

7. Hold Discussions to Understand Local Perceptions of Masculinities

Programmes engaging men and boys must begin with a clear understanding of how masculinities and gender roles are defined and practiced within the community. This involves identifying societal pressures placed on men, such as being financial providers, displaying strength, or suppressing emotions, and exploring how these norms perpetuate inequality and harm everyone. Recognizing these dynamics allows programmes to address harmful practices while emphasizing healthier, more inclusive alternatives that benefit men, women, and the broader community.

How to: Begin by talking with community members to understand their views on masculinity and local practices. Please note that there may be different understandings, revealing there exists more than one kind of 'masculinity'. Use these insights to frame your programme in a way that resonates with participants' specific lived experiences.

8. Partner with Local Stakeholders to Make Programme Content Relevant

Partnerships with local influencers such as religious leaders, educators, and community elders can help establish credibility and foster trust. Women's groups, youth organizations, and other community stakeholders should also be engaged to ensure inclusivity and intersectionality. Co-creating solutions with the community enhances ownership and relevance, making interventions more impactful and sustainable.

Testing Insight: Creating Buy in with Elders and Local Influencers

Testing highlighted that local authority structures significantly shaped programme access and participation. Prior engagement with teachers, Panchayat members, health workers, and respected elders increased legitimacy and attendance, particularly among men. These experiences reinforced that localisation requires understanding who holds influence within the community, whose approval matters, and how messages travel through existing power structures. Discussions with elders and local influencers revealed that men were viewed in different ways within the community-sometimes as perpetrators and sometimes as potential agents of change. Recognising these differing perceptions early helped shape programme framing and entry points. Aligning initial conversations with community priorities and expectations helped build trust, while allowing space to gradually introduce discussions on gender norms and masculinities.



How to: Work with local organizations and educators who know the community well. These partners can help design programme materials that use familiar language and context. Such discussions can provide a good initial sense of the rituals, practices, and processes followed in the community.

9. Work with Community Groups Like SHGs to Understand Social Dynamics

How to: Use established community groups, like Self-Help Groups (SHGs), to gain insights into community beliefs and practices.

Example: A programme that engaged with SHGs, particularly involving the wives shared that it provided valuable insights into how local families operate which helped them design a well-contextualised programme.

10. Contextualize MEL processes

- ◆ Programmes should be designed with flexibility to adapt to community feedback and evolving realities. Regular assessment of what works and what doesn't, ensures that interventions remain relevant and effective. Participatory approaches allow for continuous learning and alignment with community needs, fostering a sense of shared ownership.

- ◆ Use culturally relevant tools that accurately capture changes in attitudes and behaviours. Both qualitative (e.g., interviews, focus groups, anecdotal evidence, stories of change, etc) and quantitative (e.g., surveys) methods can help measure impact while respecting local values.
- ◆ Develop indicators that align with the local context to track short-term and long-term impacts. These could include community-specific measures of behaviour change, such as changes in social interactions or acceptance of new norms.
- ◆ Consider sharing evaluation findings with the community and other stakeholders to foster a culture of openness. This practice strengthens relationships and ensures that the programme is accountable to those it serves.

Example: In the MANthan programme, Village Champions often developed and used their own informal documentation formats to record observations, conversations, and shifts they noticed during field implementation. These notes captured subtle but important nuances, such as moments of hesitation, emerging questions, or changes in how men spoke about gender and power, that would have been lost in rigid, standardised formats. The programme team later organised and synthesised these reflections to inform programme adaptations and learning, demonstrating how flexible, practitioner-led documentation can strengthen both implementation and MEL.

Challenges

1. Resistance to Changing Traditional Gender Norms

One of the most significant challenges is resistance from communities that view traditional gender roles as central to their cultural identity. Engaging men and boys often involves questioning deeply held beliefs about masculinity, which can be seen as threatening to established norms. This resistance may come from individuals, families, or influential community leaders, creating barriers to programme acceptance.

2. Limited Understanding of Local Masculinities

Programmes may struggle to fully grasp the nuanced ways masculinity is defined and practiced within a community. Overgeneralized or external definitions of masculinity can result in interventions that feel out of touch or irrelevant. Without deep formative research, programmes risk oversimplifying the local context, undermining their credibility and effectiveness.

3. Navigating Intersectional Realities

The intersection of gender with other identities, such as caste, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation, complicates programme design. For example, men from marginalized groups may experience additional layers of oppression, while simultaneously perpetuating gender-based

inequalities. Addressing these complexities without reinforcing stereotypes or hierarchies can be challenging.

4. Balancing Global Frameworks with Local Needs

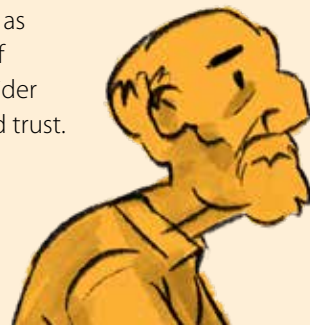
Global frameworks for gender equality may not always align with local priorities or values. For example, issues like LGBTQIA+ rights may be sensitive in communities where cultural or religious beliefs strongly oppose them. Striking a balance between advancing gender equality and respecting local contexts requires nuanced approaches that avoid alienating participants.

5. Language and Communication Barriers

Cultural and linguistic differences can hinder effective communication. Concepts like “gender equality” or “patriarchy” may not have direct translations or may carry different connotations in local languages. Miscommunication can lead to misunderstandings, reducing programme impact or causing unintended backlash.

6. Insufficient Community Buy-In

Without the support of key community stakeholders, such as religious leaders, elders, or local organizations, programmes may struggle to gain acceptance. These stakeholders often act as gatekeepers, and their lack of endorsement can prevent wider community participation and trust.



7. Resource Constraints

Grassroots organizations working in resource-limited settings may face challenges in adapting programmes due to lack of funding, training, or materials. Localization often requires time and investment, including formative research, translation of materials, and capacity-building for facilitators, which may not always be feasible.

8. Risk of Reinforcing Stereotypes

If not carefully contextualized, programmes may unintentionally reinforce harmful stereotypes. For example, framing discussions in ways that assume all men are oppressors or all women are victims can alienate participants and deepen divisions. Programmes need to ensure that their messaging is inclusive and avoids oversimplifying complex dynamics.

9. Redefining Leadership and Visibility in Male Engagement

Effective programming must also ensure critically examine the actual roles men occupy within these initiatives/programmes. Due to patriarchal privileges, men already command community respect and are expected to lead, which raises an important question about what feminist leadership actually looks like for men in this context. In this context, encourage men's feminist leadership by positioning it not as taking charge themselves, but as amplifying others' leadership, or facilitating peer-to-peer discussions among men (rather than with women) on gender inequity and violence prevention. Since public visibility is viewed as men's "natural" domain,

interventions must be designed to challenge this and work to make quieter, one-on-one engagements with peers equally appealing and valued - reframing them as "cool" and effective strategies for real change.

10. Addressing Backlash and Safety Concerns

Efforts to challenge gender norms can provoke backlash, particularly in communities with rigid patriarchal structures. Facilitators and participants may face criticism, stigma, or even threats for participating in such programmes. Ensuring the safety of all involved while continuing to challenge harmful norms is a critical yet difficult balance.

11. Sustaining Change Beyond the Programme

Localized programmes often face difficulties in maintaining momentum once initial funding or external support ends. Without integrating initiatives into local systems or building strong community ownership, the changes achieved may not be sustainable.

12. Measuring Contextualized Success

Standard metrics for evaluating gender equality programmes may not align with community-specific definitions of success. Developing context-sensitive indicators and measurement tools can be challenging, especially for organizations with limited monitoring and evaluation expertise.



Highlighted Case Study/Good Practice: Contextualization and Localization: MenCare in South Asia

The MenCare programme, a global initiative promoting fatherhood and equitable caregiving, was effectively contextualized in South Asia to address deeply rooted cultural and societal norms. Recognizing caregiving as traditionally seen as a woman's responsibility, the programme adapted its approach to align with local values and realities through extensive formative research and community consultations.

To resonate with regional contexts, the programme used religious framing, engaging imams³⁵ to link caregiving to spiritual fulfilment, and incorporated culturally familiar symbols in its materials. Workshops were designed to start with same-sex groups to create safe spaces for men to discuss masculinity and caregiving, gradually transitioning to mixed-gender groups to foster mutual understanding. Visual aids, storytelling, and community theatre ensured accessibility for low-literacy audiences.

Local indicators were used to measure success, such as increased time fathers spent with children and shifts in community attitudes toward caregiving. By contextualizing its approach, MenCare not only reduced stigma around men's caregiving roles but also strengthened familial relationships and built momentum for gender-equitable norms across communities. This example highlights how tailoring global frameworks to local cultural and social realities can make programmes engaging men and boys for gender equality more impactful and sustainable.

³⁵ An imam is a Muslim religious leader who leads prayers in a mosque and often serves as a community and spiritual guide, offering religious instruction and counsel on personal and social matters.

Hope to Achieve

- ◆ Tailoring programme messages to reflect the community's unique social dynamics makes the programme more relevant and applicable to participants' lives, increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes.
- ◆ Aligning programme content with local culture, language, and values, contextualization helps to achieve deeper and meaningful engagement and encourages active participation.
- ◆ Local ideas of masculinity, honour, safety, aspiration, family responsibility, sexuality, violence, and community respect are understood before programme content is introduced or adapted.
- ◆ Local stakeholders, including peer mentors, community groups, educators, parents, and other trusted actors, are engaged in ways that build relevance, trust, and community ownership of the programme.
- ◆ When programmes are culturally and contextually relevant, participants are more likely to internalize and apply the concepts, leading to lasting behavioural changes within the community.

Things to Keep in Mind

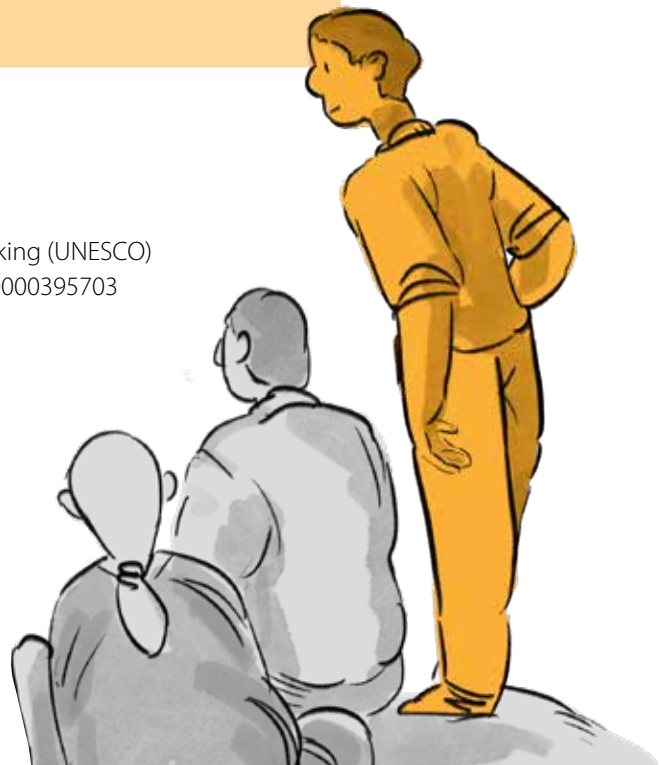
Engage with community members early on to understand cultural nuances, local beliefs, and preferred ways of communication. This initial input is vital to designing content that resonates and anticipating and avoiding any risks or backlash.

Ensure that tools, examples, and materials are adapted based on participant feedback. If certain content is not well-received, adjust it in real time to improve effectiveness.

Communities are not homogeneous; different groups may have varying beliefs and practices. Ensure that the programme acknowledges this diversity and adapts to it wherever possible (for more details refer to Module 3).

Resources

Culture for All: A Toolkit for Gender Equality in Policymaking (UNESCO)
Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000395703>





Self-check for Module 2

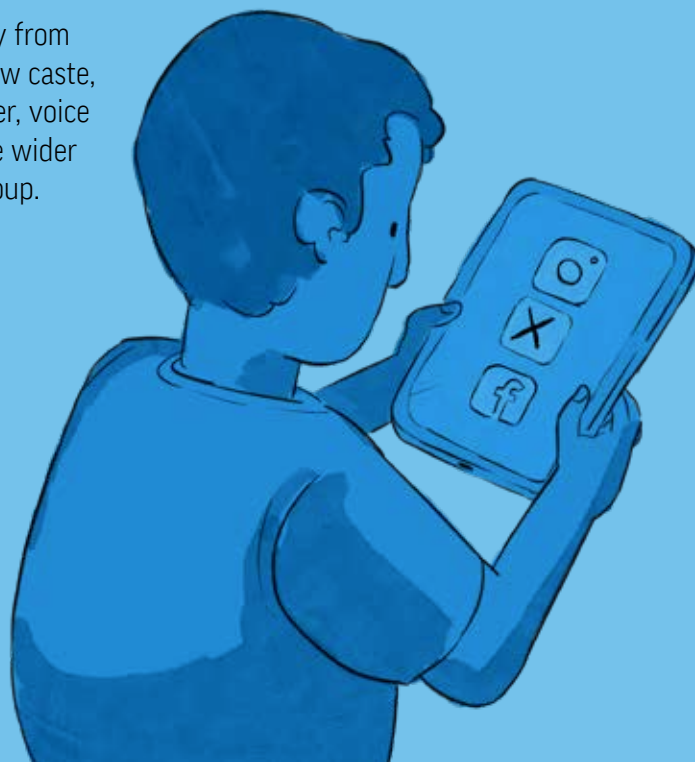
- ◆ Use these as a quick go-to list to review your programme. If you cannot answer 'yes' or 'we have a plan for this' to a question, it is worth revisiting that part of your design.
- ◆ Have we identified the local languages and dialects, and tested whether key terms (e.g. gender, masculinity) translate meaningfully?
- ◆ Have we co-created or checked sensitive terms with community members?
- ◆ Are our examples, stories and role models drawn from this community's lived reality, and not just from dominant narratives?
- ◆ Have we mapped region-specific issues and the safety and security threats relevant to this context?
- ◆ Have we engaged local stakeholders and gatekeepers early, and understood their concerns?
- ◆ Are we using validated tools and community values as entry points, rather than external frameworks alone?
- ◆ Have we struck a considered balance between global gender-equality goals and local sensitivities, without falling into silence on hard issues?
- ◆ Have we accounted for under-acknowledged diversity, such as sexual orientation and gender diversity in rural and tribal contexts?
- ◆ Have we contextualised our MEL, so that indicators are meaningful in this setting?
- ◆ Do we have a feedback loop to keep refining language and content as we learn?

Module _____

3

ADDRESSING AND ACTIONING INTERSECTIONALITY

At a glance: Module 3 helps you move intersectionality from intention to practice: recognising and working with how caste, class, religion, disability, sexuality and age shape power, voice and risk, both within your participant group and in the wider community, rather than simply gathering a diverse group.



The term *intersectionality*, introduced by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989³⁶, explains how different forms of oppression, like gender, class, caste, and race, overlap and influence each other. This concept helps us see how people's unique identities shape their experiences and interactions with power and privilege.

Crenshaw's work highlighted how mainstream movements often overlooked marginalized groups, such as working-class women or women from historically marginalized caste communities in India. By acknowledging these intersecting experiences, intersectionality ensures that activism and programmes are more inclusive and effective. It also encourages constant reflection on how our privileges and vulnerabilities interact.

Today, intersectionality is widely used to understand how systems of oppression create social hierarchies and shape individual experiences. It emphasizes the need for research, policies, and programmes to consider how identities are interconnected, even when focusing on specific issues like caste or gender. This lens is also crucial in furthering building solidarity and alliances across marginalized movements to address complex inequalities. This approach, hence, helps us view justice and inequality holistically, fostering stronger solidarity and more equitable solutions.

Consultations and the secondary research for this toolkit highlighted that intersectionality was addressed in two ways. One, was by working

with groups of diverse men based on their caste, class, age, religion, sexual and gender identity, disability, ethnicity, etc. This ended up happening by chance where programmes worked directly with schools or in communities with groups of men. It is important to be clear, however, that simply convening a diverse group of men does not, in itself, address intersectionality. If the differences and power relations within the group, of caste, class, religion, disability or sexuality, are left unnamed and unexamined, the intervention can end up invisibilising those very intersections and may quietly reproduce the same hierarchies it hopes to challenge. Addressing intersectionality means actively recognising and working with how overlapping identities shape who speaks, who is heard, who holds power and who is at risk within the room, not just ensuring that diverse bodies are present. Presence is a starting point; intentional facilitation is what turns it into intersectional practice. Two, was by including information and discussions on intersectional issues within the programmatic content. Ensuring diverse participants was intentional in very few programmes where they focused on including participants from diverse gender and sexual identities and deliberately selected these diverse participants and held separate sessions around intersectionality and diverse identities. These sessions allowed the participants to reflect deeply on dynamics related to caste, class, religious, and sexual identities. Other programmes indirectly address intersectionalities through content - games, interactive activities, discussions and case studies.

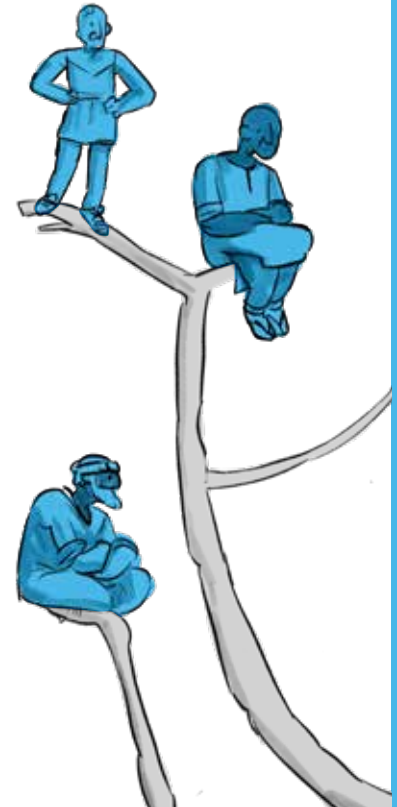
36 Crenshaw, K. (1991). *Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color*. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299.<https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

Practitioners shared that they have often strategically chosen to bring in intersectionality through the language of 'vulnerabilities' or through the human rights approach as an entry point. It was found that the intersectionalities that were found most easy to work with and get buy-in from stakeholders was that of disability, while topics around caste, religion and sexual and gender identity and expressions were challenging due to their sensitive nature and fear of backlash. Practitioners found it easier to discuss intersectionality with adolescent and young boys than older men because younger boys are more open to new ideas and less bound by traditional norms. In contrast, older men often need more time to unlearn deeply ingrained beliefs and adjust their perspectives.

As Audre Lorde rightly puts it, it is these details within each of our lives (similarities and differences) that can be scrutinized and altered for us to be able to bring about change. "How to redefine the difference for all women and men? It is not our differences that separate us, but our reluctance to recognize these differences and to deal effectively with the distortions that have resulted from the naming and misnaming of differences"³⁷. In other words, being different is not what keeps us apart. The real problem is our fear of admitting those differences exist and the way we allow society to use those labels to create unfair power gaps. When we refuse to talk honestly about our unique experiences, we miss the chance to connect deeply and grow together. Intersectionality,

hence, brings us the framework for locating and learning to deal with these differences, among and within men, women and gender-diverse people, paving the path towards social change.

Notes: Remember to refer to the essential concepts in section 1 of the toolkit, especially the concepts of intersectionality, caste, class, ethnicity, disability, marginalisation, ableism, mental health and neurodiversity.



37 Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.

Guiding Principles

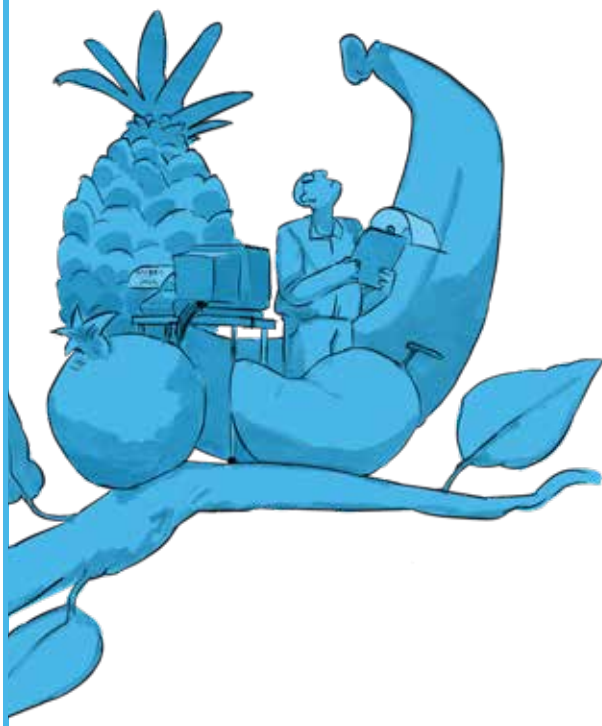
1. Incorporate Intersectionality in Budget Design

How to: When planning budgets, explicitly account for the needs of diverse groups, like individuals with disabilities, from the outset. Allocate resources for specialized materials (e.g., Braille, audio modules), sign language

interpretation and additional educator training to ensure all needs are met without discrimination. Conduct an accessibility needs assessment before the budget is planned to get an idea of the kinds of diverse disabilities and the specific support and access needed for their individual needs. These questions can be incorporated and embedded within the overall needs assessment, to avoid double work/effort.

2. Adopt Inclusive Language in Programme Materials

How to: Use inclusive language when designing programme materials and modules. This includes using appropriate pronouns and carefully choosing words that respect the diversity of the local context. Ensure representation of different ages, regions, religions, and abilities, for example, depicting older men expressing care or affection toward their partners; including people with different types of disabilities; and representing visible differences such as vitiligo. Case studies, names, and scenarios should reflect this diversity. Use simple, accessible language, avoiding jargon and religiously specific phrasing, so content is understandable and welcoming to all participants.



3.

Engage Facilitators from Diverse Backgrounds

How to: Building a diverse facilitation team helps foster inclusive environments that reflect the varied experiences of participants. Incorporate diverse, intersectional identities among facilitators or external resource persons called in for specific sessions, to enrich programme delivery. This will ensure that intersectionality is not just being talked about but also practiced. While it is important to actively recruit more men for this work, the inclusion of facilitators from different backgrounds - in terms of gender, ethnicity, or other identities - ensures more well-rounded and impactful programming. However, it is also important to ensure that the safety of the facilitator is kept in mind and there are risk mitigation measures in place.

facilitators are trained well on different identities, social issues, social power dynamics, human rights and how to actually apply the intersectional lens. They must also undergo training for attitudes and perceptions so they do not bring their personal biases along. Proper training helps facilitators maintain a balanced, respectful environment, fostering meaningful engagement from all participants. Well-trained facilitators will ensure that no single group dominates discussions and create a space where everyone's voice is heard and respected. This promotes equity and inclusivity, making the programme more impactful.

4.

Provide Comprehensive Intersectionality Training for Facilitators

How to: It is essential that facilitators are well-trained in intersectionality and aware of how different issues overlap. They must also avoid personal biases to prevent hierarchical power dynamics from emerging during sessions. For this, it must be ensured that



5. Use Constitutional and Human Rights Frameworks as Entry Points (India Context)

How to: Adoption of a human rights approach is a good entry point to discuss intersectionality, especially in contexts like India, where the constitution strongly reflects human rights principles. The constitution can be used as a framework to engage participants in discussions about rights and liberties. This will encourage deeper reflection on justice and equity while leveraging local legal and cultural contexts to foster more impactful conversations.



Example: Facilitate a session discussing constitutional rights in India, encouraging participants to explore justice and equity. This can help participants connect legal principles with their lived experiences and enhance their understanding of intersectionality.

6. Introduce Intersectionality using International Human Rights Frameworks

How to: Weave intersectionality into programmes by linking it with human rights discussions and fostering understanding through interactive activities. When bringing together diverse groups - from different castes, religions, and classes - focus on building connections through games and stories rather than direct conversations on equality. Narratives of marginalized groups can gradually introduce participants to different identities.

Example: Use narratives about trans people, women, and individuals with disabilities to explore how their rights are denied. Gradually introduce the idea that gender goes beyond binaries, encouraging participants to share personal stories and engage in labelling activities to deepen their understanding of different identities and intersectionality.

7. Create Safe Spaces for Sensitive Discussions

How to: Intersectionality is a broad term but when broken down into different communities, castes, vulnerabilities, identities, becomes a very delicate, difficult and tricky process to navigate as it is so deeply ingrained within people's thinking, beliefs and actions. To challenge the foundations of people's strong beliefs requires a safe space where discussions and disagreements can take place without judgement. Safe spaces created by gradually building trust and understanding are, hence, essential to be able to facilitate intersectional dialogues with sensitivity. With men, use of experiential methods to overcome their natural reservations and foster engagement have been found useful (explained in Module 1).

Testing Insights on Intersectionality

Insights on intersectionality emerged during testing in ways that were often subtle and embedded, rather than through explicit or conceptual discussions. Intersectionality was woven across activities, team orientation, village champions training, village-level discussions, and became most visible through participants' lived experiences. Conversations revealed how gender norms intersected with factors such as poverty, caste, age, geography, disability, mental health, and education to shape access to opportunities, participation in programmes, and exposure to different forms of risk. The testing was conducted largely in villages with predominantly tribal populations, where the VCs and community participants shared similar socio-economic backgrounds. This relative homogeneity meant that some intersectional differences, particularly around caste and class, were less visible in day-to-day discussions, even though other intersecting factors such as geography, climate risk, livelihood precarity, educational attainment, and limited access to services and sources of power were strongly present.

Intersectionality was engaged with most explicitly during team orientation and village champion training processes. These spaces allowed for deeper reflection, particularly around sensitive issues such as gender identity and sexual orientation, which were difficult to surface in village-level activities. During VC trainings, discussions explored how caste, class, disability, mental health, age, and education intersected with gender norms and masculinities, shaping both privilege and vulnerability. These reflections highlighted that while intersectionality may not always translate neatly into programmatic "insights," it is often best understood through storytelling, shared experiences, and ongoing dialogue. The testing reaffirmed that engaging with intersectionality-especially within work on masculinities-is complex and context-dependent, requiring time, trust, and repeated engagement.

8. Consider Contextual Barriers to Inclusion and Plan for Mitigation

How to: When designing programmes consider other intersectional factors that compound barriers, especially relevant to the particular context. For instance, in rural contexts, challenges like geographical remoteness can limit access to resources and opportunities. Similarly, marital status is another such important factor that shapes individual experiences and access to support. Programmes should account for these intersecting challenges/ vulnerabilities to ensure more inclusive and effective interventions.

Example: In rural areas, provide transportation support or digital resources to ensure accessibility and account for varying participant needs and vulnerabilities.

9. Build Linkages with Local Experts and Allies

How to: Establish partnerships with organizations focused on issues like disability, LGBTQIA+, mental health and/or Dalit rights. These collaborations bring valuable expertise and support, helping to integrate

intersectionality into your programmes by offering technical guidance, resources, and financial assistance. If these work well, consider formalising the partnership through MoUs to make it an official and reliable collaboration.

10. Ensure Accessibility in Digital and Social Media Engagement

How to: Incorporate accessibility features into all digital programme materials and social media content.

Example: Explore training with a disability and media-focused organization to enhance skills in using multimedia for accessibility, especially when traditional print formats are insufficient.



11.

Adopt an intersectional MEL approach

- ◆ Consider creation of a safe space, number and kind of intersectionalities addressed, any positive action led by participant(s) after attending this module, etc. as indicators of progress.
- ◆ Regular monitoring and learning are crucial when working with deeply held beliefs.

Programmers must try to keep an eye out for subtle changes like - positive shift within group dynamics between diverse participants/stories of intersectional solidarity from the community, other ethical sources of data gathering from that context, etc.

- ◆ Consider using qualitative and anecdotal methods of MEL as it is difficult to capture quick and measurable impact when dealing with attitude change.

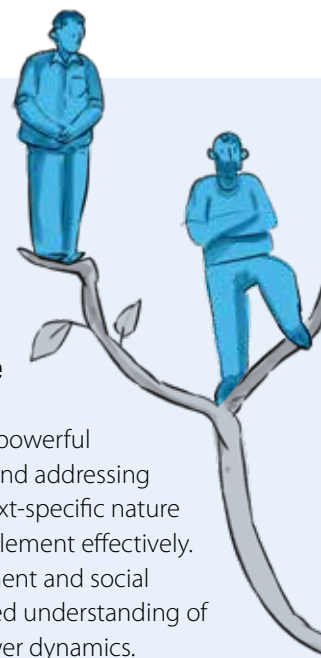
Challenges

Time Constraints and Reluctance of Institutional Stakeholders

Even where intersectionality is built into the design, time constraints and the sensitive nature of these issues often limit the depth of the conversations that are possible. This is especially the case when working with government and other institutional stakeholders, who tend to be less open to discussing caste, religion, sexuality and similar axes of difference. Programmes therefore need realistic expectations about how much can be addressed within a given engagement and may need to sequence sensitive themes over time rather than expecting to cover them in one or two sessions.

Complexity of Applying Intersectionality in Practice

While intersectionality offers a powerful framework for understanding and addressing complex social issues, its context-specific nature can make it challenging to implement effectively. Applying this lens to development and social change work requires a nuanced understanding of overlapping identities and power dynamics.



Socio-economic and Caste-based Barriers to Participation

Socio-economic status and caste often intersect, creating barriers to programme participation. For instance, it was found that engaging men from economically disadvantaged communities was a challenge as time spent in participating meant income loss for them. In some cases, economic differences within castes lead to shaping perceptions, with statements like, “That is a rich family’s practice, not ours.”

Engaging Privileged Men Amid Funding Priorities

Following the complexities of intersectionality, socio-economic barriers, and cross-contextual limitations, a fourth key challenge arises in deciding which men to engage in accountability and privilege-shifting processes. Programmes often default to men from vulnerable or marginalized communities - aligning with development funding that prioritizes “vulnerable groups”; which overlooks the greater need for privileged men to confront and relinquish their advantages. Masculinities initiatives should consciously target these influential men, where responsibility-taking has the highest leverage for systemic change and the onus does not fall on marginalized/vulnerable men only.

Limits of Cross-contextual Examples

Additionally, even though tribal women often work outside their homes, sharing this example for encouraging women to work will not be effective when working with non-tribal people as they view it as a necessity/burden for tribal women and not something that would apply to the women of their community/caste. Such perceptions hinder efforts to foster intersectional approaches, making it challenging to address caste, class, and economic dynamics comprehensively.

This toolkit incorporates practitioner insights on how to map, contextualize, and integrate intersectionality within programmes aimed at engaging men and boys. However, translating intersectionality into action - especially within the discourse on masculinity - remains inherently complex, the reviews suggested. For example, it is challenging to define the experience of a Dalit-educated man within a predominantly upper-caste-educated group. Such multiple intersecting identities highlight the nuanced challenges of addressing masculinity in diverse cultural and social contexts, sometimes even within the same state/district. This toolkit, hence, acknowledges the limitations of such an approach and instead promotes a long-term commitment to transformative work. It advocates for deeper engagement with the root causes of traditional masculinities, emphasizing that sustainable change requires continuous reflection, adaptation, and contextual understanding.



Case Study/Good Practice Spotlight

Mardon Waali Baat³⁸- The YP Foundation runs 'Mardon Waali Baat' project (Hindi for "talk about masculinity"), a research project on men, masculinities, and sexual and reproductive health and rights, or SRHR. The YP Foundation is fairly unique in the stakeholders working in this field. It is a youth-led NGO, which was established in 2002, whose mission is to support and develop youth leadership to advance the rights of young women, girls, and other marginalized youth, and to enable young people to internalize and engage in social justice, equity, and social change processes. One of its primary focus areas is in promoting SRHR through working with young leaders by: 1) increasing their access to information about SRHR; 2) empowering them to use existing platforms to strengthen engagement between young people, communities, civil society, and government actors to influence policies on youth, and 3) demonstrating "Youth Led Change" by building young people's leadership so that they can identify and address their own needs.

The Mardon Waali Baat project is interesting in that it built on the researchers' previous experience in community mobilization and then sought to understand how masculinities are constituted and expressed by young, college going men in urban Uttar Pradesh. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and life histories, researchers at YP explored the intersections between gender, sexuality, caste, class, and religion in discussions on masculinities; examined the impact of social media on masculinities; questioned the value of relationships (friendships, love, marriage, and infidelity) for men; and looked at men's perceptions of consent, sexual health, contraception, and violence. The results confirmed that men face a multiplicity of pressures to behave in a certain way that establishes their manliness, often via threats and contests for dominance. This pressure has many negative consequences on mental and physical health and permeates into nearly every social interaction and relationship. Social media only serves to exacerbate these effects and provides yet another layer of complication around performative masculinities. The programme also found that social media plays a significant role in normalizing violence against women and other men, and risky sexual behaviours in certain contexts. The Mardon Waali Baat report, and the YP Foundation's other projects, provide detailed recommendations for how other organizations can approach this topic. Such findings and recommendations reflect global research at a thematic level but are extremely important for the Indian context where research is limited. The practice of conducting, and then making public, such rigorous research should be promoted among all stakeholders. Grounded as this kind of research is communities, it provides a wealth of information that other stakeholders can use to inform and improve their own approaches.³⁹

38 Pandey, S. (2023). Workshops on beautiful masculinities: Sessions to create dialogues with young people on masculinities. The YP Foundation. <https://mardonwalibaat.com/sites/mardonwalibaat/files/pdfs/Workshop%20on%20Beautiful%20Masculinities.pdf>

39 Kedia, S., Kandpal, S., Khurana, N., & Verma, R. (2024). Transforming MENtalities: Engaging men and boys: A report on pathways to gender equality in India. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392230>



Hope to Achieve

- ◆ Programmes recognize that men and boys are not a uniform group, and that their experiences of power, privilege, discrimination, and vulnerability are shaped by caste, class, religion, disability, sexuality, gender identity, age, location, migration, education, and other social realities.
- ◆ Intersectionality is translated into concrete programme decisions, including budgeting, facilitator selection and training, accessibility, language, outreach, partnerships, risk planning, and MEL indicators.
- ◆ The establishment of a safe space where men can talk about diverse men and diverse intersectional issues in their contexts, is a giant win in itself. Beginning such conversations are crucial small steps towards long-term structural change and must be recognized as such.
- ◆ Success comes when participants realize the importance of working together toward collective goals, despite differences, for instance, collectivising to resist gender-based violence and/or early and forced child marriage within their community.

Things to Keep in Mind

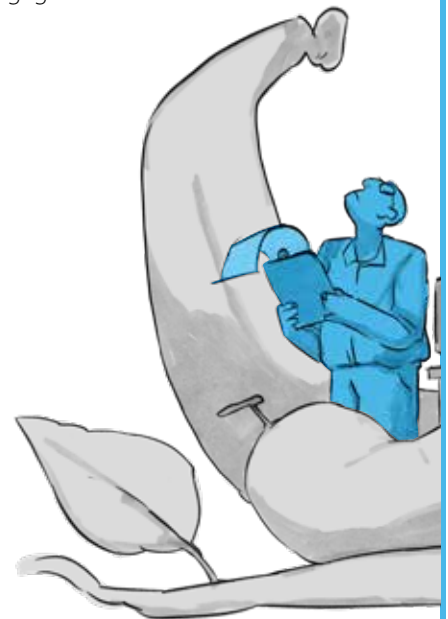
For effective contextualization, conduct a mapping study to understand the intersectional factors that create barriers within that specific community/context and design interventions accordingly

Involving community members in this process can also be very helpful to co-create interventions based on the intersectional challenges that surface during discussions with them.

We recommend that one-time training is not adequate especially when it comes to ensuring bias-free facilitation because attitudes and perceptions are borne out of deeply ingrained social messaging, hence requiring regular periodic refresher training (consider every 6 months).

Resources

- ◆ **ALLIES Toolkit:** On employing an intersectional lens in programming with men and boys. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61f407c3b5e1337808f6d8d5/t/62017bf054c03d002af45c00/1644264439326/ALLIES+FOR+GENDER+EQUALITY+TOOLKIT.pdf>
- ◆ **Power Walk Activity** — For explaining the basics of power, privilege and discrimination and how these translate into intersectionalities (see also Annex 5: Modified Power Walk Activity). Available at: <https://genderandmedia.bbcmmediaaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Power-Walk-Exercise.pdf>
- ◆ **Mardon Waali Baat** — Activities on intersectionality grounded in the Indian context. Available at: <https://mardonwalibaat.com/sites/mardonwalibaat/files/pdfs/Workshop%20on%20Beautiful%20Masculinities.pdf>
- ◆ **Feminist Accessibility Protocol (Women Enabled International)** — Outlines barriers to access and good practices for making in-person and virtual meetings and events inclusive and accessible. Available at: <https://womenenabled.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Feminist-Accessibility-Protocol-English.pdf>
- ◆ **Civil Society Response to Accessibility Standards for Healthcare of Persons with Disabilities (Rising Flame)** Available at: <https://risingflame.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Civil-Society-Response-to-Accessibility>
- ◆ Consider undertaking training with disability- and media-focused organizations to strengthen skills in creating accessible multimedia content and to build in-depth knowledge and capacity on disability. India-based organizations offering valuable support in this area include TARSHI, Rising Flame, The Revival Disability Magazine, Sruti Disability Rights Centre and Point of View, among others.
- ◆ **Activities to Engage with Diverse Men and Boys (Respect)** — An engagement toolkit on working with men and boys about gender norms. Available at: <https://www.respect.org.uk/resources/engaging-with-men-and-boys-about-gender-norms-engagement-toolkit>



- ◆ **Transforming Communities for Inclusion: Examples of Practice (TCI Global)** — Includes ideas on entry points for facilitating inclusion and influence in local community contexts. Available at: <https://tci-global.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Photo-Story.pdf>
- ◆ Accessibility Guidelines for MS Office/Documents: For detailed accessibility best practices, refer to the official **MS Office accessibility guidelines**. Below are some key **Do's and Don'ts** to follow:
 - **Don't** use word highlighting for emphasis. **Do** use **bold** or *italics* for stylizing text instead.
 - **Don't** manually adjust text sizes, styles, or colors to create headings. **Do** use **built-in heading styles** in Word and the **Canvas Rich Content Editor** to structure content. In PowerPoint, ensure accessibility by using an **accessible template**, adding a **title to every slide**, and checking **slide reading order**.
 - **Don't** manually type numbers or bullets to create lists. **Do** use the **bullet and numbering buttons** in the Word/PowerPoint toolbar for proper formatting.
 - **Avoid** using tables in Word, as some screen reader users may have difficulty navigating them.
 - **Don't** rely solely on color to convey meaning in charts and graphs.
- ◆ **Do directly label elements** in charts/graphs and incorporate **shapes or patterns** for better differentiation.
- ◆ Social Media/Audio-Visual Accessibility Guidelines⁴⁰ :
 - **Use image description/alt text:** The image description provides a description of the image you're posting. This information is used by screen reader users to understand what picture you have posted and is critical in terms of making visual information accessible to them. Include all the text in the image. For graphs and charts, make sure to include all the percentages or information being represented to give an accurate picture. This is how you include alt text (Or image description) on: X, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Website

Note: Some social media platforms have a character limit, for example: LinkedIn has 300 characters and X has 1000 characters. In these cases, we can include the description in the comments.
 - **Use Upper Camel Case hashtags:** Upper Camel Case or Pascal Case means the practice of capitalising the first letter of each word when writing compound words or phrases. This is especially useful for hashtag readability on screen readers as screen readers cannot identify individual words in a hashtag without it, which means that the content will be inaccessible, or extremely difficult

40 Rising Flame. Retrieved June 6, 2026, from <https://risingflame.org/>

to understand, to users of screen readers.
Eg: #NotAllMen. This practice not just helps people who use screen readers, but improves understanding and readability for everyone, including people in a hurry or who have low English fluency.

- **Describe and caption videos:** As social media platforms pivot more towards video content every day; videos have become an integral part of content. To make videos accessible we need to include captions in the videos. To go a step further, it would also be helpful to make transcripts for the videos available so people with diverse disabilities can choose which option works best for them. Another part of making a video accessible is to include a simple description of the video being posted. For example: A woman in a blue sari is speaking to the camera. The background has a grey wall behind with a window through which some buildings can be seen.
- **Describe GIFs (or Alt text for GIFs):** GIF, or Graphics Interchange Format, is a short looping series of images used frequently on social media platforms while communicating information. GIFs without accessible text are unreadable to blind, low vision users and others who use screen readers, removing context and necessary information from the content. Make sure to describe GIFs you use, for example: Shahrukh Khan extends his hand out from a moving train to help his love interest board the train.

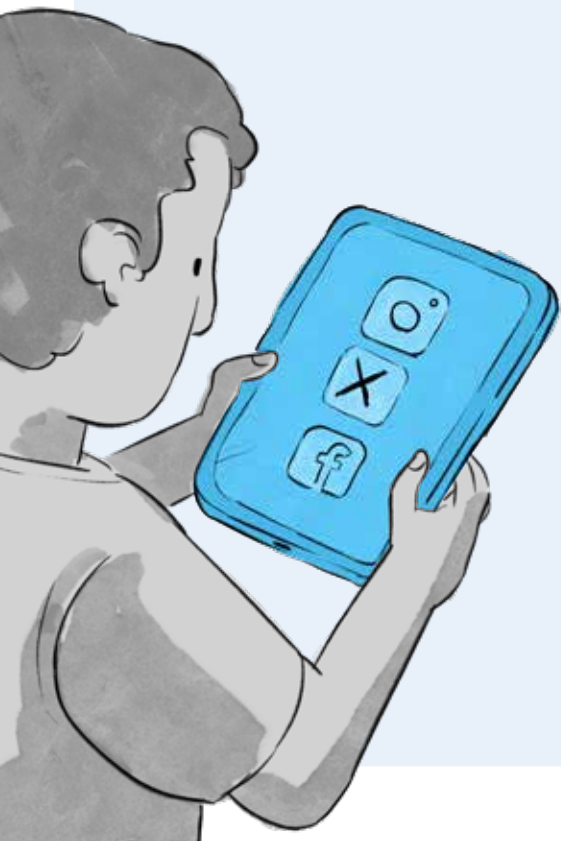
- **Tips to write Alt text:** Pull out the important element of the image – the feature that makes one want to share it. Describe the essentials, as if you were describing the image to a friend over the phone. Do not include any text in the image. Add any context cues, if required for the image to be understood properly. For graphs and charts, describe the essence.



Self-check for Module 3

Use these as a quick go-to list to review your programme. If you cannot answer 'yes' or 'we have a plan for this' to a question, it is worth revisiting that part of your design.

- ◆ Have we asked who is in the room, who is missing, and why?
- ◆ Are we actively naming and working with power differences within the group (caste, class, religion, disability, sexuality, age), and not just gathering a diverse group?
- ◆ Have we budgeted for inclusion – accessibility, translation, travel, and safe participation?
- ◆ Is our language and our material inclusive and free of stereotyping?
- ◆ Are facilitators from, or trained to work sensitively with, diverse backgrounds?
- ◆ Have we chosen appropriate entry points (for example, vulnerabilities or a human-rights framing) for sensitive intersections?
- ◆ Have we created safe spaces for sensitive discussions, with a plan to mitigate backlash?
- ◆ Are we avoiding invisibilising intersections – for example, by treating a diverse group as if it were homogeneous?
- ◆ Have we built links with local experts and allies on specific issues (disability, caste, sexuality)?
- ◆ Does our MEL capture whether marginalized participants experienced the programme differently?



Module

4

MANAGING RISKS, BACKLASH AND RESISTANCE

At a glance: Module 4 helps you anticipate, prepare for and respond to resistance and backlash, from participants, families, institutions and online spaces, as gender norms begin to shift, while protecting participants, facilitators, allies and advocates in the process.



Addressing harmful and discriminatory gender norms is a challenging endeavour because these beliefs are deeply embedded in culture and society, shaping what people consider acceptable or unacceptable, right or wrong. Initiatives aimed at transforming these norms often encounter risk and backlash, as they may be perceived as promoting “western thinking”, especially when talking about sexuality or as threats to the community’s social fabric and traditions. While a human rights approach can eventually help frame these initiatives within universal principles, facilitators cannot afford to approach this work lightly.

Programme designers, hence, must carefully map the local context and anticipate potential risks and backlash, developing multiple mitigation strategies in advance. Flexibility in response is essential, as crises may arise unexpectedly and require immediate response. The social pressure to conform to dominant versions of masculinity is often intense and the consequences of not conforming can be severe.⁴¹ Some within community forms of backlash in programmes engaging men and boys on gender equality can vary widely, from facilitators being ridiculed for teaching ‘unacceptable’ ideas or being blocked by the community for ‘undermining’ its values, to male participants facing scorn or even violence for adopting gender-equitable behaviours introduced in the programme. This reality highlights the importance of strategic

41 Esplen, E. (2006). Engaging Men in Gender Equality: Positive Strategies and Approaches – Overview and Annotated Bibliography. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Prepared for Irish Aid.



planning, with contingency options ready to address unforeseen challenges as they emerge.

Additionally, programmes may face resistance from external actors/stakeholders such as governments, religious leaders, and online spaces. Digital platforms and social media spaces often expose young people to messages that associate masculinity with dominance, control, competitiveness, or hostility towards gender equality. Such content can normalise rigid gender roles, reinforce stereotypes, and, at times, validate harmful attitudes or behaviours towards women, gender-diverse people, and other marginalized groups. Online communities and peer networks can also create echo chambers where certain views are repeatedly affirmed, making it harder for young men to encounter alternative perspectives.⁴² They may view these efforts as threatening established norms or power structures and utilize strategies of misinformation and disinformation to reverse gender equality gains. The spread of misinformation and disinformation has affected our ability to improve public health, address climate change, maintain a stable democracy, and reduce gender inequality and gender-based violence, to name a few.⁴³ Facilitators and programmes can respond by strengthening critical media literacy, creating safe spaces for discussion about online

influences, and supporting young people to reflect on how digital narratives shape their beliefs, relationships, and sense of identity. This reality highlights the critical importance of thorough strategic planning, equipped with contingency options to address unforeseen challenges as they emerge.

It is important to note that men hold disproportionate power as gatekeepers in politics, religion, media, and business, where men often occupy key leadership positions. Without their active involvement and support in advancing gender justice, efforts remain limited or face resistance from within these institutions as well as individually. Engaging men in positions of power, hence, can be crucial for challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and preventing backlash by building stronger support for gender equality among influential actors.⁴⁴

Note: Remember to refer to the essential concepts in section 1 of the toolkit. While all are relevant for all modules, particularly useful for Module 4 are: manosphere, disinformation, misinformation, hate crime/speech.

42 10 ways to engage men & boys to counter backlash: Fact sheet and guidance for activists, academics and practitioners in gender equality, human rights, democracy and climate justice. MenEngage Global Alliance, FEIM, & Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI). <https://shorturl.at/rA365>

43 American Psychological Association. (2023). Using psychological science to understand and fight health misinformation: An APA consensus statement. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/health-misinformation>

44 10 ways to engage men & boys to counter backlash: Fact sheet and guidance for activists, academics and practitioners in gender equality, human rights, democracy and climate justice. MenEngage Global Alliance, FEIM, & Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI). <https://shorturl.at/rA365>

Guiding Principles

1. Navigating Misinterpretations and Community Perceptions

How To: Clarify programme intentions and maintain open communication channels with the community to avoid misinterpretations. Be transparent about programme objectives to minimize backlash, especially around sensitive topics like sexuality and violence. Address misinterpretations directly, using inclusive language that emphasizes the shared benefits of gender equality for all genders and age groups.

Example: Frame discussions around broader, universally relevant themes such as 'healthy relationships' or 'supporting community well-being,' to redirect potentially divisive narratives and ensure the focus stays on positive change for everyone.



2. Selection and Training of Staff

How To: Choose staff/facilitators from within the community to build rapport but also ensure comprehensive training to deepen their understanding of gender norms and related challenges. Address personal biases and emphasize the importance of modelling programme values in both personal and professional settings.



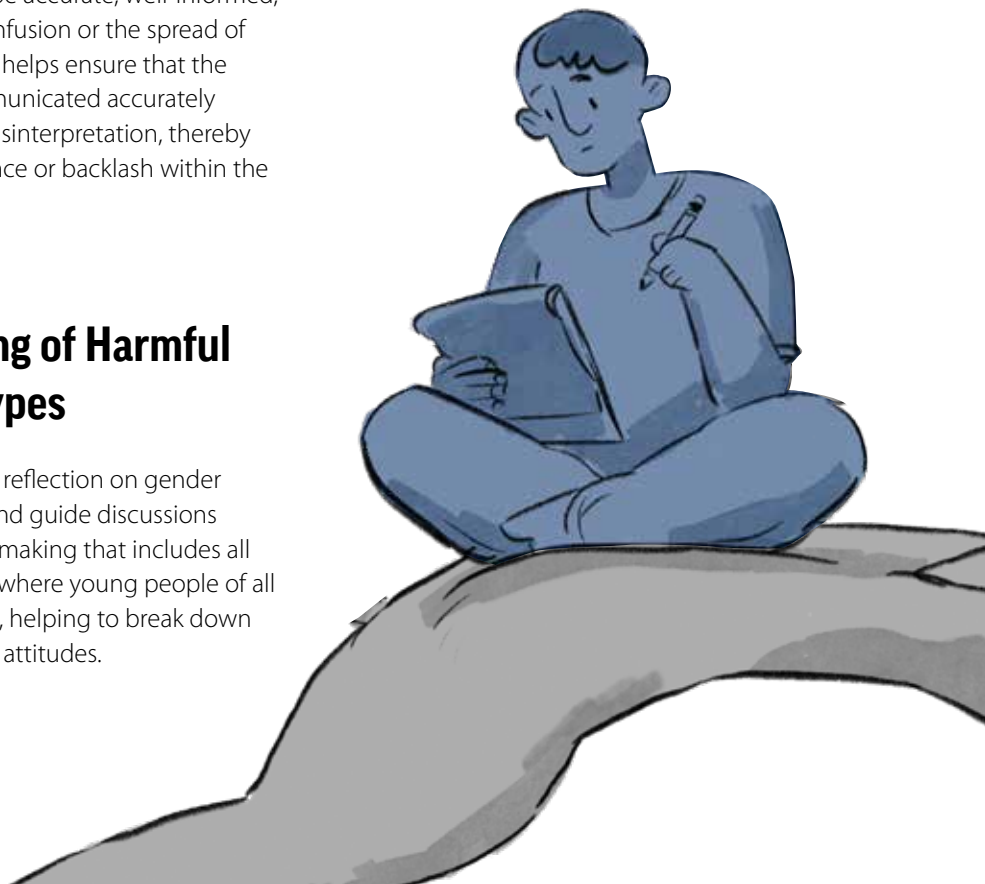
3. Choosing the Right Messengers and Messages

How to: When engaging respected peers, youth leaders, or community influencers to start conversations with men and boys about gender roles and positive masculinities, it is essential to ensure that these influential “messengers” have a clear understanding and align with the goals of transforming masculinities and promoting gender justice. Messaging should be accurate, well-informed, and consistent to avoid confusion or the spread of half-understood ideas. This helps ensure that the intended meaning is communicated accurately and in a way that avoids misinterpretation, thereby reducing the risk of resistance or backlash within the community.

Example: In a programme, boys initially adopted a “protectionist” role, deciding on rules for girls’ activities, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Facilitators restructured the activities to be co-led by both boys and girls, prompting participants to reflect on and recognize the importance of equal collaboration and shared agency.

4. Avoid Reinforcing of Harmful Gender Stereotypes

How To: Encourage critical reflection on gender roles among participants and guide discussions toward collective decision-making that includes all voices. Introduce activities where young people of all genders contribute equally, helping to break down protectionist or controlling attitudes.



5. Countering Influences from Conflicting Narratives

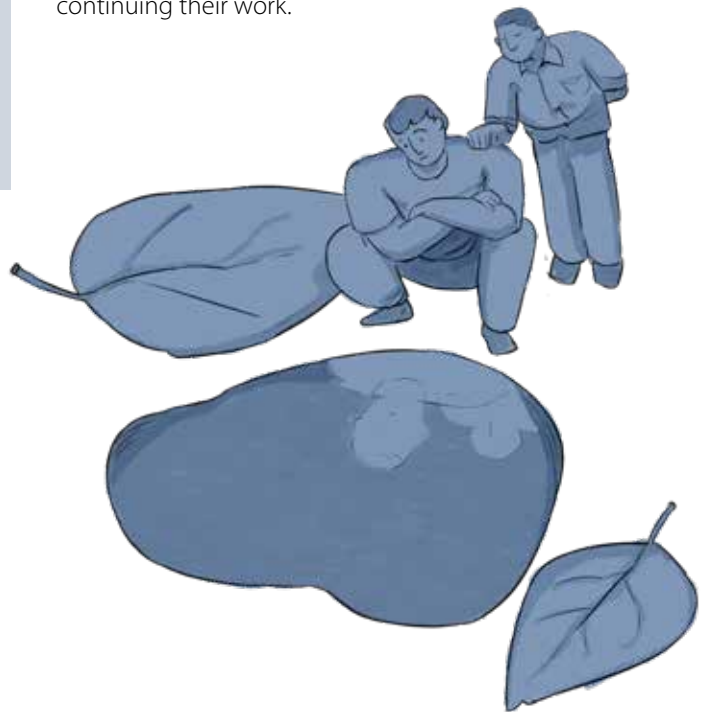
How To: Recognize and openly address alternative or conflicting narratives from other sources, such as social media, that may challenge or misrepresent programme teachings. Engage participants in discussions about these influences, helping them critically assess different viewpoints.

Example: Some groups that focus only on “men’s rights” (MRAs) have become powerful and well-funded, spreading harmful messages that work against gender equality. Using advanced online tools, these groups create viral content and run campaigns that spread misinformation and disinformation, often targeting efforts to promote equality with public harassment and online abuse.

Facilitators can turn these materials into discussion points, helping participants understand the goals behind these messages and reinforcing ideas of equality and shared responsibility. As the manosphere grows and maximizes the use of technology to expand their reach, it’s crucial to stay aware of whether participants are influenced by these messages and how to address and counter them. Addressing this influence is essential, as the manosphere has become one of the biggest and fastest-growing challenges to women’s rights and gender equality today.

6. Supporting Facilitators through Backlash

How To: Acknowledge the potential risks facilitators face, such as experiencing identity-based discrimination or resistance from the community. Provide safe spaces for facilitators to share their experiences, and establish support systems for them to navigate these challenges. Facilitators may face resistance when discussing issues like sexual violence or transgender people’s rights. Providing them with regular debrief sessions, listening spaces, and strategies to handle these barriers is essential to ensure that they feel supported and capable of continuing their work.



Testing Insights on Supporting Facilitators and Participants

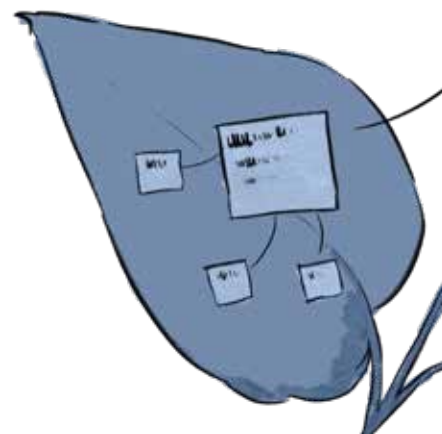
Testing highlighted that conversations around gender norms require careful pacing and the use of safer, non-confrontational entry points, particularly in community settings. The team consistently emphasized the need to be mindful when introducing sensitive topics, noting discomfort - both among facilitators and participants - when discussions touched on gender identity and sexual orientation at the village level. As a result, facilitators often chose to introduce these issues indirectly or deferred them to more controlled spaces such as trainings and reflection sessions.

The testing also revealed the importance of facilitator support, especially given that many Village Champions (VCs) were younger and had to engage with older community members and influential stakeholders. Field facilitators played a critical role in mentoring and supporting VCs during these interactions, helping them navigate resistance and maintain confidence. Ongoing team involvement and handholding emerged as essential strategies for managing backlash, reinforcing that sensitive topics should be introduced slowly and progressively. Regular check-ins with young participants were found to be particularly important, providing spaces to reflect, address discomfort, and recalibrate approaches as needed.

7. Sensitivity in Language and Framing of Materials

How To:

- ◆ Use careful, context-specific language when discussing gender and sexuality. Choosing terms and imagery that align with community comfort levels while gradually introducing progressive ideas is the most crucial to avoid backlash, especially in the initial stages of the programme when trust is yet to be established.
- ◆ When developing training material, it is suggested to test materials with trusted stakeholders, such as community leaders, local educators, or experienced facilitators. This helps to assess the community response to the content and ensures that the language, examples, and approach are culturally sensitive and hence prevent backlash. Early feedback from these stakeholders can guide necessary adjustments, making the toolkit more effective and respectful of local values.



8.

Engaging Parents and the Broader Community

How To: Recognize the social networks that influence participants' beliefs, particularly parental opinions. Create structured spaces to engage these groups in discussions, helping them understand the programme's objectives and potential benefits.

Example: Boys who help with household chores may face backlash from their immediate family, including mothers. In response, facilitators should hold discussions with parents, helping them understand how gender-equitable behaviours benefit the whole family and community, creating a more supportive environment for boys to practice these behaviours.

9.

Addressing Concerns of Disrupting Social Norms

How To: Reframe the narrative to focus on safety, respect, and reducing gender-based violence rather than on challenging gender roles outright. This approach helps mitigate fears of social disruption and centres the conversation on mutual well-being.

10.

Supporting Male Advocates

How To: Recognize the social risks male allies face when standing up for gender equality and provide them with community support. Facilitate peer networks where men can share experiences, reinforcing their commitment and resilience.

Example: Men who advocate for women's rights often risk facing ridicule. By connecting them with supportive peers and including them in stakeholder engagement efforts, facilitators can ensure these advocates feel valued and less isolated in their work toward gender equality.



11. Engaging Men in Positions of Power

How To: Efforts to work with men and boys frequently focus on grassroots or youth engagement, while overlooking elite men who hold significant authority in political and corporate systems. When leaders remain disengaged, programmes may face resistance within institutions or struggle to sustain long-term change. This wider base of influential allies can reduce resistance, prevent backlash, and enable more lasting structural shifts.⁴⁵

Example: Influential male leaders can be engaged actively through policy dialogues, leadership workshops, and/or public advocacy platforms.

such as compassion, fairness, dignity, and shared responsibility. Engaging faith leaders and using culturally resonant moral frameworks can help build trust and reduce resistance.

Example: Facilitators can hold small group discussions with local faith leaders and men to reflect on religious teachings that encourage respect, non-violence, and shared roles at home, helping reduce resistance and build wider support.

Note of caution: Before engaging religious or faith leaders, it is important to understand their values, influence, and position on gender equality. Some leaders may help open difficult conversations, while others may reinforce the very norms the programme seeks to question or change. Facilitators should therefore engage selectively, build relationships carefully, and ensure that the discussion remains grounded in equality, dignity, non-violence, and rights.

12. Engaging with Spiritual/ Religious/Faith Contexts

How To: Recognize that spiritual and religious beliefs strongly shape social norms and values. When working with men and boys, connect discussions on gender equality to widely respected principles



⁴⁵ 10 ways to engage men & boys to counter backlash: Fact sheet and guidance for activists, academics and practitioners in gender equality, human rights, democracy and climate justice. MenEngage Global Alliance, FEIM, & Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI). <https://shorturl.at/rA365>

13.

Institutional Risks and Limitations

How To: Working with institutions like schools and colleges can come with unique limitations and risks, including potential resistance and backlash. Topics such as the realities of sex work, issues faced by transgender communities, or discussions around sexuality may be met with hesitation or even requests to exclude them due to concerns about parental or community response. To manage this, engage institution leaders early, communicate the educational value of these topics, and remain flexible in adapting the content to align with institutional boundaries while still fostering meaningful discussion.

and facilitators. This helps understand the community's readiness and allows the programme to address concerns proactively.

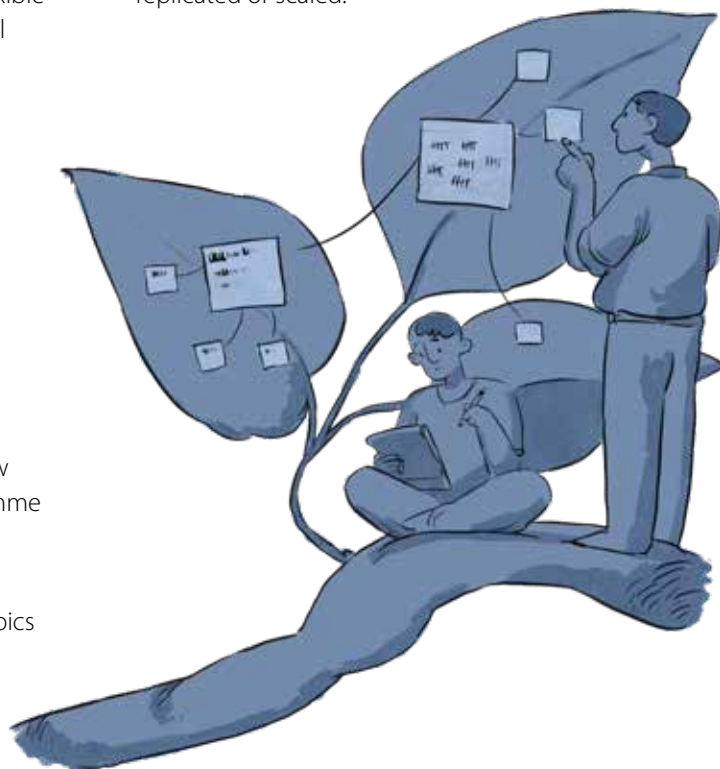
- ◆ Track both immediate reactions and longer-term shifts in social norms and attitudes around topics like gender equality and sexuality. This provides a clearer picture of how effectively the programme balances challenging existing norms with promoting inclusivity.
- ◆ Maintain records of any resistance encountered and how it was managed, to inform future programme cycles and refine approaches to challenging topics. This also helps identify successful strategies that can be replicated or scaled.

14.

Using MEL to capture and address backlash

How To:

- ◆ Conduct regular check-ins with participants, parents, and other stakeholders to gauge how well the community is accepting the programme content. This allows for timely adjustments to prevent backlash from escalating.
- ◆ Gather specific feedback on how sensitive topics are received and perceived by participants



Challenges

Challenging Power and Privilege

Many men may resist gender equality efforts because they perceive these initiatives as a threat to their traditional roles and privileges. The fear of losing control or status can lead to denial, defensiveness, or even hostility toward programmes aiming to address these inequalities.

Community Norms and Social Pressures

In communities with rigid gender norms, men who participate in gender equality initiatives may face ridicule, stigma, or ostracization. Social expectations can discourage men from openly supporting such programmes, fearing judgment from peers, family, or community leaders.

Misconceptions and Misinformation

Resistance can also arise from misunderstandings about gender equality. Some men may falsely believe these programmes aim to undermine or disadvantage them, rather than fostering fairness and shared opportunities.

Resistance from Institutions and Leaders

Traditional leaders, religious institutions, or local authorities may oppose programmes that challenge established power structures or cultural practices. Their resistance can influence public opinion and hinder programme acceptance.

Tokenism and Superficial Engagement

Some men may engage in programmes superficially to appear supportive without committing to real change. This can undermine the programme's credibility and long-term impact.

Internalized Gender Norms

Many men have internalized harmful notions of masculinity, such as the need to dominate or suppress emotions. These beliefs can make it difficult for participants to embrace alternative, equitable ways of thinking and behaving. As a challenge to interventions specifically, internalised norms tend to surface as resistance within the programme space itself: facilitators may meet defensiveness or disengagement when equitable alternatives are introduced; participants may dismiss new ideas as unrealistic or 'not for people like us', revert to familiar norms under peer pressure, or agree intellectually in the session while continuing old behaviours outside it. Anticipating this, and planning for repeated, gradual engagement rather than one-off messaging, is part of managing backlash that comes from within the group, and not only from outside it.

Backlash Against Women Advocates

Women advocating for gender equality may face increased resistance, as some men might see their leadership as a direct challenge to patriarchal norms. This backlash can range from subtle undermining to overt aggression.

Online Backlash and Accessing Digital Justice

Lack of adequate knowledge, skills, and safe spaces to respond to online harassment, misinformation, and harmful digital narratives. Facilitators may feel unprepared to address these influences in real time, while participants often lack the media literacy needed to critically assess and respond to what they encounter online. Additionally, clear channels for seeking digital justice are often limited, and cyber laws can be complex, unclear, or constantly evolving, making them difficult to track and apply. Duty bearers themselves may not always be fully informed, which can further delay or obstruct timely and effective responses.

Addressing Intersectional Challenges

Resistance can be compounded when addressing intersecting issues like caste, class, sexuality, or disability, as these layers of inequality often trigger additional biases and prejudices.

Programmes must anticipate and address backlash with strategies like creating safe spaces for dialogue,

engaging influential community leaders, providing clear communication on the mutual benefits of gender equality, and gradually introducing sensitive topics. Continuous engagement, empathy, and contextual understanding are crucial to overcoming these challenges and fostering meaningful change.

Case Study/Good Practice Spotlight

Promundo's Programme H is a globally acclaimed initiative designed to challenge harmful norms of masculinity and engage men and boys in promoting gender equality. In Brazil, the programme faced significant resistance from participants and community members who viewed its objectives as a threat to traditional male roles and cultural norms. Some men perceived discussions about caregiving and emotional openness as undermining their authority, while religious and community leaders expressed skepticism about the programme's impact.

To address this backlash, Promundo adopted culturally sensitive strategies. They framed gender equality as a means to strengthen families and communities, emphasizing benefits like improved family harmony and child development. Local leaders were engaged as allies and advocates, helping to lend credibility to the programme. Safe spaces, such as same-sex discussion groups, were created to help men share their thoughts and experiences without fear of judgment. These spaces allowed participants to gradually open up to sensitive topics, such as emotional expression and non-violence.

The programme also focused on promoting positive masculinity, framing equitable and caring behaviours as strengths rather than weaknesses. As the programme progressed, women, families, and community members were included, fostering mutual understanding and breaking down perceptions that the initiative was divisive.

As a result, participants reported improved relationships and a reduction in household violence. Community attitudes shifted to become more accepting of gender-equitable behaviours, demonstrating the programme's success in overcoming resistance.

Hope to Achieve

- ◆ The goal is to create an environment where difficult topics, like gender norms and social roles, can be discussed openly without fear of backlash and positive change is encouraged in a manner that is respectful of the community's values.
- ◆ Programmes are able to anticipate where resistance may come from, while ensuring that facilitators, Village Champions, male allies, women advocates, and community messengers have the preparation, support systems, referral pathways, debrief spaces, and response protocols needed to navigate backlash safely.
- ◆ Managing backlash effectively can ensure that challenging topics - such as the experiences of marginalized groups or discussions around sexuality - can be sustained in the programme over time, paving the way for a long-term impact.

Things to Keep in Mind

Proactively assess potential areas of resistance and actors/stakeholders from whom backlash may arise - community members, parents, or institutional leaders - when planning the programme. Anticipating where backlash might arise allows for the development of mitigation strategies, ensuring the team is prepared to handle challenges smoothly and respond quickly if sensitive issues spark negative reactions.

Use language that aligns with community comfort levels, especially when introducing progressive ideas. Gradually introduce more sensitive topics only after trust has been established, to ensure that participants feel safe and respected.

Participants, especially men and boys, may face social pressures to conform to traditional gender norms which can lead to significant stress and mental health support needs. Building peer support groups within the programme can help participants navigate such pressures.

Resources

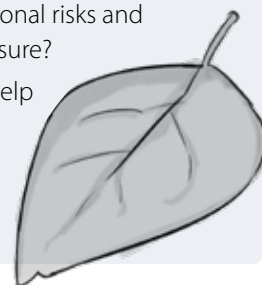
- ◆ **Centre for Catalyzing Change (C3):** Responding to Backlash in Jharkhand — C3's strategic approach to building an enabling environment and responding to resistance/backlash to sexuality education in Jharkhand, India. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7597059/>
- ◆ **Action Reaction (Dasra):** Helps you understand the adverse consequences (backlash) faced by organizations implementing gender-equality programmes, and different ways of overcoming such backlash. Available at: <https://10to19community.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Action-Reaction-I.pdf>
- ◆ **Understanding Online Gender-Based Violence / Technology:** Facilitated Violence (APC)
- ◆ **10 Ways to Engage Men & Boys to Counter Backlash (MenEngage Global Alliance, FEIM & SVRI)** Available at: https://cdn.menengage.org/media/documents/resources/10-ways-to-engage-men-and-boys-to-counter-backlash/10-Ways-to-Engage-Men-and-Boys-to-Counter-Backlash-Men-Masculinities-and-Countering-Backlash-Collective-2025_2025-09-25-072627_fnan.pdf
- ◆ **The Manosphere, Rewired: Understanding Masculinities Online & Pathways for Healthy Connection (Equimundo)** — Helps you understand more about the manosphere. Available at: <https://www.equimundo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Manosphere-Rewired.pdf>
- ◆ **The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An Analysis of Masculinity in Video Games (Oak Foundation, Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media & Equimundo)** — On how masculinities operate in online and video-gaming communities. Available at: <https://www.equimundo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/GDI-and-Promundo-masculinities-and-gaming-study-2021-FINAL-1.pdf>
- ◆ **Addressing and Countering Disinformation (Association for Progressive Communications, APC)** Available at: https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Explainers-disinformation_final.pdf



Self-check for Module 4

Use these as a quick go-to list to review your programme. If you cannot answer 'yes' or 'we have a plan for this' to a question, it is worth revisiting that part of your design.

- ◆ Have we anticipated who might resist, and why (participants, families, leaders, institutions, or online actors)?
- ◆ Have we considered how backlash may affect different participants differently, especially by caste, class, religion, disability, sexuality, gender identity, age, or marital status?
- ◆ Do we have a plan for community misperceptions, misinformation and disinformation?
- ◆ Have we prepared facilitators to handle disagreement and personal backlash, and to support one another?
- ◆ Have we engaged parents and community gatekeepers proactively? Have we checked that our chosen messengers, influencers, or faith/community leaders understand and support the programme's gender equality goals?
- ◆ Do we have mitigation strategies for online and social-media backlash, and for digital safety?
- ◆ Do we have clear referral and response pathways if participants disclose violence, distress, online harassment, or safety concerns?
- ◆ Are we protecting advocates and allies who may face backlash?
- ◆ Have we considered institutional risks and our own organisation's exposure?
- ◆ Does our MEL capture and help us respond to backlash as it emerges?



Module

5

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

At a glance: Module 5 helps you design Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning that captures real change (not just attitude shifts), grounds measurement in local realities, triangulates evidence rather than relying on self-report alone, and feeds learning back into an evolving programme and Theory of Change.



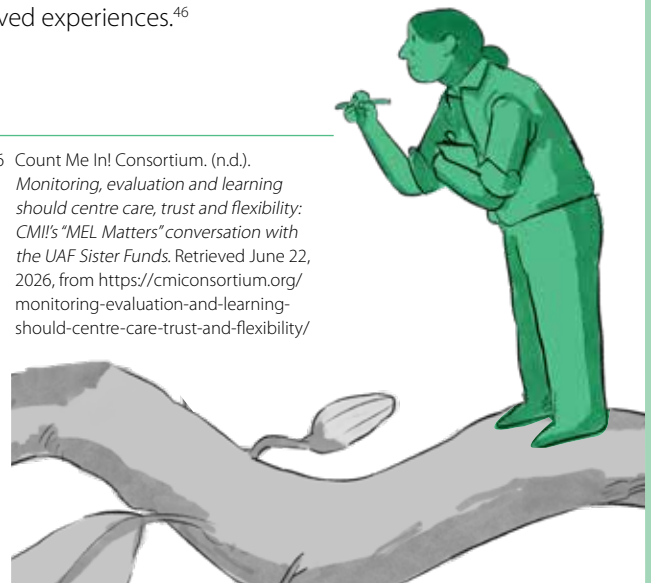
Work with men and boys has shown some positive shifts, especially in attitudes around household work and gender-based violence. However, there is still limited evidence of consistent behaviour change and of wider impact on women, gender-diverse people, and communities. While programmes that work at multiple levels - individual, family, and community - have shown promise, sustaining these changes over time and influencing systems and institutions remains difficult.

Most programmes use a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to track progress but maintaining consistency and quality across different contexts continues to be a challenge. Although collaboration with multiple stakeholders is common, keeping goals aligned and communication strong over time is not always easy. Many evaluations focus on changes in knowledge, attitudes, and self-reported behaviours, but often miss how social norms shift or how women's lives are affected as a result. Including women's voices in both programme design and evaluation is essential to ensure that interventions respond to their needs and realities. Importantly, the assumption that changes in attitudes will automatically lead to changes in behaviour is not always true. Social norms, community expectations, and structural barriers play a significant role and must be considered when assessing impact.

Current Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) systems used by many funders can also create challenges. These systems often rely on rigid timelines and reporting formats that do not reflect how social change happens. Such approaches can place additional pressure on women and girls, sometimes even putting their safety and confidentiality at risk by demanding sensitive information. They also tend to overlook local contexts and the realities faced by activists and practitioners on the ground.

A feminist approach to MEL offers an alternative. It prioritizes care, trust, and flexibility, and recognizes that change is complex and non-linear. Feminist MEL pays close attention to power and inequality, actively includes women and girls in defining what success looks like, and values their lived experiences.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Count Me In! Consortium. (n.d.). *Monitoring, evaluation and learning should centre care, trust and flexibility: CMI's "MEL Matters" conversation with the UAF Sister Funds*. Retrieved June 22, 2026, from <https://cmiconsortium.org/monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-should-centre-care-trust-and-flexibility/>



Guiding Principles

1.

Treat MEL as an Ongoing Process, Not a One-time Exercise

How to: Design MEL processes that run throughout the life of the programme rather than only at the beginning or end. Collect information at regular intervals to understand how knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and skills evolve over time. Use similar questions, reflection prompts, or observation tools at different stages so changes, both positive and negative, can be tracked and responded to. This allows teams to adapt programming based on what is actually happening on the ground.

Example: Facilitators may collect short reflections after sessions, document observations in field notes, and hold periodic group discussions. Early notes may capture rigid gender-stereotypical views, while later entries may reflect questioning, silence, or partial shifts in language and behaviour. Reviewing this information regularly helps teams see where change is emerging, where it is stalled, and what course corrections are needed.

2.

Focus on Behavioural Change, Not Just Attitude Shifts

How to: Go beyond measuring what participants say they believe and examine how they act in their everyday lives. Track changes in behaviour within households, peer groups, and community spaces, such as participation in care work, responses to violence, or willingness to challenge harmful norms. Behaviour change often takes longer than attitude change and may appear uneven or context-specific, making repeated observation and follow-up essential.

Example: Programmes can use follow-up conversations with family members, peers, or community stakeholders to understand whether changes are visible outside programme spaces. For instance, community members may notice shifts in how young men speak to women, share responsibilities at home, or intervene in harmful situations. These insights often do not surface through surveys alone but are revealed through conversations and observation. Programmes can also try to raise funds for longitudinal studies, where they revisit their participants and communities after a period of time and check in on these issues.



3. Use Multiple Perspectives to Understand Impact

How to: Combine different methods and viewpoints to build a fuller picture of change. This includes using both qualitative and quantitative tools, and actively seeking feedback from women, young people, and other community members, not only programme participants. Diverse perspectives help surface gaps, contradictions, and unintended outcomes that single-source data may miss.

Example: While participants may report positive change in surveys, feedback from women or younger community members may point to areas where change is limited or uneven. Bringing these perspectives together helps teams refine their understanding of impact and avoid overestimating success.

4. Ground Measurement in Local Contexts and Realities

How to: Adapt tools and indicators so they reflect local language, norms, and realities. Measurement questions and indicators should resonate with participants' lived experiences and be updated as social contexts change. What signals progress in one setting may not be meaningful in another.

Example: Practitioners may revise discussion questions or survey statements to reflect locally relevant situations, relationships, or forms of control and resistance. This helps capture subtle shifts in beliefs and practices that generic tools may overlook.



5.

Embed MEL Within Existing Community Structures

How to: Work through trusted local groups, such as SHGs, youth collectives, or community committees, to gather feedback and reflect on change. These spaces allow MEL to become part of regular community conversations rather than an external reporting requirement. This also supports sustainability and shared ownership of outcomes.

Example: Community groups can serve as regular forums to discuss whether ideas around gender equality, safety, or care work are being practiced in daily life. Group members may identify locally meaningful signs of progress and raise concerns early, enabling continuous dialogue and informal monitoring.

6.

Use Qualitative Data to Deepen Learning and Adaptation

How to: Value qualitative data, such as reflections, stories, observations, and discussions, as critical sources of learning. These forms of data help capture complexity, resistance, and nuance, and are particularly useful for understanding sensitive issues and process level changes.



Testing Insights on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

During toolkit testing, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning was approached primarily as a system for learning and reflection. Given the limited time for testing, the focus was on understanding processes, facilitation experiences, and early signals of change. MEL practices during testing relied largely on qualitative and reflective methods. These included facilitator reflection notes, voice recordings from Village Champions, workshop debriefs, and weekly team check-ins. Together, these practices created a continuous feedback loop. Facilitators were encouraged to document moments of discomfort, resistance, confusion, silence, or breakthrough, recognising these as important data points that offered insight into how participants were engaging with sensitive issues.

This approach helped capture several small but meaningful shifts. Boys spoke openly, often for the first time in group settings, about pressures related to earning, migration, and expectations of masculinities. Village Champions reflected on changes in their own beliefs, as well as growing confidence in facilitating difficult conversations. While these shifts were uneven and incremental, they were treated as valuable indicators of emerging change.

MEL also played a critical ethical and protective role during testing. Regular reflection spaces allowed facilitators and Village Champions to process emotional labour, discuss instances of backlash, and assess risks. Decisions to slow down discussions, reframe topics, or revisit issues at a later stage were guided by MEL insights rather than fixed timelines or targets. This helped ensure that facilitation remained responsive, safe, and contextually appropriate.

Overall, testing reinforced that MEL for programmes engaging men and boys on gender equality needs to be embedded, qualitative, and adaptive. Rather than functioning as a separate technical component, MEL is positioned within the toolkit as an integral practice that supports ethical facilitation, contextual responsiveness, and sustained learning over time.



Example: Field diaries, facilitator notes, and debrief meeting discussions often capture moments of discomfort, resistance, silence, or gradual shifts in thinking. Reviewing these regularly helps teams identify patterns, improve facilitation strategies, and adapt content without creating additional reporting burdens.

7.

Practice Transparency, Care, and Accountability

How to: Share findings thoughtfully with relevant stakeholders and create spaces for dialogue around what the data shows. MEL should prioritize safety, dignity, and care, especially for women and marginalized groups, and avoid extractive or rigid reporting practices.

Example: Holding discussions with community groups or women's collectives to share learnings and reflect on progress can strengthen trust and accountability, while also grounding future programme decisions in lived realities.



Challenges

1. Difficulties in measuring Behavioural and Attitudinal Change

One of the most significant challenges is assessing shifts in attitudes, behaviours, and power dynamics. Behavioural change, particularly around deeply ingrained gender norms, is often slow and difficult to quantify. Measuring subtle, gradual changes in attitudes, such as increased awareness of gender equality or shifts in personal beliefs about masculinities, can require both time and sensitive approaches, making it hard to attribute changes directly to programme interventions.

2. Context-Specific Indicators

Gender equality programmes need to be responsive to the local context, but this can make developing standardized indicators challenging. Gender norms and the experiences of men and boys differ significantly across cultures, communities, and social groups. Creating meaningful and context-specific indicators that can accurately capture the impact of programmes in different settings is essential but often difficult to manage on a large scale.

3. Resistance to Measurement

Programmes that aim to change entrenched gender norms and behaviours may face resistance from participants who are reluctant to reflect on or acknowledge the need for change. This resistance



can manifest in reluctance to complete surveys, participate in focus groups, or provide honest feedback. Ensuring that participants feel safe and confident in sharing their experiences is key to overcoming this challenge.

4. Gender-Sensitive Data Collection

Collecting data that is both gender-sensitive and inclusive is a challenge. It's important to capture not just changes in men's attitudes and behaviours, but also the perspectives of women and other gender minorities who may be affected by these changes. Data collection methods must account for these perspectives without reinforcing patriarchal structures or biases, which can be difficult when men's engagement with gender equality programmes is the focus.

5. Intersectionality and Complexity

Men and boys are not a homogeneous group. Different social categories, such as caste, class, sexuality, and disability, intersect with gender and influence how individuals experience and respond to gender norms. Incorporating an intersectional lens into MEL is critical but can be complex, requiring nuanced understanding and careful interpretation of data to ensure that diverse experiences are represented and understood.

6. Short-Term vs. Long-Term Impact

The impact of gender equality programmes aimed at men and boys often takes time to manifest. Short-term evaluations may not capture long-term changes in attitudes and behaviours, leading to an incomplete understanding of the programme's effectiveness. It's difficult to measure sustained shifts in social norms or changes in power dynamics, which can take years to fully materialize.

7. Limited Resources and Capacity

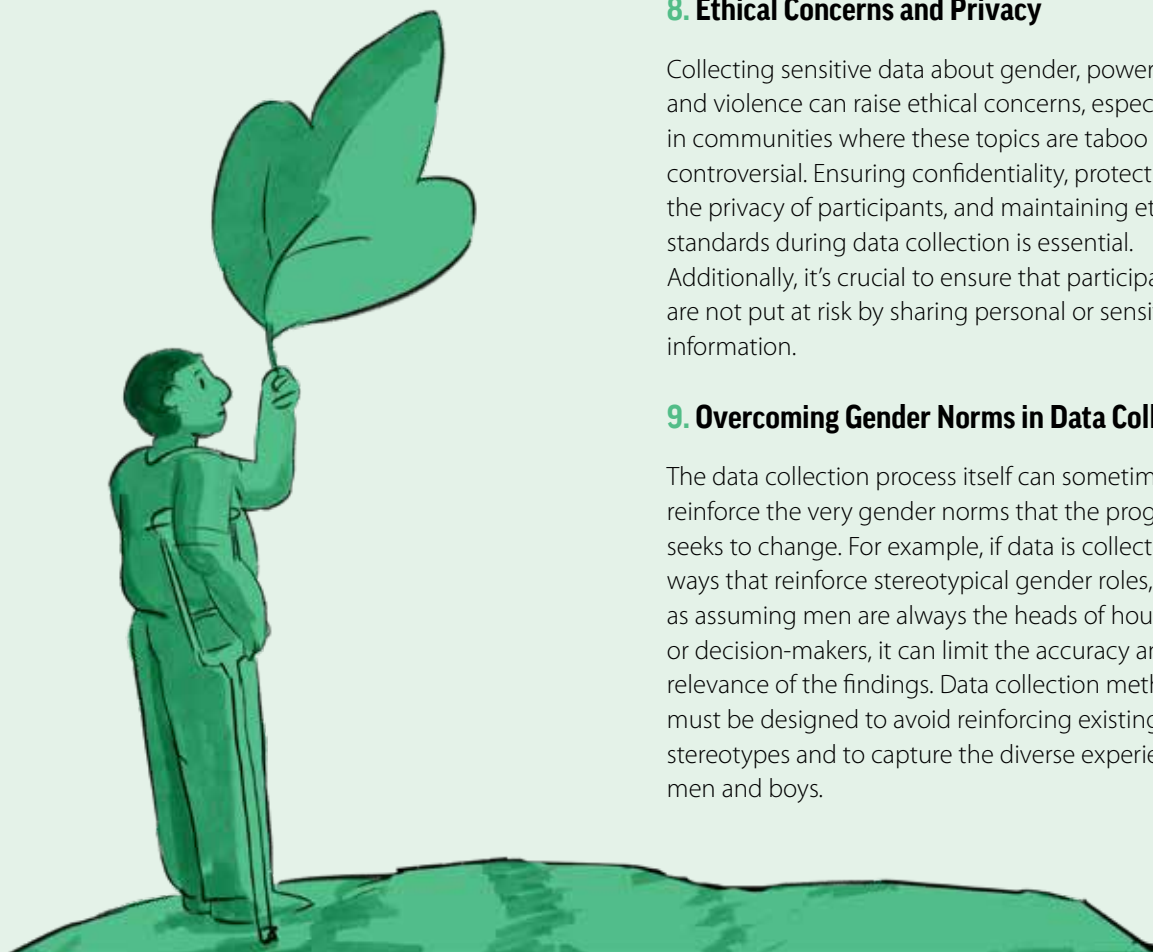
Many community-based organizations have limited resources and capacity to conduct thorough monitoring and evaluation. High-quality data collection, analysis, and reporting require time, funding, and trained staff, which can be a barrier for grassroots organizations. Without adequate resources, organizations may struggle to implement effective MEL systems, limiting their ability to track and demonstrate the success of their programmes.

8. Ethical Concerns and Privacy

Collecting sensitive data about gender, power, and violence can raise ethical concerns, especially in communities where these topics are taboo or controversial. Ensuring confidentiality, protecting the privacy of participants, and maintaining ethical standards during data collection is essential. Additionally, it's crucial to ensure that participants are not put at risk by sharing personal or sensitive information.

9. Overcoming Gender Norms in Data Collection

The data collection process itself can sometimes reinforce the very gender norms that the programme seeks to change. For example, if data is collected in ways that reinforce stereotypical gender roles, such as assuming men are always the heads of households or decision-makers, it can limit the accuracy and relevance of the findings. Data collection methods must be designed to avoid reinforcing existing stereotypes and to capture the diverse experiences of men and boys.



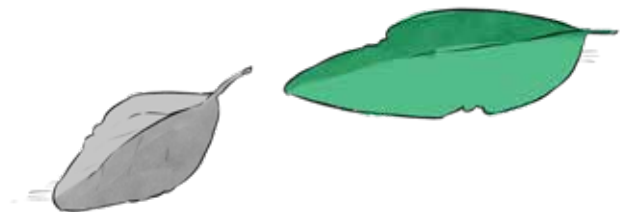
Case-study/Spotlight

The “Men as Partners” (MAP) programme in South Africa, launched by EngenderHealth, is a successful example of engaging men and boys in gender equality through a well-structured monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) framework. The programme focused on shifting attitudes and behaviours related to masculinity, sexual and reproductive health, and gender-based violence (GBV). By using a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the programme tracked changes in men’s understanding of gender equality, their involvement in family planning, and their participation in caregiving and combating GBV. The MEL system allowed for continuous learning and adaptation, ensuring that the programme remained relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of participants.

The programme’s success was also attributed to its intersectional approach, which considered the different experiences of men based on factors such as age, socio-economic background, and location. Regular data collection and feedback from stakeholders, including health workers and community leaders, ensured the programme was accountable and its impacts were accurately measured.

Hope to Achieve

- ◆ The goal is to move beyond measuring simple attitude changes to assess real, sustained behaviour shifts that contribute to gender equality. Effective monitoring and evaluation aim to capture nuanced impacts, including shifts in family dynamics, community interactions, and social norms which enables a fuller understanding of how programmes influence individuals, families, and broader communities, highlighting areas where gender equality is successfully promoted and where adjustments are needed.
- ◆ MEL should provide insights into how well programmes foster long-term change. By focusing on multi-level impacts, from individual behaviours to community-wide acceptance of gender-equitable norms, MEL can aid programmes to achieve not just immediate improvements but sustained systemic transformations.
- ◆ Evaluation processes should actively include diverse voices, especially those of diverse men and gender-diverse individuals, to ensure programmes that meet the needs of all stakeholders and ‘leave no one behind’. This approach promotes transparency, builds trust, and aligns with feminist principles, creating a more inclusive and equitable programme structure.



Things to Keep in Mind

Ensure MEL tools and methods are carefully adapted to different cultural and social contexts, even while maintaining consistency in evaluation standards across geographies. This helps programmes gather reliable data across diverse communities and capture the unique impacts in each setting.

While attitude changes are valuable, they do not always guarantee behaviour shifts, and effective evaluation should differentiate between the two to provide a complete picture of impact.

Resources

- ◆ **Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Equality and Health–Evaluation**

Tools: A detailed set of evaluation tools, sample questionnaires and logical-framework formats for working with men and boys globally. A great resource to get started, but it will need contextualization and localization. Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/engaging-men-and-boys-gender-equality-and-health>



- ◆ **Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) (Government of Canada):** An

evaluation tool for capturing impact on intersectionality. Available at: <https://women-gender-equality.canada.ca/en/gender-based-analysis-plus.html>

- ◆ **Feminist Approaches to Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (Equality Fund)**

Available at: <https://equalityfund.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Feminist-MEL-Research-Overview-Paper-FINAL-1.pdf>

Self-check for Module 5

Use these as a quick go-to list to review your programme. If you cannot answer 'yes' or 'we have a plan for this' to a question, it is worth revisiting that part of your design.

- ◆ Is MEL built into the programme from the beginning, with regular moments for reflection, learning, and course correction - rather than a one-time exercise?
- ◆ Are we measuring behaviour change, and not only shifts in attitude? Are we tracking whether change is visible beyond the individual - in families, peer groups, institutions, and communities?
- ◆ Are we triangulating – using multiple perspectives and sources, rather than self-report alone?
- ◆ Are our indicators grounded in local context and realities?
- ◆ Are learning and reflection embedded throughout the programme, so that insights from the field regularly inform facilitation, content, risk management, and course correction?
- ◆ Are we using qualitative data to understand what is changing, what is stuck, and why??
- ◆ Are facilitators documenting resistance, silence, discomfort, backlash, and small breakthroughs as important MEL data?
- ◆ Are we collecting and sharing data in ways that protect confidentiality, safety, dignity, and trust?
- ◆ Are findings feeding back into programme adaptation and an evolving Theory of Change?
- ◆ Have we named what we still do not know, and what needs longer-term follow-up or further research?



Stakeholder Recommendations



Change does not happen in a vacuum. Beyond direct engagement, programme designers must address the broader ecosystem in which men and boys live, work and learn - a “holistic ecosystem” approach in which different actors act as mutually reinforcing pillars.⁴⁷

The following recommendations serve a dual purpose: first, they provide programme designers with a roadmap for identifying and engaging strategic partners who can amplify their work; and second, they offer a set of actionable considerations for the stakeholders themselves. By recognizing their unique roles and responsibilities within this ecosystem, these actors can move beyond passive support to become active drivers of gender justice.

- ◆ **Faith-Based Organisations:** Working with FBOs as stakeholders is essential because religion plays a central role in many communities, shaping values, behaviours, and attitudes. FBOs contribute through charity, counselling, and community services, addressing social issues at the grassroots level. Despite concerns over their alignment with conservative values, engaging with FBOs offers opportunities to promote gender equality by integrating faith-based principles like compassion,

respect, and empathy into development goals. FBOs can influence large groups of followers, making them powerful allies in driving social transformation toward SDG5. Given below are some key recommendations for partnering with FBOs:

- ◆ **Leverage Community Leadership** - FBO leaders shape public opinion and influence community values. Partnering with them can mobilize resources and build support networks to advance gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE), accelerating progress toward SDG5.
- ◆ **Align with Value-Based Work** - Faith-based values - such as respect, empathy, and compassion - align with human rights principles at the core of SDG5. Translating these goals into culturally familiar frameworks helps communities embrace them more effectively.
- ◆ **Encourage Self-Reflection** - Use religious tools to promote individual and collective reflection. This encourages women to embrace their strengths and challenges men to acknowledge privilege and take responsibility for advancing social justice. Reflection processes, supported

47 Kedia, S., Kandpal, S., Khurana, N., & Verma, R. (2024). Transforming MENTalities: Engaging men and boys: A report on pathways to gender equality in India. UNESCO.<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392230>

by faith principles, can foster balanced gender dynamics and sustainable social transformation.

- ◆ **Mental Health:** Mental health in India remains highly stigmatized and underrepresented within the medical and psychosocial field. Recent evaluations, such as the National Mental Health Survey (2015-16), revealed an 85% treatment gap for common mental health issues. Young people in India are increasingly affected by anxiety, depression, and stress-related issues, driven by intense academic pressures, economic uncertainties, and rapid social changes. Yet, mental health care remains largely inaccessible, with a severe shortage of trained professionals, cultural stigma, and limited services, especially in rural and underserved areas.⁴⁸ Women especially marginalized women and gender diverse people, particularly survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault, face significant mental health risks within a gender-unequal society. When developing mental health curricula or interventions, it is crucial to assess the compounding impact of masculine performance as a primary stressor. The internal pressure to meet the social benchmark of being a “real man” often acts as an umbrella that heightens other systemic pressures, such as the demand for high income, the expectation of family leadership, and the maintenance of peer status. Furthermore, this is compounded by a secondary pressure: the

cultural mandate to remain in absolute control. This dynamic effectively stigmatizes help-seeking as “un-manly,” creating a dangerous feedback loop where the very norms that cause mental strain also prevent individuals from accessing the interventions needed to alleviate it. This gap in treatment, compounded by stigma, stresses the need for compassionate, innovative mental health programmes that integrate efforts to engage men and boys in gender equality initiatives.

Investing in youth-centred mental health services and integrating them into schools, workplaces, and community health programmes can promote early intervention, reduce stigma, and improve resilience, creating healthier communities and a more robust future workforce. Addressing mental health urgently among young people is not just a public health imperative but a critical step toward sustainable social and economic progress in the country.

- ◆ **The Rural Sector and Environment Dimension Engagement:** The two critical areas that need immediate attention in gender equality programmes are - working with rural communities and focusing on climate change and environmental risk.



48 Mahapatra, P., & Seshadri, S. (2023). Mental health in India: Evolving strategies, initiatives, and prospects. *The Lancet Regional Health - Southeast Asia*, 20, 100300.



These are both essential for sustainable development, especially in India, where 65% of people live in rural areas.

Rural communities face greater impacts from issues like climate change, loss of natural resources, and poor land management. Addressing these challenges means not only promoting environmental care but also making sure rural communities are a central part of gender equality efforts. To effectively engage rural communities, programmes should focus specifically on rural men and boys, who often have unique challenges and viewpoints because of their close connection to the land. Programmes should honour this by encouraging people in rural areas to work together to protect and conserve natural resources. By involving men and boys actively in caring for the environment, these programmes can also challenge traditional gender roles, opening up new ways to promote gender equality.

Adding a **climate change and environmental focus** to gender equality programmes also aligns well with broader sustainability goals. When environmental education and conservation are part of gender equality programmes, men and boys are engaged in meaningful ways that relate to their everyday lives and livelihoods. Programmes should highlight the practical benefits of taking care of the environment like stronger, more resilient farming practices and sustainable use of resources. This approach builds a shared responsibility across genders for the health of natural resources, showing how everyone benefits from environmental stewardship.

In addition to good practices and guiding principles, stakeholder engagement plays a key role in deepening engagement with men and boys. Cooperation and collaboration between sectors accelerate progress toward gender equality. Leveraging existing infrastructure and platforms - like UNESCO and the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India - can enhance knowledge-sharing, resource coordination, and unified approaches. Such partnerships also allow stakeholders to recognize their limitations and seek complementary expertise from other sectors, ultimately amplifying the impact of collective efforts. Hence, this toolkit also offers recommendations for stakeholders on how they can contribute towards creating a strong, conducive and effective ecosystem for gender equality through engaging with men and boys.

- ◆ **Academia:** We recommend that academia contributes to the research and understanding of masculinity and engaging with men and boys to question patriarchy in a more intentional and nuanced manner. These insights should be shared with governments and civil society to strengthen their programmes by grounding them in relevant, contextual knowledge. This will be crucial in bridging the gap faced by practitioners on the lack of adequate and contextualized information and resources on men and masculinities, specifically from diverse Indian contexts and cultures.
- ◆ **Non-Academic Stakeholders:** All non-academic stakeholders share best practices and lessons learned publicly to inform new approaches and methodologies. This will highlight areas of saturation and neglect across dimensions and geographies making it easy to identify areas that are not receiving sufficient attention. All this together will help potential funding agencies to better understand what is needed the most.

◆ **Researchers:**

- Key groups that require more focused research and programmatic efforts include men who have sex with men, men living with HIV/AIDS, male caregivers, men involved in substance abuse, men with disabilities, male sex workers, and transgender individuals.⁴⁹
- Lack of research on working with masculinities across the diverse contexts of India.

◆ **Civil Society:**

- There is a lack of educational material and publicly accessible training guides for engaging with men and boys. Although there are some processes that are necessarily proprietary for organizations that earn a profit through their programmes, developing open-access educational material, training guides, measurement scales, interview question banks, and other such material will benefit the greater national efforts immensely. Programmes like Yaari Dosti have done an excellent job of developing and contextualizing its open-access training manual on working with men and boys on HIV and AIDS and gender violence.
- There remains a persistent focus in the men and masculinities literature on violence and sexual health, which can tend to reinforce unhelpful stereotypes of men as inherently violent and blameworthy. Instead of a

focus on ‘harm reduction’ – stopping men from infecting women with HIV through unsafe sex or being violent with their wives, for example – issues such as who does the housework, or who gets paid less on account of their gender should be taken up.

- Gender-transformative work with men should actively advocate for political and policy change, in partnership with and accountable to intersectional feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. This work must address institutional inaction and impunity by building internal capacity and commitment to reform, while also creating external pressure to ensure accountability to this reform agenda.⁵⁰

- ◆ **UN Agencies:** To effectively promote gender equality in India, the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office should encourage all UN agencies in India to prioritize programmes that actively engage men and boys. By integrating this focus into existing gender equality initiatives, UN agencies can foster a more comprehensive approach to gender equity that addresses cultural norms and creates lasting change. This engagement is particularly crucial, as changing attitudes among men and boys can lead to broader societal transformation, supporting the 2030 Agenda’s goal to “leave no one behind.”

49 Esplen, E. (2006). Engaging Men in Gender Equality: Positive Strategies and Approaches – Overview and Annotated Bibliography. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Prepared for Irish Aid.

50 UN Women. (2021). Working with men and boys for gender equality: State of play and future directions [Policy brief]. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Policy-brief-Working-with-men-and-boys-for-gender-equality-en.pdf>

Moreover, as the RCO aligns its work with the objectives and priorities of the Government of India, it is essential to address the current gap in political support for such initiatives at both national and state levels. We recommend that the RCO advocate for increased political commitment by highlighting the long-term benefits of engaging men and boys in gender equality programmes, both in terms of social stability and sustainable development. Partnering with government entities to build awareness and support for this approach would enhance alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and promote a more inclusive path to achieving Agenda 2030. To implement this recommendation, the RCO can:

- ◆ Incorporate a gender equality focus that includes engaging men and boys in the annual assessment of UN agency work plans.
- ◆ Ensure that gender budgeting within UN programmes allocates resources for male engagement initiatives in gender equality.
- ◆ Encourage reporting on men and boys' involvement in the UN gender equality monitoring template to capture progress and outcomes.
- ◆ Engage with government stakeholders to raise awareness of the benefits of male engagement in gender equality efforts, strengthening alignment with national and state priorities.

◆ Government

- National and state efforts on involving young men and boys should involve collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women and Child Development, alongside experts in early childhood development. It is equally important to engage parents, as their influence plays a key role in shaping gender values in young children.
- Government education departments should consider conducting a comprehensive **equity audit** of general curricula across all subjects to identify and dismantle embedded gender biases. Alongside this systemic review, specific programming should be implemented that utilizes creative, non-traditional, and game-based engagements for boys that can effectively challenge the social benchmarks of "appropriate" gender behaviour, encouraging boys to adopt more equitable and emotionally honest ways of being.
- Effective schemes/policies should promote gender equality in schools, encouraging discussions on respect for girls and women, the harm of violence and misconduct, and accurate and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education. Incorporating aspects of mental health and teaching safe internet practices is strongly suggested.



◆ **Public Service Duty Bearers**

To drive sustainable gender equality in India, it is essential to focus on engaging men and boys within public service institutions, particularly among duty bearers like the police, military, government offices, judiciary, and medical professionals. These institutions wield significant influence in society, and many state actors within them are both gatekeepers and products of the same patriarchal structures that drive gender-based discrimination and violence. Engaging men and boys in these roles is crucial for fostering an institutional culture that actively promotes gender equity and dismantles harmful gender norms.

Public service sectors, especially the police and military, often reinforce traditional masculine ideals that can perpetuate silence or inaction around gender discrimination and violence. This culture not only risks endorsing gender-based discrimination but also affects service delivery at critical points of justice and support for survivors of gender-based violence. For this reason, integrating gender sensitivity training that specifically targets male duty bearers is an urgent and essential step toward creating an inclusive and safe environment for all.

◆ **Donors/Funders**

- We recommend that funders move beyond the idea that gender equality is relevant to only one gender or that everyday feminists focus solely on women's issues. The intersectional nature of feminist work shows that these issues impact everyone. To truly support intersectional

organizing and funding across diverse issues and populations for sustainable change, it is essential to include men and boys in efforts to challenge gender injustice.

- We recommend that funders remain mindful of the scarcity of resources for gender equality initiatives globally, especially the recent increase in global funding cuts for the same. Despite its critical importance, women's rights organizations receive less than 0.13% of total global Official Development Assistance (ODA). Given the already limited and rapidly declining funding for gender equality, it is essential to ensure that resources allocated to engaging men and boys are not diverted from the small funding pool dedicated to diverse women and girls. Such diversification of gender equality funds would undermine the overarching goal of achieving gender equity and risk compromising the progress made by women's movements. Therefore, it is imperative that initiatives engaging men and boys remain accountable to the women's rights movement, ensuring that these efforts complement and strengthen, rather than detract from, the broader struggle for gender justice.



- ◆ We recommend that funders allocate sufficient resources to enable programmes to address the nuanced needs of diverse populations, such as disability inclusion. Limited resources pressure programmes to focus on broader and homogeneous populations, leaving certain needs unaddressed especially those of marginalized people. With adequate funding, programmes can better integrate overlooked areas and design more inclusive interventions, ensuring that no group is excluded from development efforts.
- ◆ We recommend that funders prioritize resources for the scalability and sustainability of gender-transformative interventions focused on male engagement. While there are innovative pilot projects demonstrating success, expanding these efforts to reach larger populations remains challenging due to limited funding, capacity constraints, and the lack of scalable, evidence-based models. Adequate support will enable programmes to strengthen capacity, generate actionable evidence, and ensure long-term impact across communities.
- ◆ It is important to measure not only short-term change in small-scale programmes or settings but also long-term change in large-scale populations and settings, and call on donors to support such evidence building.⁵¹ We recommend that funders adopt a broader perspective on impact evaluation for gender-transformative programmes, recognizing that structural change is a long-term process and consider integrating Feminist MEL in their work. Traditional evaluations often focus narrowly on shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours, missing the broader effects on social norms and outcomes for women and communities. It is essential to value qualitative insights, including stories and anecdotal data, as these provide critical context and demonstrate incremental progress toward long-term transformation. Embracing diverse forms of impact ensures that programmes remain aligned with the complex realities of social change.

51 UN Women. (2021). Working with men and boys for gender equality: State of play and future directions [Policy brief]. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Policy-brief-Working-with-men-and-boys-for-gender-equality-en.pdf>



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Annex 1

Probes for Understanding the Population, Community, Challenges and Opportunities

A. Knowing Your Population

- ◆ Demographic profile (location, population, number of households, age, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, literacy rate, religion, etc.)
- ◆ Persons with disabilities in the region
- ◆ Mental health related issues
- ◆ LGBTQIA+ groups in the region
- ◆ Education and livelihood patterns
- ◆ Migration patterns
- ◆ Key groups of men and boys present
- ◆ Existing leadership or influencer groups

B. Knowing the Community Context

- ◆ Social and cultural norms related to gender
- ◆ Power structures and decision-making spaces
- ◆ Key institutions (schools, panchayats, youth groups, religious institutions, health institutions)
- ◆ Environmental concerns
- ◆ Any conflict situation
- ◆ Existing government, CSO and private sector programmes or initiatives in the community
- ◆ Community attitudes towards ongoing gender equality work
- ◆ Connectivity and mobility related

C. Key Challenges and Risks

- ◆ Harmful gender norms and practices
- ◆ Forms of resistance or backlash anticipated
- ◆ Safety concerns for participants or facilitators
- ◆ Structural barriers (poverty, access, exclusion)
- ◆ Previous programmatic challenges

D. Opportunities and Entry Points

- ◆ Existing allies or champions
- ◆ Positive norms or practices to build on
- ◆ Youth spaces or platforms for engagement
- ◆ Moments of change (life transitions, community events)
- ◆ Institutional or policy linkages



Annex 2

Sample Theory of Change

This Theory of Change (ToC) outlines a framework for meaningfully engaging men and/or boys in gender equality programmes. It aims to address the systemic, cultural, and individual barriers to gender equality by challenging traditional notions of masculinities and transforming harmful gender norms towards achieving more gender equality in the context of intervention.

The example below shows how the guiding principles in Module 1 can be translated, step by step, into a simple Theory of Change. It draws on the toolkit's field test with the MANthan programme in Jamtara, Jharkhand, and is illustrative only: the specific problem, assumptions and outcomes should be replaced with whatever your own community analysis tells you.

Step 1: Know your community (guiding principle 1).

Formative research in the three test villages surfaced high rates of school dropout and early marriage for girls, alongside strong expectations that boys be 'providers', be tough, and avoid anything seen as 'girls' work'. Trusted entry points included sports and the respect young men gave to older 'big brother' figures.

Step 2: Name the problem and who you work with.

Problem: rigid masculine norms among adolescent boys and young men help sustain girls' dropout, early marriage and an unequal division of work. **Population:** adolescent boys, and through them parents and the Village Champions who work with them.



Step 3: Make your assumptions and risks explicit.

Assumption: if boys experience respected male role models who model equitable behaviour, they will begin to question 'provider/tough' norms. **Risks:** backlash from families or peers, and time poverty among boys who already work.

Step 4: Choose strategies (guiding principles 2–6).

Sports-based engagement with structured reflection after the game; trained Village Champions acting as proximal role models; intergenerational dialogues with parents; and experiential sessions on emotions, care work, respect and consent.

Step 5: Map the results chain.

Set out, for each strategy, the immediate output it produces, the medium-term outcome it is meant to lead to, and how that contributes to the overall goal.

A simple results chain for this example:

- ◆ Sports plus reflection with peer mentors → boys attend regular sessions and discuss gender openly (output) → boys hold more equitable attitudes to girls' education and to 'boys'/girls' work' (outcome) → contributes to changed community norms and fewer dropouts (goal).
- ◆ Trained Village Champions as role models → visible, respected men modelling care and respect (output) → boys take up non-violent, supportive behaviours with peers and at home (outcome) → contributes to reduced violence and more equal households (goal).
- ◆ Intergenerational dialogues with parents → parents engage with the value of girls' schooling (output) → families delay marriage and re-enrol girls who had dropped out (outcome) → contributes to girls' continued education (goal).

Reading the chain backwards (goal ← outcome ← output ← strategy) is a good way to test whether each activity plausibly leads to the change you want, and to spot missing steps or untested assumptions before you begin.

Goal:

To foster inclusive, gender-equitable communities by engaging men and boys as active agents of change, co-beneficiaries, and stakeholders in gender equality efforts.

Outputs:

- ◆ Increased awareness of gender norms being socially constructed, understanding of the impact of patriarchy on all genders
- ◆ Increased acceptance of diverse forms of masculinity and its expression among the participant group
- ◆ Increased gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours among men and boys
- ◆ Increased understanding of how power works and contributes to gender-based violence

Outcomes:

- ◆ Shift in attitudes towards gender roles, recognition of the benefits of gender equality for men and society
- ◆ Increased awareness on gender-based violence (GBV) and seeking support for it
- ◆ Adoption of non-violent behaviours and increase in respectful relationships

- ◆ Improved uptake of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services
- ◆ Enhanced participation of men in caregiving and household responsibilities
- ◆ Increased acceptance of diverse forms of masculinity and its expression among the community

Long-term Outcome

- ◆ Changes in community norms, Reduction in gender-based violence (GBV)

Inputs/Strategies/Pathways of Change:

1. Awareness and Knowledge Building

- ◆ **Activities:** Educational workshops, community dialogues, reflective exercises, peer mentoring, role-playing, storytelling
- ◆ **Outputs:** Increased awareness of gender norms, understanding of the impact of patriarchy on all genders, Increased understanding of how power works and contributes to gender-based violence
- ◆ **Outcomes:** Shift in attitudes towards gender roles, recognition of the benefits of gender equality for men and society



2. Behavioural Change and Skill Development

- ◆ **Activities:** Skill-building in emotional regulation, conflict resolution, shared caregiving responsibilities
- ◆ **Outputs:** Increased gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours among men and boys, Increased acceptance of diverse forms of masculinity and its expression among the participant group
- ◆ **Outcomes:** Adoption of non-violent behaviours, respectful relationships, increase in seeking GBV support,

3. Community and Structural Transformation

- ◆ **Activities:** Community mobilization, engagement with stakeholders (religious leaders, educators), advocacy for policy reforms
- ◆ **Output:** Increased acceptance of diverse forms of masculinity and its expression among the community
- ◆ **Long-term Outcome:** Changes in community norms, Reduction in gender-based violence (GBV)

Guiding Principles:

- ◆ **Intersectionality:** Address overlapping forms of discrimination related to caste, class, sexuality, disability, and more.

- ◆ **Accountability:** Programmes are accountable to feminist movements and prioritize the voices of women and marginalized groups.
- ◆ **Safe Spaces:** Create environments where men and boys can express vulnerabilities and critically reflect without judgment.
- ◆ **Co-Creation:** Engage participants in designing interventions, ensuring cultural relevance and local ownership.

Assumptions:

- ◆ Engaging men as allies, stakeholders, and agents of change contributes to sustainable gender norm transformation.
- ◆ Community involvement and multi-level interventions (individual, interpersonal, community, societal) are critical for impact.

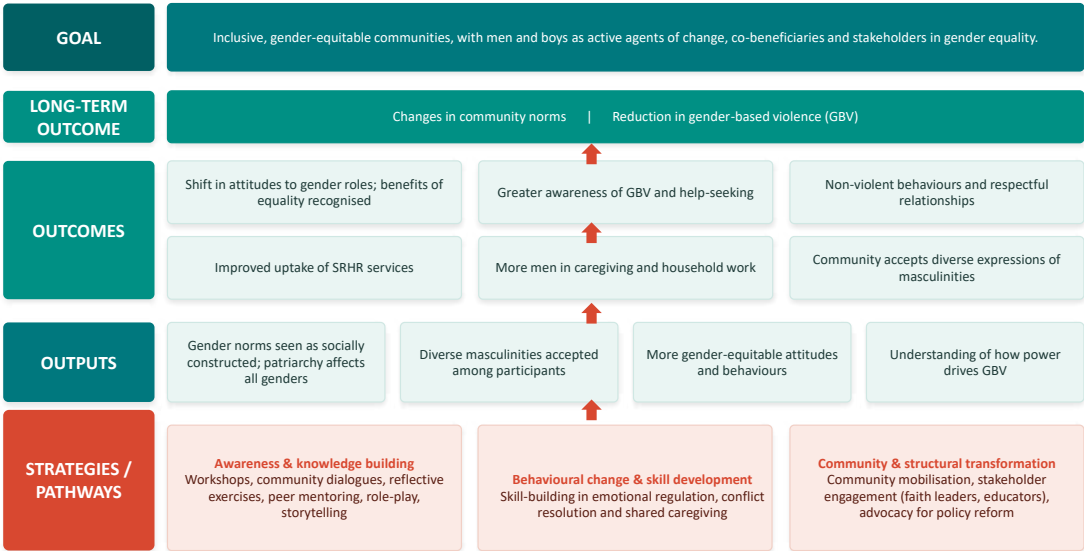
Risks and Mitigation Strategies:

- ◆ **Resistance/Backlash:** Anticipate possible risks from within or outside of the community and mitigation strategies to be prepared in case of any backlash. For instance, use of strategic communication, engaging with community leaders and other stakeholders as relevant, establishing support networks, etc.
- ◆ **Sustainability Challenges:** List out the vision and challenges for sustainability of the intervention/ programme.

Sample Theory of Change

Engaging men and boys for gender equality

Read from the bottom up: strategies lead to outputs, then outcomes, and ultimately the goal.



What underpins the Theory of Change

Some key guiding principles, assumptions, and risks that hold the framework together

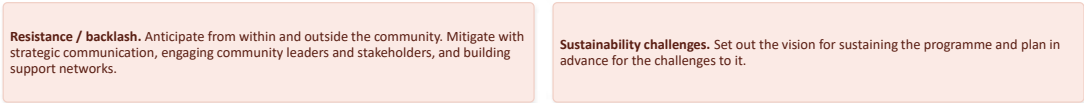
GUIDING PRINCIPLES



ASSUMPTIONS



RISKS & MITIGATION



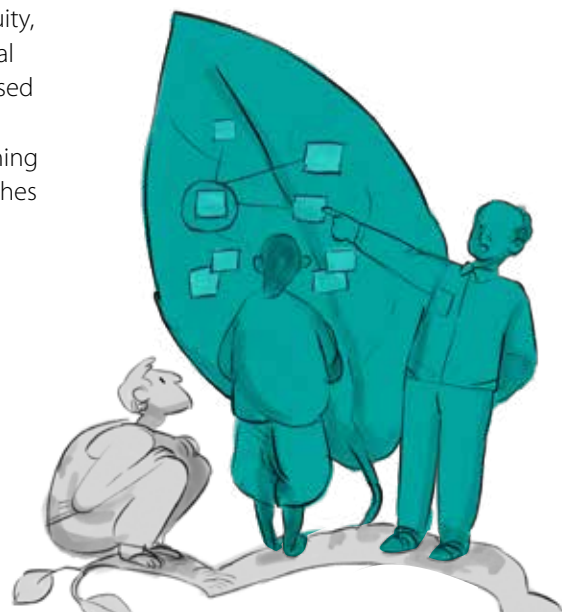
Annex 2, Sample Theory of Change. adapt the boxes to your own context, population and indicators.

Annex 3

Conceptual Frameworks and Methods in Engaging Men and Boys

Efforts to engage men and boys in gender equality must be rooted in robust conceptual frameworks and methods that address the complexities of gender norms, masculinities, and intersectionality. These frameworks provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how harmful norms are created, sustained, and resisted across different social and cultural contexts. Methods, on the other hand, translate these concepts into practical strategies for action, equipping practitioners with tools to foster behavioural and attitudinal change.

Engaging men and boys effectively require approaches that are both transformative and inclusive, emphasizing accountability, equity, and shared responsibility. This section explores key conceptual frameworks that inform interventions, as well as evidence-based methods that have demonstrated success in shifting harmful norms and promoting gender-equitable attitudes. By combining theoretical insights with practical applications, these approaches offer a roadmap for creating sustainable, community-driven change that benefits individuals of all genders.



Socio-Ecological Model⁵²

The ecological model framework recognizes and addresses the individual, institutional and cultural dynamics that influence the behaviours and vulnerabilities of people.

- ◆ The **individual level** focuses on personal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to encourage self-reflection and new ways of thinking. For example, comprehensive sexuality education can shift personal perspectives on violence, mental health, relationships, etc and inspire individuals to adopt healthier behaviours. However, these changes are often fragile without addressing other levels of influence alongside.
- ◆ The **interpersonal level** highlights the importance of relationships with family, friends, and peers. Programmes at this level focus on influencing interpersonal dynamics, encouraging people to support each other in challenging gender norms and adopting more equitable behaviours.
- ◆ The **community level** explores the role of local institutions, such as schools, workplaces, and religious organizations, in influencing behaviour. These institutions serve as hubs where norms are taught, reinforced, or challenged. Community-level interventions often involve partnerships with key stakeholders and leaders who can model and support questioning of the rigid norms.
- ◆ The **societal level** examines the broader structural factors that shape social norms, including laws,

policies, media representation, and cultural expectations. For example, working towards changes in laws and policies. This layer ensures that efforts at the individual and community levels are supported by an enabling environment that sustains progress over time.

By addressing all these levels, the ecological model provides a comprehensive framework for designing interventions that promote gender equality. Only when these layers align can long-term shifts in gender norms and behaviours be achieved. This model has been used by several organizations like ICRW, Equimundo, MenEngage and Breakthrough to name a few.

Pathways Model⁵³

The **Pathways Model** recognizes that social and behaviour change is a gradual, non-linear process, where individuals and communities may progress through different stages and sometimes move back and forth along the journey. It begins with **awareness and knowledge** - raising understanding about an issue. However, the model emphasizes that awareness alone isn't enough to trigger change. For instance, knowledge on STI/RTI/unintended pregnancy, does not guarantee practice of safer sex.

As individuals and communities engage with new information, **social norms and values should shift to create an enabling environment that supports positive change.** This may be achieved through public

52 Promundo, UNFPA, & MenEngage. (2010). Engaging men and boys in gender equality and health: A global toolkit for action. New York: UNFPA.

53 Sonke Gender Justice & MenEngage Africa. (2020). MenCare Media Kit: A Toolkit for MenEngage Africa Organisations Working with Media. Cape Town, South Africa: Sonke Gender Justice.

dialogue and debate, where people exchange ideas, challenge harmful practices, and explore healthier alternatives. Emotional engagement plays a crucial role in this process. Feelings like empathy or anger can mobilize individuals to act, as people become personally invested in the cause.

A key aspect of the model is building **self and community efficacy** - the belief that change is possible. Individuals and communities must feel empowered and capable of making a difference. However, sustainable change also requires structural systemic support through policies and an enabling environment that reinforces new behaviours. For example, policies offering paternity leave encourage fathers to take on more caregiving responsibilities. Ultimately, all these steps work together to achieve lasting behaviour change, supported by shifts in attitudes, social norms, and systemic structures.

The Process-Oriented Approach (POA)⁵⁴

POA is a deeply reflective framework designed to foster personal transformation and lasting mindset shifts. Rather than relying on prescriptive teaching, this approach emphasizes self-exploration and internalization of new ideas through experiential learning, encouraging them to examine their beliefs, experiences, and values.

- ◆ The POA focuses on helping individuals become more aware of the ways **entrenched norms and stereotypes** have shaped their identities and behaviours. Participants are prompted to challenge these ingrained attitudes by asking themselves reflective questions about their role in maintaining or resisting harmful practices. This personal journey helps them see the need for change not as an external demand but as something they come to recognize as essential from within.
- ◆ The approach is distinct in its **non-judgmental nature**. Rather than framing values and behaviours in rigid terms of right and wrong, it encourages participants to **appreciate a diversity of values** while critically assessing those that sustain inequality, patriarchy, or harm. This makes the process more authentic and effective, as it allows individuals to confront sensitive issues without feeling judged or defensive. Participants engage with concepts such as gender, power, and sexuality in ways that resonate with their lived experiences.
- ◆ **Facilitators play a key role** in this process by creating a safe and supportive space where participants feel comfortable exploring, sharing without hesitation and discussing complex issues. Facilitators must be well-versed in gender equality, sexuality, and social norms, ensuring they can guide discussions with empathy and insight. They also prepare for the emotional reactions that such discussions might evoke, offering support and referrals as needed.

54 Sonke Gender Justice. (2021). Engaging Men in the Elimination of Child Marriage: Facilitation Manual. Cape Town: Sonke Gender Justice.

- ◆ The POA relies heavily on **dialogue, introspection, and experiential exercises**. Through storytelling, role-playing, and reflective activities, participants connect abstract concepts to their own realities. For example, sessions may involve participants revisiting childhood memories or examining their relationships with family and community members, helping them understand how these dynamics influence their behaviour.
- ◆ The POA seeks to **change mindsets** rather than just behaviours. It encourages participants to view transformation as a lifelong journey, where growth comes from continuous reflection and engagement with others. This approach ensures that personal transformation aligns with broader social change, making it a powerful tool for addressing deep-rooted issues like gender inequality and child marriage.

Diffusion of Innovation Model⁵⁵

The diffusion of innovations theory aims to explain the processes behind the adoption of new ideas and practices, including why this adoption often takes place gradually over extended periods. First published in 1962 by Everett Rogers, the theory explores how new ideas and technologies disseminate through societies, and identifies key factors that influence the adoption process, such as the innovation's perceived advantages, compatibility with existing values, complexity,

trialability, and observability.⁵⁶ By understanding these dynamics, we can better predict and facilitate the spread of beneficial innovations. How innovations are communicated across different segments of society, along with the perceptions and subjective opinions surrounding them, play a crucial role in determining the speed and extent of their 'diffusion' or spread.

In the context of engaging men and boys for gender equity, this model emphasizes the importance of leveraging key individuals, often referred to as "champions/enablers/role models" to act as catalysts for change. These role models play a vital role in adopting and promoting new behaviours and attitudes and encourage others to follow. It explains that the process of adopting innovation is non-linear and occurs in stages. It begins with early adopters, those open to change, who influence the early majority, a group who are more receptive but cautious about adopting new ideas. As momentum builds, the late majority eventually adopts the change, but only after it becomes more mainstream and widely accepted. Laggards, the last group, are resistant to change and adopt new practices only when they become unavoidable.

The model highlights the importance of designing targeted media campaigns and interventions that focus on early adopters to create a ripple effect. Identifying influential figures within a community is critical, as they serve as role models and encourage others to engage. This cascading adoption process allows new ideas to gradually integrate into social norms and structures.

⁵⁵ Programme-HMD Toolkit for Action. "Diffusion of Innovation Model," Program-HMD-Toolkit-for-Action.pdf.

⁵⁶ Rogers, E. M. (2003). Diffusion of innovations (5th ed.). Free Press.

Programme Healthy Masculinity Development (HMD) Theoretical Framework⁵⁷

This model is grounded in gender consciousness, relational gender theory, and the importance of diversity and gender-synchronized approaches. It draws on the work of Paulo Freire and feminist literature, emphasizing critical reflection and activism. This theoretical framework is grounded in four fundamental concepts that guide the programme's approach to gender equity and social justice. These concepts are:

- ◆ **Gender Consciousness:** This concept is inspired by Paulo Freire's notion of "conscientization," which refers to the process of becoming critically aware of one's social reality through reflection and action. In the context of the toolkit, gender consciousness involves individuals reflecting on the cultural, social, and class structures that sustain gender inequality. This critical reflection is aimed at promoting personal growth, social awareness, and activism, ultimately fostering greater gender justice and social justice.
- ◆ **Gender as Relational:** Gender is not an isolated or finite concept but is continuously produced and expressed through interactions and relationships. This relational understanding of gender lays emphasis on the impact of gender norms on men, women and gender diverse persons and how

these norms shape behaviours, opportunities, and vulnerabilities. The activities within the programme must encourage men and boys to critically examine the costs and demerits of rigid gender norms and the benefits of adopting more equitable gender practices.

- ◆ **Diversity:** Diversity should be a cross-cutting theme, recognizing the intersections of gender with other aspects of identity, such as sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, and disability. The programme must include specific activities that promote respect for sexual diversity and confront homophobia, acknowledging that inequalities related to these characteristics are closely tied to gender inequalities. The focus on diversity ensures that the programme is inclusive and addresses the needs of all participants, regardless of their background.
- ◆ **Gender-Synchronized Approaches:** A gender-synchronized approach involves working with young men, women and gender diverse people to examine and change rigid gender norms and power imbalances. This approach recognizes that achieving gender equity requires the engagement of all genders in the process of questioning and transforming harmful norms. Depending on the context, the programme can be implemented with single-sex groups or mixed groups, with the goal of creating safe, meaningful, and effective spaces for critical reflection and dialogue.

⁵⁷ Programme-HMD Toolkit for Action. "Diffusion of Innovation Model," Programme-HMD-Toolkit-for-Action.pdf.

ICRW Approach⁵⁸ (serves as the foundation for the guiding principles in this toolkit)

In 2018 ICRW with support from Cartier Philanthropy developed a conceptual framework for using a gender transformative approach in male engagement efforts for gender equity. The key components include:

- ◆ Engaging men as **stakeholders or co-beneficiaries and agents of change** instead of gatekeepers (who hold power) or allies (who understand the societal benefits of and promote gender equality) to emphasize the responsibility that men have in promoting gender equity and the benefits that they themselves gain. This is a key foundational principle of gender norm transformation work with men and boys.
- ◆ Leveraging entry points like **promoting benefits that men can gain from an equitable society**, working with men in spaces that are familiar and non-threatening, using role models with whom men can relate and exploring issues that interest men. After these initial conversations, programmes can delve deeper into patriarchy and harmful notions of masculinities.
- ◆ Using programme strategies that work with men and boys to **create changes at the individual, community, institutional and policy levels** (a socio-ecological approach) and **adopt**

multisectoral, intersectional and long-term approaches. This is important because gender norm changes take a long time, given inequities are all pervasive and manifest in different forms, across different levels of our eco-system and impact most key aspects of our lives.

These components work together to create processes of gender transformative behaviour and social action and lead to increases in gender-equitable knowledge and attitudes. This **change is iterative**, wherein sometimes attitude changes precede behaviour change and sometimes behaviour changes precede attitudinal shifts. Such changes have a **multi-level impact** benefiting women, men, gender diverse people and families and communities through the creation of an enabling environment for gender equity. This enabling environment entails equitable power relations, equitable distribution of care, acceptance of alternative definitions of masculinity and femininity, equitable policies and infrastructure and representation of women in policy and advocacy positions.

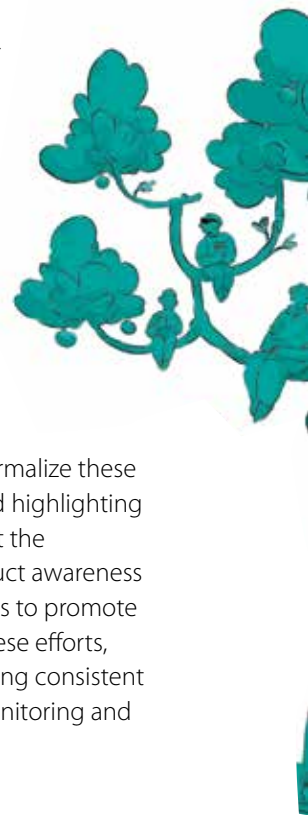
This framework also stresses that in a gender transformative process, the **gradual deconstruction of gender binary** by engaging all genders and understanding how their experiences intersect is crucial, given that **gender and sexual orientation is a continuum**. Finally, the framework calls for accountability to the women's movement and to ongoing programmes and their efforts to empower women and girls with resources and agency.

With regards to research, monitoring and evaluation, the framework calls for complementing programming activities and cycles with a process that helps track changes, capture learnings and feedback loops that can facilitate adjustments as needed, to enhance impact. Here it is important to note that **gender-norm transformation is not linear**, and **measurements and tools need to be responsive and able to measure the journey of participants and facilitators** with all the nuances involved.

The approaches outlined above are not mutually exclusive. While each primarily follows a specific theory of change, a closer look at on-the-ground programmes reveals a blended approach that integrates elements from multiple theories. For instance, the ICRW approach combines principles from pathways, processes, and diffusion of innovation within a broader socio-ecological framework. This approach prioritizes shifting social norms and institutionalized practices that sustain these norms while also focusing on individual-level changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours.

Adopting a socio-ecological approach has been a common strategy among the programmes. One of the key insights was that men and boys were engaged as stakeholders or co-beneficiaries and agents of change through programmes that highlighted how gender equality can be beneficial for men. These included

initiatives within schools, Panchayati Raj Institutions, through wives from an SHG, and other community group education activities. Other programmes focused on men as peer educators or role models, and this too was found effective. At the individual level, the programmes engage men and boys through workshops and peer mentoring, using all-male spaces for open discussions on sensitive topics like sexuality and family planning. Achieving sustainable gender equality requires supporting men in questioning these norms and behaviours, while still holding them accountable for their actions. These safe spaces enable young men to engage openly and honestly without fear of judgment, facilitating meaningful conversations that might not occur in mixed-gender settings. Activities such as sports help normalize these conversations, fostering peer support and highlighting the personal benefits of gender equity. At the community level, the programmes conduct awareness campaigns and use community structures to promote gender equity. Trained facilitators lead these efforts, guiding respectful discussions and ensuring consistent programme quality through ongoing monitoring and training.



58 Kedia, S., Kandpal, S., Khurana, N., & Verma, R. (2024). Transforming MENTalities: Engaging men and boys: A report on pathways to gender equality in India. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392230>

Annex 4

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2. Girls Not Brides (2012) Engaging men in the elimination of child marriage. Available at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resources/engaging-men-elimination-child-marriage/>
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Annex 5

Modified Power Walk Activity

Power and Intersectionality

Activity 1: How Power Operates

Learning objectives

- ◆ Understand how power operates in and impacts everyday lives
- ◆ Understand patriarchy as a system of unequal power based on the masculine/feminine two-gender system that interacts with other systems of power to restrict some people's human rights and progress in life.

Time and materials needed: 60 minutes

- ◆ A set of 13-character cards
- ◆ A room or open space large enough for participants to do the power walk

Instructions:

- ◆ Prepare a set of character cards, based on the examples given in the Notes for facilitator section.
 1. Introduce the activity by presenting the learning objective. Explain to participants that this activity will look at the interactions between patriarchy and other systems of unequal power in restricting some people's rights and progress in life.
- ◆ Ask the participants to stand in a row. Give each of the participants one of the character cards that you prepared earlier. Ask each participant to read out loud the role that has been given to them.
- ◆ Character cards can be the following (adapt based on your context):
 1. Male member of a Panchayat, age 35
 2. Wife of a Sarpanch, age 40
 3. Female Anganwadi worker experiencing domestic violence at home, age 22
 4. Female migrant worker employed in a factory, age 24

5. Unemployed, unmarried Muslim man, age 32
 6. Unemployed woman living in poverty with three children and an alcoholic husband, age 29
 7. Employed transgender person working in a corporate setting in a city, age 29
 8. Hijra who ran away from home in Jharkhand at age 14 and has since been living with the Kinnar community in Ranchi, age 20
 9. Male student enrolled in school and facing pressure to drop out due to poverty; belongs to a lower-caste family, has two younger brothers, lost his mother, and has a father who works as a Rozgar labourer, age 15
 10. Employed young single woman, age 21
 11. Unemployed blind man, age 45
 12. Brahmin man working as a schoolteacher, age 30
 13. Tribal man serving as a Block Development Officer, age 34
- ◆ Explain to the participants that for this activity you want them to take on the character that has been written on the card. You will read a series of statements. For each statement, you would like them to consider whether that statement applies to the role they have been given.
 - ◆ If it does, they should move forward one step. If it doesn't, they should take a step back. If you are unsure, stay in the same place.
 - ◆ Remind participants to speak up and ask for help from the rest of the group if they are unsure as to how a particular statement applies to their character.
 - ◆ Read each of the following statements in turn and allow participants the opportunity to silently move forward one step if the statement applies to them. Statement options:
 - a. I have had or will have opportunities to complete my education
 - b. I don't have to worry about where my next meal will come from
 - c. I can choose the career I want
 - d. I could find a new job easily
 - e. I have a right to inherit property
 - f. I could get a bank loan to start a business if I wanted one
 - g. I can be open about my gender
 - h. I can choose my romantic partner/who I will marry
 - i. I have never worried about how to dress to keep myself safe
 - j. I can determine when and how many children I will have
 - k. I own a mobile phone which I don't have to share with anyone
 - l. If I have a health problem, I can get the help I need right away

- m. I do not rely on my partner to pay for my clothes and food
- n. I can leave my partner if she/he threatens my safety
- o. I can go to the market alone, at any time of the day
- p. If I have a crime committed against me, the police will listen to my case
- q. I can walk down a street at night and not worry about being sexually assaulted
- r. I am respected by most members of my community
- s. I can decide when and how much rest I need

When you finish all the statements, ask the participants to read out their roles again.

Ask the participants to remain where they are standing, and discuss the activity using the questions below:

- ◆ What does it feel like to be standing where you are? Was it easy or difficult to relate to the character you were given?
- ◆ If you did not move or moved very little, how does it feel to see where the others are standing?
- ◆ Does it feel right to be so far behind the others? Who or what is to blame for your position?
- ◆ If you moved a lot, how does it feel to be ahead of many of the others? Does it feel
- ◆ right to feel so far ahead? Why are you so far ahead?
- ◆ How much inequality do you see between the different characters in this activity?

- ◆ What would need to happen in our society so that everyone in this group could be standing at the same point in the front of the line, with equal levels of power in their lives?

End discussion with the following **key messages**:

1. **No one lives a single-issue life** : People do not experience life through only one identity or issue. Gender, caste, class, religion, disability, age, sexuality, location, education, and family situation can all affect how much power, freedom, safety, and opportunity a person has.
2. People who are pushed far behind cannot simply “work harder” to catch up. They may need targeted support, protection, resources, access to services, and changes in unfair social norms and systems.
3. Further, inequality increases people’s risk of violence, exclusion, poor mental health, and loss of opportunities. This is why programmes must look at both personal behaviour and larger systems of power.
4. Creating change is not only about giving information or building skills. People also need safe spaces, open communication, supportive relationships, and an enabling environment where they can question harmful norms without fear.
5. The goal is to understand how unequal systems work and how society can change so that everyone has dignity, safety, rights, and equal opportunities to move forward in life.



“
Gender equality is
not a women’s issue.
It is all of ours.
”

From Reflection to Action: A Toolkit for Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality

