The art of medicine
Gender equality: engaging men in change

I have been working on issues of men, masculinities, and gender for 32 years, and it looks to me like men’s roles in building gender equality are now part of the public agenda to an unprecedented extent. Almost every day, there are new stories and initiatives on how men can support women’s participation in medicine and science, end domestic and sexual violence, share the load of fathering and housework, and more. This focus has a compelling rationale. Above all, we will not make much progress towards gender equality without change among men—and men themselves will benefit from this progress.

There is a particularly energetic focus on men and masculinities as the subject of popular debate, media commentary, and policy and programming. Recent examples include men and the #MeToo movement and media talk of “toxic masculinity” and its harms. There have been other times in history when men have been seen to be in so-called crisis, and I am sceptical of simplistic claims about such a crisis, but this attention to men is new.

This turn to men is visible too in public health. There is growing recognition that gender should not be code for women, men’s lives too are structured by gender, and the social organisation of masculinities is an important determinant of health and wellbeing. There is intensified attention to how the norms and relations of gender and manhood are implicated in violence against women and violence between men, sexual and reproductive health, suicide, alcohol and drug use, mental health, occupational deaths and injuries, and a host of other issues. A wealth of studies over the past three decades have documented that conformity to traditional masculine norms is an influential risk factor across a range of domains. Men who conform more strongly to the beliefs that men should be tough, stoic, dominant, daring, and in control are typically more likely than other men to assault and rape women, assault other men, consider suicide, take risks with sexual partners or at the wheel of a car, avoid help-seeking, and refrain from active fathering. Gender is not the whole story here, but there is no doubt that it is a key part of the story.

There is growing sophistication in research, health promotion, and advocacy on men and masculinities. Greater attention is paid to diversity among men and boys, whether in peer cultures, organisations and institutions, or countries. There is increased use of an intersectional lens, recognising how gender intersects with other social dimensions and inequalities such as ethnicity, class, and sexuality. There are developments in investigations of masculine norms themselves. It matters which norm it is: particular masculine norms have more impact on some health outcomes and harmful behaviours than others.

There is now a field of programming and policy focused on “engaging men”. This comprises efforts aimed at men or boys and intended to involve them in progress towards gender justice. The organisations involved are diverse, from small advocacy and service-focused groups running campaigns in local communities to large-scale national organisations and regional and global networks. Their initiatives are diverse too, from local initiatives inviting men to take action against men’s violence against women or share responsibility for sexual health to regional campaigns intended to recast masculine social norms or produce change in government policies on parenting. Such efforts are buttressed by a growing evidence base, including a steadily increasing collection of impact evaluations and reviews, syntheses, and meta-analyses of these. These analyses show that if done well, then interventions among men and boys can make lasting change in the attitudes and behaviours associated with gender inequality.

Some men are involved in grassroots advocacy in support of feminism. Profeminist men’s advocacy emerged with the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, and there are earlier examples of organised male support for the suffragettes and women’s rights to vote. My first taste of this activism was in an anti-sexist men’s group in 1987, involving both progressive personal change and political activism. Several years later, I found myself in a march of men on the streets of Melbourne, Australia, under the banner Men Against Sexual Assault. Contemporary profeminist men’s advocacy includes local and national groups and organisations in countries rich and poor.
There are international efforts such as the White Ribbon Campaign to end male violence against women and girls, now in more than 70 countries, and the global alliance MenEngage, a network of community organisations and non-governmental and UN agencies seeking to involve boys and men in efforts to achieve gender equality.

Lifting our heads up to look at communities and societies more broadly, there are signs of progress. In my own country, Australia, community support for norms of gender equality has increased over the past two decades, albeit slowly. Community tolerance of domestic and sexual violence has declined. Norms of sexism masculinity to some extent are up for debate. And there’s a growing expectation that men have a role alongside women—indeed a responsibility—to challenge sexism and violence.

All of this is encouraging. Perhaps this reflects my activist bent rather than a careful appraisal of these developments, but they give me hope for long-term progress towards gender equality.

There are, however, good reasons also for concern, and even despair. Gender inequalities that disadvantage women and privilege men remain pervasive across the world. Patriarchal social and religious movements and governments are ascendant in some countries. Explicit attention to men and masculinities in media, popular culture, and government policy is not all good, and sometimes driven by anti-feminist backlash. Progress towards gender equality has slowed or stalled in some high-income countries. Again in Australia, for example, economic decision making by business leaders and executive board members continues to be monopolised by men. Community agreement with some violence-supportive beliefs, such as the myth that false accusations of gender-based violence are common, has increased. And rates of violence against women remain stable. Globally, gradual progress on improving parity between women and men stalled in 2017, when the global gender gap increased for the first time since 2006, and persistent and wide gaps are visible, particularly for economic participation and political empowerment.

Public health’s attention to men and masculinities is only nascent and uneven. Its lenses often are insufficiently gender transformative interventions to reduce HIV risks and violence with heterosexually-active men: a review of the global evidence. AIDS Behav 2013; 17: 2845–63
Flood M. Engaging men and boys in violence prevention. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018
International Center for Research on Women. Gender equality and male engagement: it only works when everyone plays. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women, 2018

Further reading
Flood M. Engaging men and boys in violence prevention. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018
International Center for Research on Women. Gender equality and male engagement: it only works when everyone plays. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women, 2018