



# ways & means

## Working with Men for Women's Rights

Involving men in our work towards gender equality is by no means a new idea, but there remains reluctance within women's movements to promote or embrace it. Engaging men is critical to achieving gender justice; thus this primer addresses strategies and tools for working with men.

### *Where are we now?*

Globally, we are faced with a situation where a rise in militarism, fundamentalisms, poverty and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, amongst other issues, threaten women's rights. Given the current state of the world's women, and despite the excellent work done by many feminists around the world, there is an urgent need to be creative, to be strategic and to re-evaluate how we can strengthen our efforts to protect the rights of women and bring about gender equality.

### *Why is involving men important?*

Men are part of the equation that will ultimately lead to gender equality. Involving men is therefore a pragmatic measure within efforts to achieve women's rights and is also a

tactical measure towards the goal of human rights for all. By working only with women, we may be trying to improve the lives of women while actually having little effect on the overall institutional, societal and structural transformations needed to achieve true gender equality.

"Achieving gender equality is not possible without changes in men's lives as well as in women's. Efforts to incorporate a gender perspective into thinking about development requires more than a focus on women, however vital that might be; what is also needed is a focus on men. Yet, significantly, men continue to be implicated rather than explicitly addressed in development programmes focusing on gender inequalities and the advancement of women." (Grieg, Kimmel and Lang, 1)



**Our intent in working with men (whether separately or together with women) is to analyze power relations in particular contexts and to progressively shift these power relations towards equality.** This includes exploring men and women's access to power, and current gender roles and power in decision-making in the household, communities and societies.

How have gender roles changed? How have the perceived and actual responsibilities of men and women been impacted?

Furthermore, **working with men is critical for developing partnerships and common visions between young women and young men.** Emerging leaders have indicated the need to strike new ground and to employ new strategies for social justice in the context of neoliberal globalization. They are developing their leadership skills and simultaneously exploring new terrains of gender (in)equality. It would be short-sighted not to build the capacity of young men to see the world beyond the patriarchal lenses of most mainstream leadership development.

Most societies and institutions are based on male models of power that promote inequality, domination, and disparate access and control over resources. **Working with young men on power and equality issues has the potential to transform the institutional, cultural and**

**social models that continue to impact on women's rights and gender equality.** By developing partnerships between young people that are based on principles of equality, a basis can be laid for men to support women's rights and gender equality work in the future. This in turn can transform institutions and social structures which impede the attainment of equality.

### *Where do we start?*

**Firstly, we must acknowledge the need to work with men.** While feminists have constantly challenged and examined power, our personal histories as leaders/activists affect the perspectives we take on many issues, including the role of men. Including men in our gender equality strategies may challenge us to reassess some personal experiences with men in our lives and the impact these have on our working co-operatively with them, but this exercise is necessary as we strive to confront power and reform structures.

**The next step is to expand our current understanding of the power relations and dynamics that shape gender roles and how power impacts on gender inequality.** Feminist discourses have taken giant steps in

‘de-constructing’ women’s identities and subsequent discriminations, based on social modifiers such as class, age, sexuality, race, language, religion, culture, etc, while in our understanding of masculinity the same exercise remains at a nascent stage. It is essential that we also deconstruct masculinities, what they are, how they vary and what impact they have on women and men. This involves “debunking the idea of a single hegemonic masculinity” (White, Green and Murphy, 4) and recognising that power is not static or equal for all men. It is influenced by the same social modifiers that contribute to the composition of women’s identities. Similarly, social contexts shape the identities of men and determine the degree of power they wield in relations with women and also amongst themselves. Until we can look at men as more than mere oppressors or one-dimensional, peripheral figures in struggles for gender equality, and instead consider the relations of power between and within genders, interventions aimed at addressing gender equality will remain inadequate.

## *Turning Theory into Practice*

Involving men means taking into account their realities and assessing how they can share responsibility for gender equality at institutional and programmatic levels, and also as gender specialists and program clients. The following strategies are being implemented in various places:

► **Gender sensitization training** allows men to start understanding gender systems, deconstructing masculinity, and talking about sex, sexuality and related issues. These processes, targeted at the individual and the collective, allow men to reflect on their own views and attitudes. The sensitization process is one that should be

“Acknowledging male privilege on an individual level is a beginning, but enlarging the discourse onto a global level will have far-reaching consequences. I would like to pose a question: Can men come to realize that the comforts of power that drive the continuation of male hegemony are self-destructive and harmful to women, children, and the physical and social environments that sustain life?”

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customised to suit the specific needs of the context and the participants and should also make links between culture, religion and gender equality. Ultimately, gender sensitization training should promote cultural beliefs, practices and values that reinforce shared responsibility for gender equality and should focus on attitude shifts



and behaviour transformation, rather than just imparting information.

- **Mobilizing men as agents of change** involves recognizing the power men have to challenge the thinking, attitudes and behaviours of other men (Grieg 4). Given that most of those occupying the upper echelons of power continue to be men, there are advantages to be gained by using this power for positive influence. Similarly, men may find it easier to communicate with and confide in other men. Having men mobilized for gender equality also adds different perspectives and values to the gender equality agenda.
- **Developing strategic partnerships and alliances with other social movements** facilitates reflection on women's issues and gender equality in civil society and helps in developing common and shared commitments to changing unequal gender relations.

“ *Clarity of purpose and vision is essential to ensure that opportunities to involve men do not compromise women and their needs.* ”

Partnerships and alliances also allow for the development of gender-sensitive interventions and policies that take into account the needs of both women and men in order to enable transformation.

- **Creating spaces for dialogue**, where men and women who have gone through the process of deconstructing gender roles come together to talk about gender equality and

social transformation, is another way to work with men. Constructive dialogue will facilitate the development of a shared understanding of equality, which is crucial for the younger generation of emerging leaders.

## *Avoiding the Pitfalls*

**Defining a vision and clear goals is crucial** for the women's movement(s) when strategizing around men's involvement. We must not lose sight of where we are at, how we got here, and what our goals are. At the same time, **we need to be absolutely clear on what we want to achieve by involving men in our work for gender equality.** Involving men does not mean that our fundamental strategies of women's empowerment are discarded, but instead that additional strategies are considered in order to bring about real gender equality. Clarity of purpose and vision is essential to ensure that opportunities to involve men do not compromise women and their needs. In this way

we can avoid male-dominated and male-oriented agendas. **Women-only spaces for awareness-raising and organizing are still essential and should be protected.** Working with men does not mean that all feminist spaces now become mixed environments.

**Ensuring fair resource allocation is another concern**, particularly given the scarcity of resources for gender equality work at this time. The problem is that programs by and for men can

take away from the resources available for women's initiatives and lead to the further marginalization of women. So while the long-term impact of working together with men to deconstruct hierarchies and power bases that perpetuate gender inequality may be positive, **ensuring that resources for service provision and advocacy are strategically targeted to those most in need is essential if working with men is going to lead to women's empowerment and greater equality.**

**Avoiding the perpetuation of gender inequality must be a central tenet** to any work with men.

A concern is whether men will still promote equality in situations where there is not a 'win-win' situation, in other words where they have to personally or collectively give up power or personal comfort. **The promotion of feminism and gender equality has always carried with it the risk of a negative backlash against women** and this risk is very real when sharing spaces and agendas with men (as has happened in nationalist or liberation movement struggles, for example). In strategizing, therefore, we must remain vigilant of possible challenges and incorporate measures to identify and address problems that may arise.

### *Some Successful Initiatives Targeted at Men*

#### ■ Centre for Communication and Popular Education - CANTERA (Central America)

In Nicaragua, while increases in intra-family violence were undoubtedly related to the effects

of Nicaragua's civil war, massive unemployment (especially among men), alcohol abuse, and rampant poverty, it became obvious to many of those working to prevent domestic violence (mostly women) that the root cause of gender-based violence lay in the socially constructed norms that promoted and condoned violent attitudes and behaviour in men. If male violence was to be stopped, or at least minimised, men would also have to become involved in a radical reappraisal of their own gender identities. Their values would have to be redefined, their attitudes altered and their behaviour transformed.

The Centre for Popular Education and Communications (CANTERA), therefore, began offering training courses on masculinity and gender which encourage men to challenge traditional male values and behaviour. Included is an exploration of issues such as the social construction of masculinity, violence, power, love, paternity, relationships and sexuality. The success of this intervention can be attributed to the fact that participants use their own life stories rather than theoretical frameworks in the trainings. Through introspection, they take ultimate responsibility for promoting and consolidating change processes in themselves and in other men. This is done in a framework that would ultimately lead to men and women together focusing on improving the quality of their lives and relationships.

The interventions by CANTERA are informed by the belief that the transformation of traditional masculinity, of men's conceptions,





values, attitudes and behaviour, is a prerequisite for gender equity and eradicating violence against women, without which sustainable human development and social justice can never be achieved.<sup>1</sup>

■ **EngenderHealth – Men as Partners Programme (International)**

Many family planning and preventive health programs focus exclusively on women, forcing women to take disproportionate responsibility for reproductive health and family size. The result is not only an extra burden on women, but a closed door to the health system for men.

EngenderHealth has therefore undertaken to involve men in reproductive health and to addressing their needs through its Men as Partners Programme. The program has run in Tanzania, Uganda, India, and Indonesia, and has helped to create policy support and successful models for integrating men's services into existing health systems. In Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine, South Africa, and the United States, EngenderHealth works with local partners to match services to needs, while raising awareness about gender equity and rights. Local partners conduct workshops in a variety of settings such as workplaces, trade unions, prisons, and faith-based organizations, to improve male involvement in reproductive health.

The program has impacted on those (both men and women) who have participated and those

who run the programs by making them more aware of the links between their own lives and social change. Evaluations of the program have indicated that older men tended to respond better to in-depth sessions of longer duration. On the other hand, adolescent boys were more amenable to accepting alternate views that challenge traditional constructs of masculinity. Many of the local partners run consecutive women-only empowerment processes, and on occasion the two groups are brought together for dialogues on gender equality.<sup>2</sup>

■ **Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas- SIDH (India)**

This organisation focuses on education as a means of addressing gender inequities in the villages of the Central Himalayas. SIDH has developed an innovative training strategy for village youth that views gender as part of the larger issue of social injustice and explores the relationship of gender equity to men's and women's reproductive health.

SIDH's program grew out of several years of experience working with women's groups. SIDH staff realized that most of their programs with women did not fully succeed because of lack of support from the men in women's lives. SIDH felt that a genuine attempt must be made to involve men in women's issues, both to ensure that efforts to empower women did not adversely impact the lives of women and their families as well as to help liberate men from the social pressures of sex-role stereotypes.

Through a process involving a series of workshops, focus groups and interviews SIDH gathered information from men, women and youth in selected villages about their beliefs, customs and values related to gender relations. Using these and other research findings, SIDH designed a process aimed at changing social attitudes rather than merely imparting knowledge or particular skills. The training is designed for youth because in SIDH's experience they are the most receptive to new ideas and most capable of making lasting changes in their attitudes and behaviours. The training is followed by network-building between men and women.

By employing a holistic and integrated approach, SIDH illustrated that gender and reproductive health issues need to be seen in the larger context of social injustices. SIDH did research on the cluster of beliefs and attitudes impacting gender discrimination. Their intervention then illustrates conflicts and creates dissonance with these beliefs in order to facilitate behaviour change and transform attitudes. The underlying principle employed in this program was that gender justice is about healthier relationships at the micro-level. Hence men's involvement is important for the sake of both justice and happiness.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

Achieving gender equality through the involvement of men entails acknowledging the different experiences and changing roles of men and women in our societies today. Involving men in gender equality has two goals: to promote women's agency and power, and to facilitate men's agency in challenging inequalities.

**Our challenge is to move beyond gender stereotypes and misconceptions**, specifically criticisms of men's behaviour. We must instead find a broader, more creative strategy for confronting and transforming power imbalances and dominant constructions of masculinity, as well as femininity, to achieve gender equality for all.

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### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> For more information about this project visit: <http://www.oneworld.org/cantera> and <http://www.ciir.org/ciir.asp?section=news&page=story&id=291>.

<sup>2</sup> Further information about this project is available at <http://www.engenderhealth.org>

<sup>3</sup> For more information about this project please visit [http://www.rho.org/html/menrh\\_progexamples.htm#india](http://www.rho.org/html/menrh_progexamples.htm#india)

The Association for Women's Rights in Development is an international membership organization connecting, informing and mobilizing people and organizations committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. A dynamic network of women and men, AWID members are researchers, academics, students, educators, activists, business people, policy-makers, development practitioners, funders and others, half of whom are located in the global South and Eastern Europe.

AWID's goal is to cause policy, institutional and individual change that will improve the lives of women and girls everywhere. Since 1982, AWID has been doing this by facilitating on-going debates on fundamental and provocative issues as well as by building the individual and organizational capacities of those working for women's empowerment.

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Some specific and immediate ways to initiate the participation of men in our programs include:

■ **Strategize around involving men:** In our current work, we can reassess visions and strategies for gender equality. How can we work with men to improve the effectiveness of existing strategies? How do we most effectively build alliances with men nationally, regionally and internationally? How should we organize ourselves in terms of policy development and leadership?

■ **Create and support spaces for dialogue:** By bringing together groups of men and women who have gone through gender sensitization processes, constructive dialogues can move our agenda forward.

■ **Assess how we might practically work with men either on a day-to-day basis or at strategic moments to advance the agenda for gender equality:** Part of this might involve forming partnerships with groups that are working with men or supporting potential players who want to initiate interventions targeted at men.

■ **Organize gender sensitization forums in the workplace:** Gender sensitization forums with the ultimate aim of transforming organisational cultures and policies can go a long way towards breaking down barriers and tangibly improving conditions for women.

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