

Involving Men in Gender Policy and Practice

MICHAEL FLOOD

Introduction

Across the globe, there is growing interest in the question of men's roles in fostering gender equality. The perception that it is desirable to involve men in efforts toward gender equality is rapidly becoming institutionalized in the philosophies and programs of international organizations. Local programs that engage men have proliferated in fields such as sexual and reproductive health, violence prevention, parenting, and education. At the same time, policies and programs addressing men in gender-conscious ways are scattered and underdeveloped. There are few examples of the systematic integration of gender-related work with men in either government policies or the programming of large-scale institutions. In addition, there are key areas in which men's gendered lives and relations have received little attention, including civil conflicts and wars.

Given the persistence of widespread gender inequalities that disadvantage women, and the limited availability of resources for gender-related work, the desire to continue focusing on women alone, rather than incorporating men, in gender policies and programming is understandable. Programs that address women's strategic and practical gender needs are often marginalized and under-funded, and have had little impact on mainstreaming gender concerns in policies and processes. Thus far, gender mainstreaming has generally fallen short of any radical transformation of the patriarchal gender order.¹ Some women also fear what may happen if men are invited to participate in gender-related work because they have sometimes seen men take over and erode women-oriented projects.²

Nevertheless, including men will be critical to the successful creation of gender equality. There is a compelling rationale for engaging men to positively transform gender relations. This paper outlines the rationale for this engagement and identifies the principles that should guide men's involvement.

Reasons for Engaging Men in Gender Issues

There are four essential reasons for engaging men in building gender equality.

Men Are Gendered, not Generic, Citizens

The impetus for male inclusion in gender-related work is associated with an important shift in how gender issues are conceived and addressed. Men have always been part of the policies and practices of development work, for example, but they have traditionally been treated as generic and ungendered representatives of all humanity. When we assume that men speak for all members of their communities, we perpetuate masculine norms and gender inequalities. The agenda of engaging men is not novel then because of whom it addresses, but how. It addresses men *as men*—as gendered beings who participate in gender relations.

A “women in development” approach—characterized by a focus on women in both analysis and practice, the creation of separate organizational structures for dealing with women, and the development of women-specific policies and projects—dominated development work in the 1970s and 1980s.³ The subsequent shift to a “gender and development” approach over the last two decades embodies a move toward a more overt focus on gender relations and an aim of creating structural changes in male-female power relations. While this approach continues (ideally) to address women’s experiences and social situations, it also situates these in the context of social and power relations between men and women.⁴

Men are *unavoidably* involved in gender issues.⁵ Most immediately, men (or more accurately, specific groups of men) control the resources required to implement women’s claims for justice. But, more broadly, gender inequalities are based in gender relations, in the complex webs of relationships that exist at every level of human experience. Men are as implicated in gender is-

sues as women, and addressing men's attitudes and roles is a crucial element in reconstructing gender relations and equality.

This point is particularly pronounced in conflict and post-conflict societies. To understand and respond to civil unrest, militarism, and war, we must address the men and masculinities that dominate them.⁶ Constructions of male warrior heroes are central to the histories and meaning of war, and gendered social norms shape young men's participation in collective violence.⁷ Conflict situations often reinforce narrow views of masculinity and gender hierarchies.⁸ On the other hand, periods of post-conflict reconstruction offer new opportunities for addressing gender inequalities and institutionalizing reforms.

Many Men Maintain Gender Inequality

Engaging men is necessary though for a more direct reason: to achieve gender equality, many men's attitudes and behaviors must change. Men often play a crucial role as "gatekeepers" of the current gender order through their responsibilities as decision-makers and leaders within their families and communities. They may participate in sexist practices and maintain unjust gender relations by perpetrating violence against women, controlling women's reproductive and familial decision-making, limiting women's access to community resources and political power, or espousing patriarchal beliefs and norms that allow other men to engage in such actions. More broadly, patterns of gender injustice are tied to social constructions of masculinity and male identity. In northern Uganda, for example, where notions of male strength and authority and female weakness and untrustworthiness are prevalent, "real" men are expected to exercise control over their wives.⁹

Conflict and post-conflict societies provide a blunt example of the need to challenge men's perpetuation of gender inequalities. Perhaps the most brutal instance of this is some men's use of violence against women. Incidents of rape and sexual exploitation by men in war and conflict are widespread and well documented. Armed conflicts and political upheavals often entrench gender inequalities and create new ones. Indeed, policies adopted as part of post-conflict reconstruction may exacerbate these.¹⁰ Post-conflict policies and programs must therefore encourage men's adoption of gender-equitable identities, behaviors, and relations. For example, effective strategies for gun control and disarmament must "demobilize" the militarized and violent conceptions of masculinity that sustain arms violence and undermine weapons collection processes.¹¹ They must engage with

and build on the nonviolent identities and social relations evident among many men to encourage unarmed and peaceful ways of living.¹²

Men Have a Stake in Fostering Gender Equality

Gender work with men has also been fueled by the more hopeful insight that men have a positive role to play in fostering gender equality. There is growing recognition that gender inequality is an issue of concern to women and men alike and that men have a stake in fostering gender equality.

Some men are already living in gender-just ways: they respect and care for the women and girls in their lives, and they reject traditional, sexist norms of manhood. And some men are already playing a role in fostering gender equality. Individual men in trade unions and government organizations have been important advocates for women's rights. Small numbers of men are engaged in public efforts in support of gender equality, in such fields as violence prevention, HIV/AIDS prevention, and education.¹³

Experiences in conflict and post-conflict societies also provide powerful examples of how gender disparities harm men and progress toward gender equality benefits them. Again, the strongest example of this concerns violence. In areas of political conflict, young men often have a greater exposure to and participation in violence than young women.¹⁴ Men are most at risk of violence from other men, and sex-selective mass killings of males are a gendered component of many political and military conflicts.¹⁵ While male combatants are perpetrators of abuse against women and other men, both they and non-combatants pay a hefty emotional, social, and physical price for their complicity in patriarchal systems of violence. Conflict and post-conflict conditions provoke further challenges for men, including the loss of traditional livelihoods and displacement from family and community roles. For example, Namibia's post-apartheid legacies of systematic societal discrimination have removed men's access to some traditional forms of affirmation and status and have subsequently encouraged violent and controlling masculinities.¹⁶

Some men are capable of recognizing that they and their communities will benefit from reducing the civil and international violence associated with aggressive constructions of masculinity and patriarchal nation-states.¹⁷ Indeed, there is evidence that gender inequality does more than merely harm women's status and livelihoods; it increases the likelihood that a nation-state will experience internal conflict in the first place.¹⁸

Excluding Men Is Detrimental to Positive Change

Finally, excluding men from work on gender relations can provoke male hostility and retaliation. It can intensify gender inequalities and thus leave women with yet more work to do among unsympathetic men and patriarchal power relations.¹⁹

Given that women already interact with men on a daily basis in their households and public lives, involving men in the renegotiation of gender relations can make interventions more relevant and workable and create lasting change. Male inclusion increases men's responsibility for change and their belief that they too will gain from gender equality, and can address many men's sense of anxiety and fear as traditional masculinities are undermined.²⁰

Why Should Men Change?

There are two broad answers, one practical and the other moral, to the question, "Why should men change?" First, it is in men's best interest to change. By advancing toward gender equality, men will see improvements in their own lives, relationships, and communities. Second, given the fact of men's unjust privilege, many would argue that there is an ethical obligation for men to act in support of the elimination of that privilege.

Many men receive formal and informal benefits from gender inequalities, including material rewards and interpersonal power. At the same time, men also pay significant costs, particularly to their emotional and physical health. More widely, men can be and are motivated by interests other than those associated with maintaining gender privilege. Overall, there are four reasons why men may support change toward gender equality and will benefit from it.

Personal Well-Being

Men suffer heavy personal costs for conforming to dominant definitions of masculinity. For example, current gender roles in South Africa compromise men's health by encouraging them to engage in risky sexual behaviors as part of being "manly" and to see health-seeking behavior as a sign of weakness.²¹

Better Relationships with Women

Men live in social relationships with women and girls—their wives and girlfriends, sisters, daughters, mothers, aunts, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and so on—and "the quality of every man's life depends to a large extent on the quality of those relationships."²² Many men hold high hopes for their daughters' futures, care for their sisters, value their mothers, and disapprove—

at least privately—of male peers' abusive treatment of their wives and girlfriends.

Community Well-Being

Gender reform benefits the well-being of the communities in which men live. For example, both men and their communities profit from flexible divisions of labor that maximize labor resources, improvements in women's health and well-being, and diminishing interpersonal and collective violence.²³

Principle

Men may support gender equality because of their ethical, political, or spiritual commitments. Male human rights activists have advocated for gender equality because of their commitment to ideals of liberation and social justice, while male religious leaders have promoted faith-based beliefs in ideals of compassion and justice for women. Thus, some men have embraced a moral imperative that men share their rights and responsibilities with women.

Risks of Male Inclusion

Nevertheless, male inclusion in gender-related work also involves risks. Involving men in gender policies and programming can threaten funding and resources for programs and services directed at women and may dilute such services' feminist content and orientation. There is also a danger that in speaking to men's concerns, interests, and problems, the impetus for justice for women will be weakened.²⁴ Emphasizing men's roles can also communicate a false sense of symmetry between women's and men's social positions. Indeed, growing policy interest in men and gender issues has been fueled in part by non-feminist and even anti-feminist motivations, including the misguided beliefs that "the balance has swung too far and men are now the victims" or that "men must take back their rightful places at the head of the family and society." Anti-feminist men's and fathers' rights groups are vocal advocates of such positions, and they have had some influence in swaying the policy agendas of governments.²⁵

Key Principles for Male Involvement

What principles then should inform efforts to engage men in gender-related policies and practices? Three interrelated principles guide the positive involvement of men in gender issues: men's involvement must have a pro-feminist purpose, interventions must be sensitive to diversities among men, and we must acknowledge and support men's positive contributions. In addition, to be

effective, the interventions chosen must be culturally appropriate and theoretically informed.

To be pro-feminist is to be guided by principles of gender equality and social justice. It is to be critical of those aspects of men's behavior, constructions of masculinity, and gender relations that harm women. To be pro-feminist or gender-just is to also encourage men to develop respectful, trusting, and egalitarian relations with women, and to promote positive, open-minded constructions of gender or selfhood. Any engagement of men in gender-related work should further feminist goals and draw on feminist frameworks. In other words, we must frame male involvement within a clear feminist political agenda. This work must be done in partnership with, and even be accountable to, women and women's groups. In addition, we must protect women-only spaces and women-focused programs.²⁶

Any approach to men's issues must also acknowledge both commonalities and diversities in the lives of men. Factors such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age shape expressions of manhood and gender. Men share the fruits of male privilege unequally, and some forms of manhood are dominant while others are marginalized.

Furthermore, any work must be grounded in both a belief that men can change and a support for every man's efforts at positive change. This commitment involves resisting feeling hopeless about men and dismissing their participation, and instead building on the many positives already in place in current notions of manhood.

While it is important to understand these three principles for male involvement in gender-related work, it is equally important to be able to translate them into effective interventions. It is clear, for example, that effective interventions must be culturally appropriate—they must be grounded in the realities of men's lives and relations and local gender cultures. Evidence from the field of violence prevention shows that effective educational strategies are comprehensive, intensive, and address cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains: what people know, how they feel, and how they behave.²⁷ Ideally, gender-sensitive education for men uses male facilitators and peer educators, working in partnership with and at times led by women, and creates safe spaces for men to reflect and learn. Our interventions must pay attention not only to men's perpetration of and complicity in gender injustice but also to their involvement in gender-just behaviors and relations.

Interventions should also be theoretically informed by contemporary scholarship on men and masculinities. This recognizes that constructions of masculinity in any

context are likely to be diverse, organized into hierarchies that are actively contested and negotiated, sustained in the gender regimes of institutions and by collective processes of reward and sanction, shaped by both local and global forces, and intertwined with other forms of social organization associated with ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, and nationality.

Conclusion

There is now a sizeable range of resources with which to encourage men's roles in promoting gender equality. The rationale for involving men in work toward gender equality has been well articulated in academic writing and at international conferences.²⁸ Online, pro-feminist men's websites explore anti-sexist politics.²⁹ More practically, key educational and organizational strategies for engaging men are increasingly well documented.³⁰ What is needed now is the widespread adoption of this work, which requires funding, institutionalization, and policy and professional development.

The impetus for men's involvement in gender-related work is likely to increase in the next few years. It is fueled by ongoing shifts in gender relations, feminist and pro-feminist recognition of the need to transform and reconstruct masculinities, and trends in fields such as international development. There is no doubt that involving men in efforts toward gender equality has the potential to greatly enhance the impact and reach of this work, but whether it does so or not will depend on the play of political and cultural forces. Still, building a gender-just world will bring benefits to both women and men, and the reconstruction of gender relations will require their shared commitment and involvement.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Ertürk, 2004.
- 2 Chant and Guttman, 2000.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Connell, 2003.
- 6 Nagel, 1998.
- 7 Enloe, 2000; Buchanan et al., 2005; Barker and Ricardo, 2005.
- 8 Myrttinen, 2003.
- 9 Dolan, 2002.
- 10 Greenberg and Zuckerman, 2006.
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- 13 Connell, 2003.
- 14 Reilly et al., 2004.
- 15 Carpenter, 2002.
- 16 Kandirikirira, 2002.
- 17 Nagel, 1998.
- 18 Greenberg and Zuckerman, 2006.
- 19 Chant and Guttman, 2000.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Mehta et al., 2004.
- 22 Connell, 2003.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Flood, 2004.
- 26 Flood, 2005.
- 27 Flood, 2005-2006.
- 28 UNDAW, 2003; Kaufman, 2003. Also see <http://mensbiblio.xyonline.net/>.
- 29 See the articles, lists of websites, and other resources collected at XYonline: <http://www.xyonline.net>.
- 30 Family Violence Prevention Fund, both entries; Flood, 2005-2006; Instituto Promundo, 2002; Greig and Peacock, 2005; Ruxton, 2004.

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