

Advocacy Brief

Role of Men and Boys in Promoting Gender Equality

Prepared for UNESCO Bangkok
by Tamo Chattopadhyay

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Role of Men and Boys in Promoting Gender Equality

1. Introduction: Scope of this document

There has been an increasing emphasis internationally, in policy and in practice, on engaging men to promote and achieve gender equality. Beginning with the Beijing Declaration, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, a number of intergovernmental platforms, including the World Summit on Social Development (1995) and its review session (2000), as well as the special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS in 2001 have focused on this issue. The importance of education systems in shaping the gender perspective of boys was underscored in the landmark Dakar Framework for Education for All (UNESCO, 2000). An explicit goal (goal 5) of the Dakar framework is to ensure that education systems contribute to and promote gender equality, instead of reinforcing gender stereotypes. Most recently, in its 48th session in March 2004, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women specifically focused on the theme: ***The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality.***

According to UNESCO, the term gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed meanings and roles assigned to persons of different biological sexes: males and females. The concept also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and behaviors of both women and men. On the other hand, the notion of gender equality entails that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make life choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid roles and prejudices. In other words, gender equality means that the differences in behaviors, aspirations and needs of women and men should be valued and treated equally. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same; but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Thus, gender equality starts with equal valuing of girls and boys. It is based on women and men being full partners in their home, their community and their society.

- While the concept of Gender Equality is not new,
- what is relatively new is the concerted effort to revisit
- men's roles and identities in order to significantly
- increase men's involvement in gender equal
- societies. The current policy brief aims to present
- key rationales, identify principal challenges, and
- recommend actionable strategies for engaging boys,
- young and adult men¹ in efforts to achieve gender
- equality. The goal of the policy brief is to provide
- policy makers, practitioners, business and the civil
- society leaders with a framework for developing
- strategies, implementing programs, and evaluating
- progress of engaging men in gender equality efforts
- in all spheres of life.

2. The Rationale: Why men have a stake in gender equality

(a) Men have a lot to benefit

Despite dominant rhetoric about manhood, many men suffer from socially constructed gender stereotypes and hence have a lot to gain from a gender equal society. Such stereotypes put pressure on them to be 'tough' and be the 'breadwinner'; resulting in conditions of labor which are often harsh and involves injury, violence (including army and war), crime, and imprisonment. Macho images of masculinity are also leading men to engage in un-safe sex that jeopardizes their partners' and own well being. Men, who are victims of many forms of personal and institutional violence, primarily at the hands of other men, have a great deal to gain from moving towards gender equality: it is an important step towards reducing violence. Particularly, tackling homophobia and other forms of discrimination

1 From here until the end of the Policy Brief, the term "men" will be used, unless indicated otherwise, to refer to "boys, young and adult men".

against men because of their sexual orientation, will undoubtedly have very positive effects on promoting gender equality between heterosexual men and women, since in both cases a repressive 'status quo' is challenged.

Because of gender stereotypes men are also missing out on a whole range of emotions and experiences that are immensely rewarding and socially valued. For example, in most cultures men are not expected to play a significant role in caring for the children, or for sick parents, or to show affection and express their vulnerabilities in distress; since these qualities are typically assigned to women.

Moving toward gender equality does not mean loss of masculinity. *It does mean that men as a group will be able to share and be part of a broader, healthier, safer, and richer cultural experience.*

(b) The society benefits as a whole

The formations of dominant and violent military masculinities in conflict zones around the world create extreme forms of gender oppression. The active involvement of men and boys in promoting gender equality is a critical resource in peace building, peacekeeping and social reconstruction. On the other hand, men's violence against women produces staggering economic and social costs, detrimentally affecting economic performance and efficiency. Domestic violence in Canada is estimated to cost the country some \$1.6 billion per year; while, for the United States, the losses are as high as \$67 billion. In New Zealand, the cost of family violence in 1993 was at least \$1.2 billion, more than the earnings from the export of wool.

A fundamental benefit for men and women to live in gender equality is to live in a world where arbitrary inequalities of all kinds are rejected. Thus, although there could be short term struggles, in the long term men and women win if the society is gender equal.

(c) Men can make a difference

Achieving gender equality requires systemic changes in policy and modes of social interactions at all levels of the society: home, work place, school, public services, media, and so on. Men continue to occupy positions of power and privilege in the social structures of

patriarchal social system and without their active involvement a gender equitable society will neither be achievable nor be sustainable.

3. Challenges: Why it is difficult to involve men for gender equality

Peer pressure, social norms, and available institutional/organizational rules (such as child care facility based on number of women employees only, and not considering men's role in child rearing) influence adherence to gender specific stereotypes. In many parts of the world men's supremacy is justified on grounds of religion, biology, cultural tradition or organizational mission (for example in the military or police force). Since men continue to benefit from these 'patriarchal dividends', there remains a strong of resistance among certain men to be engaged in fighting for gender equality. The areas where the role of men has received most attention are violence and sexual/reproductive health. But these two areas, just as gender inequality as such, are manifestations of much larger underlying social processes (such as: socialization in family, in school, in workplace) that reinforce gender stereotypes and assigns expected gender roles. These core issues that manifest in a multiplicity of challenges in all aspects of life, can be addressed through an ensemble of strategies that are outlined in the next section.

4. Strategies: How to engage men to promote gender equality

(a) Basic working principles

1. **Human Rights Framework:** Given the deep-rooted socio-cultural factors that perpetuate gender discrimination, there is a tremendous need to reframe the issues and create a new vocabulary to formulate effective strategies for change. Framing gender equality issues in the language of human rights and social justice enables men to see their engagement in gender issues as an action that helps improve human rights of all, as opposed to diminishing their own privileges. The human rights framework also provides with a strong instrument to fight for the equality and social justice of non-heterosexual men and women.

2. **Integrated Social Vision:** There is an urgent need to move from ‘adversarial’ role to partnership between men and women in achieving the goal of gender equality. Policies should articulate an integrated social vision of gender where men and women play complementary roles. An important experience in this regard comes from a Pakistani NGO named Rozan that is actively involving men, along with women, in developing a national network of gender trainers and activists.
 3. **Life-cycle Approach:** Because gender stereotypes are pervasive and they operate throughout lifetime, a life-cycle based approach is needed to affect the socialization of men and boys in relation to the whole range of social arenas: home, education, workplace, economy, sexuality, sexual orientation, health, work/life balance, etc. Lifecycle based strategies should start with early childhood education and care. Within the home environment, interaction with adults who reinforce broader and alternative roles is critical for gender sensitive socialization. Mothers have a crucial role in educating boys on how to treat their future spouses and female partners. Moving through various phases of adolescence and adulthood, the strategy should take into account age specific psycho-social needs: self-esteem, school to work transition, single hood to parenthood, and so on. For example, seeing their male peers advocating for preventing violence against women on popular show MTV, other adolescents were motivated to join since they thought it was ‘hip’ to act up against gender violence.
 4. **Multi-sectoral Partnerships:** Strategies to achieve gender equality should both address ways men need to change, and encourage men to become agents of change. Concrete structured opportunities should be created so that men can become and stay engaged. This requires involving a whole range of stakeholders in the process: governments, multilaterals, private sector, trade unions, civil society, religious organizations, non-governmental organizations, army and the police, research institutes, community agencies, the media; to name a few.
 5. **Pragmatic Incrementalism:** Since values and social norms do not change overnight, a pragmatic and incremental approach is imperative. The goal should be to get men into action by identifying their common points of concern. Often men might be enlisted for some other concern, perhaps for supporting the suffering of other men, but they might eventually see the underlying issue of gender inequality as the root cause and join in that fight. For example, the *Stepping Stone approach* developed by Action Aid helps bringing the underlying issues of gender inequality out in the open.
- (b) Education strategy
6. Education, in all its diverse formats and contents: formal, non-formal, supplementary, informal, life-long learning, etc., is widely recognized as a key contributing factor to the social reproduction of gender inequality. By the same token education also is the key towards achieving a gender-equitable society. While their delivery mode, governance structure, or programmatic content may vary, both formal and non-formal educational development should incorporate some basic principles of gender equitable teaching-learning experience. Curricula, through specially designed texts and learning tasks, should allow boys to interrogate masculinity and gender relations.
 7. Whether it is a formal school, or a community based non-formal learning center, often a perceived lack of safety for girls, both inside and on the way to such facilities, makes parents withdraw their girl children from education. In Pakistan, a specially designed program had boys as ‘big brothers’ accompanying girls to school. In Nepal, action research and advocacy supported by Save the Children have engaged girls and increasingly boys in mapping and campaigning for ‘safe space’ for girls’ learning and being in the community environments.
 8. Very often in the countries of South Asia formal schools are gender segregated, reflecting long standing social traditions. Deliberate efforts should be made so that young men from ‘boys only’ schools get opportunities to work with girls, both inside and outside school (such as summer camps).
 9. Even when learning environments have students of both sexes; gender differentiated learning assignments, learning tracks and teacher expectations continue to exist. Strategies should include professional trainings

for teachers and program coordinators to interact with learners in gender equitable ways in the learning environment and in broader social settings.

10. There are widespread practices in many societies where boys are typically favored over girls for education. Boys and men should be mobilized by aligning their support for girls' education with other rational priorities. In the Indian state of Haryana the boys and their parents recognized that an educated bride has more earning potential, and this made them strong supporters of girls' education. It significantly slowed the practice of early marriage and withdrawing girls from school.
11. Research shows that boys who are strongly connected to school, excel in some cultural competency such as dance or music, or are star soccer players; seem to have a greater freedom to explore gender equitable behaviors. These realms of competency seem to counter the social pressure to adhere to a traditional version of masculinity. Boys should be presented with such extended opportunities to excel and define themselves through formal and non-formal education and developmental programs.
12. Health education, specifically education about HIV/AIDS and reproductive health for men should be integral part of any formal or non-formal offering.

(c) Institutional strategies

13. The workplace, including the education sector, is a major site of inequality between women and men that thrives on gender stereotypes of work roles. Special legislative changes, including tax incentives, targeted hiring practices should be considered as mechanisms to engage men and women to work in roles traditionally considered to be for the opposite sex. Employer policies such as training gender competencies for staff, paternity leave (leaves for men to stay home with the newborn, as in Scandinavia), flexible work hours, enforced sexual harassment policies, and childcare facilities for male employees should be considered too.
14. Similarly, training programs for men in childcare and other professions considered as feminine would enable them to accept opportunities outside of gender stereotypes.

15. There is a clear power differential across the gender divide. Hence it is critical to work with men in positions of power and have them publicly endorse and enforce gender equality in their own practices to mobilize others. Male dominated institutions such as police force and military can play a positive role in promoting and protecting gender equality through appropriate education and sensitization campaigns.

(d) Communication strategy

16. Most societies of Asia are more accepting (or less vindicating) of men having multiple sexual partners, while women are widely expected to be sexually submissive and monogamous. Male sexual practices, such as unsafe sex with multiple partners, play a crucial role in spreading of HIV/AIDS. The risk is also acute for non-heterosexual males. The myths about AIDS, men's crucial role in spreading the epidemic, its fatal consequences, and the behavioral changes necessary to prevent the disease should be communicated with utmost urgency and cultural sensitivity. Same applies for violence against women. UNICEF's '*Let's Talk Men*' educational videos for adolescent boys in Asia help them explore issues of masculinity and its relationship to violence against women.
17. Like in any social campaign, allies should be identified using the existing forms of social network: churches, mosques, microfinance agencies, school principals, government officers, community elders and so on. A campaign by Buddhist monks in Thailand (Sangha Metta) is having a significant impact on raising awareness on HIV/AIDS among men and women.
18. Strategies should be context specific, and responsive to local cultural measures. For example, in Yemen: instead of using the word '*gender*', the idea of equality of all people was emphasized in efforts to reduce gender discrimination against women. In Canada where public discourse of gender is more accepted, '*The White Ribbon Campaign*' organizes a highly visible advocacy event, where men and boys wearing white ribbons publicly display their commitment to end violence against women.

19. Often a typical argument is: “*men cannot do that, it is a woman’s job*”. However, under unemployment pressures, men have joined the nursing profession, once considered solely a woman’s job. It is important to keep sight of this capacity of men to change and while devising communication strategies for engaging men.

20. A vital step in affecting behavioral change through communication is to ensure that men are listening to the concerns of women. In the case of the NGO ‘Promundo’ in Brazil, which engages young men to work with other young men against gender violence, such communication was facilitated with professional counseling. The key is to view young men not as problem but also as solution, and with adequate training, engage them as potential change agents for other men.

5. Conclusion

There is a subtle yet critical distinction between communicating ‘*role of men in achieving gender equality*’, as opposed to advocating ‘*benefits of greater equality of women in society*’. Any effective strategy to engage men in promoting gender equality must appeal to male policymakers, first and foremost, as a pragmatic and rational framework with clear dividends for men, and not as a moral verdict on the status quo.

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The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality; agreed conclusions <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw48/ac-men-auv.pdf>

Beijing Declaration, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 on men’s role in promoting gender equality: paragraph 35

In times of peace, gender equality also makes good sense for all. Recent World Bank figures indicate that an increase of 1 percentage point in the share of women with secondary education can translate

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Example of the Indian state of Haryana: see Govinda, Basic Education in India (2002)

UNICEF’s ‘Let’s Talk Men’ educational videos: www.unicef.org

In Nepal, action research and advocacy projects supported by Save the Children have engaged girls and increasingly boys in mapping and campaigning for ‘safe space’ for girls’ learning and being in the community environments. www.id21.org

Additional Resources

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• BRIDGE Briefings on Development and Gender –
• Based at IDS Sussex, BRIDGE is an information and
• analysis service that aims to assist development
• professionals to integrate gender into their work. The
• site includes information about the briefings, as well
• as other references.

Directory of Gender Related Internet Resources for Academic Research – Links to academic resources on Gender. Includes Electronic Discussion Lists; Conferences; Organisations; Bibliographies; Electronic Texts; Departments, Research Centres, Programmes and Syllabi; Libraries Worldwide.

Electronic Development and Environment Information System (Gender) – Hosted at the Institute of Development Studies, Eldis is one of the best on-line directories to information resources on development and environment. The Gender Guide allows searching this database for organisations, online documents and print publications on Gender.

IRC Gender Publications (Water and Sanitation) – From the International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC), a number of English-language publications on gender issues for water and sanitation projects. Includes theoretical framework as well as practical tools.

IWTC GlobalNet – How to subscribe to this weekly one-page bulletin of current information on women-and-development events, organisations and resources worldwide. From the International Women's Tribune Centre.

MANUSHI: A Journal About Women and Society – This site carries select articles from the issues of Manushi, a magazine which analyses political, economic and social issues within India. Articles focus on women's lives and work, civil liberties and human rights.

Mapping the World of Women's Information Services – Mapping the World is a database of women's information services available throughout the world. Its aim is to increase the visibility of women's information services, and to facilitate access to gender-specific information. Target users are women and women's organizations, policy makers, decision makers and general information services.

Men's Bibliography – A comprehensive bibliography of writing on men, masculinities and sexualities. Compiled by Michael Flood (7th edition; February 1999)

OECD-DAC Gender Publications – Visit the site of the OECD-DAC Working Party on Gender for a number of useful publications: gender glossary, DAC Guidelines, conceptual issues relating to gender, and more.

• *UNIFEM Publications* – UNIFEM has an active publications program, addressing core focus areas such as Human Rights, Ending Violence Against Women, CEDAW, Economic and Political Empowerment. Visit this site to learn more.

• *University of Minnesota Human Rights Library: Women's Human Rights* – A listing of links and resources pertaining to Women's Human Rights

• *Women in Development Network (Widnet)* – Includes a directory of women-resource organizations, links and references to other WWW sources, statistics.

• *Women's Studies/Women's Issues Resource Sites* – This is an extremely useful directory of web sites containing resources and information about women's studies/ women's issues, with an emphasis on sites of particular use to an academic women's studies program.

• *Women, Ink. Publications* – Women, Ink. is a project of the International Women's Tribune Centre to market and distribute books on women and development worldwide. It includes 250+ titles from publishers all over the world, and is the exclusive distributor of publications from UNIFEM.

• NATIONAL ACTION PLANS. The Beijing Platform for Action, in paragraph 297, called on all governments to develop implementation strategies or plans of action for the Platform. List of countries that have submitted national action plans/strategies to the Division for the Advancement of Women can be found on-line (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/followup/national/natplans.htm>) together with a useful list of summaries of national plans arranged by region/country (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/followup/national/africsum.htm>).

