

Engaging Men for Effective Activism against Sexual and Gender-based Violence

Men are becoming ever more visible as integral partners in tackling sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), holding themselves, peers and power-holders accountable for maintaining harmful gender norms that perpetuate violence. To maximise the potential of working with men to ensure inclusion, and sustainability in the response to SGBV, the global programme on Effective Organised Activism against Gender-based Violence highlights the importance of addressing the underlying structural causes of violence. It calls for efforts to address these challenges by applying gendered context and power analysis in understanding and identifying barriers to address SGBV, engaging men in prevention and response not just as ‘protectors’ of women, and building a shared agenda between individuals, communities and networks involving men and women. This approach not only enables a deeper understanding of the complexities around SGBV, but provides important lessons to be shared.

Collective action to address SGBV

Feminist movement-building has played a critical role in ensuring that legislation and policies on gender-based violence (GBV) are created and that there is accountability for implementation. The main emphasis of working with men and boys to end SGBV has been towards individual and small groups, focusing on understanding how the costs of masculinity can harm individual women and men within unhealthy relationships. There are a growing number of examples where men engage as gender equality activists and mobilise from a pro-feminist standpoint to demand social and gender justice. This research programme has explored the role of men in collective action to address SGBV, and the extent to which outcomes are transformative.

Situating the role of collective action in the prevention and response to SGBV, the programme highlights the importance of recognising the complex and dynamic nature of violence in specific contexts and its diversity across settings.

For example, understanding sexual harassment in public spaces in Egypt requires a different contextual analysis than understanding intimate partner violence in post-conflict Sierra Leone. This includes challenging simple interpretations of men and women’s social roles and the frequent assumption of men being perpetrators and women victims of violence. Understanding cycles of victimhood and perpetration, for example, is critical in engaging in the lives of young men involved in gangs in South Africa.

Focus on structural and institutional factors

The work points to the need to get to the root causes of SGBV, including: gender inequality, increasing economic inequality, weak and inadequate laws and legal frameworks. Furthermore, practices of violence are shaped by how patriarchal privilege and power, inequalities of identity and cultural systems play out in specific contexts. SGBV is therefore seen to be driven by an interplay between personal, situational and wider social, political

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Country	Programme focus
Egypt	Exploring effective citizen-led initiatives in the struggle against gender-based violence in-between Egypt's two revolutions
Kenya	How collective action and the involvement of men and boys influence the prospects of changing community norms regarding SGBV in Kenya
India	The Men's Action to Stop Violence Against Women (MASVAW) campaign as a networked approach to challenging patriarchy across institutions in India
Sierra Leone	The legacy of conflict and the struggle to end SGBV in Sierra Leone
South Africa	The role of individual agency and collective action for addressing structural and gender-based violence in South Africa
Uganda	Survivor support groups as spaces of empowerment for male refugees who have survived conflict-related sexual violence and are now living in Uganda

and economic issues. In the programme's India case study, gender inequalities are seen as constructed in relation to ever-changing connections between patriarchy, nationalism, religion, caste and class. Analysing the contemporary and historical gendered realities of this context can provide a map that helps to find pathways for social change.

Create spaces with men to build personal commitment and political action

Initiatives that engage men need to recognise and understand participants' expectations from the outset in order to understand their motivations. Entry points for men joining a group can be diverse, initially this is often through peer support. In Kenya and Sierra Leone men were engaged as gatekeepers, decision-makers, fathers, brothers and sons in programmes and through community mobilisation in order to build empathy for women. In Uganda it was about providing a physical and social space for men as survivors of violence for healing from trauma. Acknowledging that change is a personal and emotional process, enabling self-reflection and mutual learning on issues of gender norms, privileges and socialisation is important. Many activists face resentment and isolation from their families and communities when challenging gender norms. However, as these groups build an identity and the purpose of the group evolves, these men are further supported in their action. Yet still, when initiating spaces of engagement, questions of legitimacy of who is creating the space, who is included or excluded, and how decisions are being made need to be considered.

Context matters

Understanding context is integral to sustainable and transformative change as it shapes the process of collective action across societal levels. The programme has shown that distinct contexts shape how social norms are constructed and influence how and why collective action emerges over time and space. Therefore, gendered context and power analyses need to highlight barriers and drivers of change to address SGBV. Such context analyses enable the identification of key building blocks of collective action strategies engaging men and boys to address SGBV by transforming unequal power relations. Connections need to be purposefully made between men's personal processes of change, grass-roots mobilisation with men, and in efforts to change broader social and economic policies that influence SGBV. This process could include:

- *Consciousness raising*; i.e. critical reflection and consciousness raising on harmful expressions of power over others and the way that different inequalities and privileges interact to maintain exclusion;
- *Walking the talk*; i.e. shifting personal behaviours towards gender equality and social justice within private and public life;
- *Public collaborations in gender solidarity*; i.e. community mobilisation and solidarity expressed publicly in actions with women and marginalised groups to address attitudes, norms and behaviours that perpetuate SGBV;
- *Advocacy for systemic change*; i.e. changes in the wider system through demanding political accountability and effective laws and policies by alliance-building across gender equality and social justice movements, and inclusion of grass-roots activist groups within institutional settings.

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Working in collaboration across diverse networks and social levels

Collaborations across individuals, groups and institutions are valuable for three reasons. First, the role of a collective in providing a safe and supportive haven is essential for individuals to keep engaged. Experiences in India and South Africa showed that a sense of belonging and equality within a group that supports the personal process of changing identities helps ongoing negotiations about individual and project goals and sustains engagement.

Second, working with people in institutions, for example police, pastors, teachers, etc., can help to ensure change within places where traditional structures of institutionalised gender inequality exist. Relationships for engaging with men and boys need to be identified, and can, where appropriate, include collaboration with traditional and religious leaders as gatekeepers. This was important in Kenya for opening up previously closed spaces at the community level to discuss SGBV issues with men.

Third, strategic alliances, partnerships and networks across sectors, particularly with women's organisations, are critical. Organisations can learn from each other, be role models with respect to their unique strengths and comparative advantages, and challenge the status quo together. Building synergies around intersections and shared goals across movements can be a way not only to make effective use of sparse material resources and share human capital, but also to increase pressure for change. Across these partnerships it is important to install mechanisms of accountability for gender equality.

Relationships matter for sustaining changes

Providing safe spaces is one way to maintain trust, motivation and engagement over time. Garnering support from peers within activist networks and organisations, building a shared agenda with communities and building diverse alliances are all strategies to sustain and extend localised change geographically and/or across institutions.

Tapping into existing structures in society and using these as examples to show different types of relationships and engagement is one way to engage individuals and convince them of specific project goals. This requires good knowledge of local contexts. For example, in the Uttar Pradesh (India) case

study, advantages of smaller and more nuclear families, which are becoming more prevalent in Uttar Pradesh, were used by male activists as alternative role models for more equitable partnerships. Good leadership, lobbying for support in formal and informal institutions, and raising awareness, for example by using media, are important ingredients to encourage and sustain engagement and achieve change.

Recognising the achievements and challenges of – and backlash to – change requires taking into account the social and cultural dimensions, and the contextual patriarchal underpinnings of gender inequalities. Regular monitoring, analysis and renegotiation of a project's achievements and goals are crucial to understand where and how changes occur. Critically analysing backlash and its various sources can help reinforce the project or movement's agenda, strategy and identity, and help keep members motivated and engaged.

Time is needed for adapting, learning and showing the impact of collective action

Implementing projects that address SGBV takes time, because they aim to achieve complex change of deeply rooted gender inequalities. Often, time and resource constraints put pressures on the transfer of knowledge and implementation practices from one initiative to another. Moving to scale should always allow for time to learn and adapt.

Additionally, sufficient time should be allowed for teams to learn from their experience after project completion. Current funding architectures usually do not allow for this, impeding valuable reflection, documentation and knowledge generation that could be transferred and used in other projects. Training and capacity building across institutions in South Africa has shown the need to go beyond broad one-off approaches.

Finally, the pressure to generate evidence can divert attention and resources from projects with potentially low short-term – but high long-term – impact to projects with high visible short-term impact only. Opportunities to investigate whether projects that involve complex social change, such as the projects within this programme, have had long-term impacts would prove useful in order to better understand what works, and what types of activities should be promoted, supported and further developed.

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Lessons for policy and programming

Why support collective action?

- Collective action provides a platform to change SGBV outcomes over the longer-term through mobilisation to address the underlying structural dynamics of violence.
- Collective action can enable interventions to work at multiple levels, with citizens and institutions and with diverse stakeholders across the community, including cultural, religious and political leaders. This can lead to change in the wider system and opens up opportunities to engage a broader range of relevant men in ending SGBV.
- Collective action between men working for gender equality and women's organisations can help ensure accountability of men to achieving positive work towards women's rights.

What approaches work best for effectively engaging men in collective action?

- Work with men to address SGBV should engage men as agents of change in the prevention and response, and not just as perpetrators or bystanders. Within this, men need to be held to account for personal change and work together with women to take political action.
- Gendered context and power analyses are essential for identifying barriers and drivers of change to address SGBV and the position of men and masculinities within.
- Strategies for collective action need to ensure that connections are understood and made between men's own processes of change, grass-roots mobilisation for gender equality, as well as efforts to change broader policies that influence SGBV. The personal is political.
- Activities should involve individuals and small groups in safe spaces, but also extend to collaborations with and across institutions, across gender and generations, that is, in partnerships and networks across sectors and alliances with women's organisations. Mechanisms of accountability for gender equality are important aspects across these partnerships.
- A shared agenda must be built with individuals, communities and across partnerships and networks. It is important to recognise that these collaborations need to be strategic and that not all men or community members are equally necessary to engage. Goals and achievements of this agenda must be regularly scrutinised in order to understand where and how changes occur and what needs to be done to make them sustainable.
- Time must be allowed for learning, transfer of knowledge and adaptation of good practices from one programme or territory to others. Opportunities to study long-term effects of past projects would help identify workable pathways for social change with men for gender equality.

Moving beyond male protectionism and paternalism

Where work with men is building on men's concern for women's safety, as in work with men to address SGBV, risks of strengthening patriarchal norms are high. Engaging men should not reinforce a sense of male supremacy, by simply appealing to men as 'protectors' of women and girls.

Men should be engaged as agents of change holding themselves and their communities accountable for rejecting SGBV on the grounds of dismantling oppression and claiming human rights. Working together with women to challenge problematic gender roles and expectations amongst both men and women strengthens this accountability and provides space for mutual learning and redefinition of harmful gender norms.



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Further reading

Research reports from South Africa, India, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Egypt and Uganda, on which this briefing is based, are available on the Interactions on Women's Empowerment website (<http://interactions.eldis.org/gender-based-violence>). Web pages relating to the India, South Africa and Uganda case studies include visual outputs that outline personal and shared narratives by activists.

Credits

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