

# Reframing men and boys in policy for gender equality



HarassMap community outreach volunteers at a volunteering festival in Cairo, 2015. Image from HarassMap

## 1 Introduction

Gender inequality remains a critical challenge, threatening to severely undermine progress toward the Global Goals for Sustainable Development. Women and girls still have fewer opportunities, rights and freedoms than do men and boys. Women continue to be paid less than their male counterparts for the same work, spend significantly more time caring for others than men do, and remain underrepresented in positions of power across business and government sectors (United Nations 2014a; UN Women 2015; World Bank 2012). However, while many gender equality policies and programmes only target and work with women and

girls, compelling evidence has emerged to show that engaging men and boys in these processes is crucial if lasting change is to be achieved.

'Engendering Men: Evidence on Routes to Gender Equality' (EMERGE) is a two year project to build an open repository of accessible evidence and lessons for working with men and boys for gender equality. This policy brief draws implications for policy from the learning in the project, making the case for reframing policy on gender equality in order to more productively factor in men and boys. It also suggests actions and approaches that policymakers can take to reframe policy in this area.

## 2 Why engage men and boys in gender equality initiatives?

There are three clear reasons why men and boys should be factored into gender equality initiatives:

### ✓ *Gender equality requires addressing unequal gender relations*

Gender identities are constructed through the social interactions, relationships and inequitable contexts we encounter from birth. For example, boys may be granted more freedom than their sisters, are more likely to inherit land and property, and may face fewer barriers in education or gaining paid employment. Yet, men and boys come under pressure to demonstrate ‘masculine’ traits of toughness and strength, whilst inequitable norms of gender identity and sexuality are policed by families and entire communities. Addressing unequal gender relations means working on the power relations between women and men that form the root causes of gender inequalities.

### ✓ *Engaging men and boys can enable positive outcomes for women and girls*

While it is important to devote resources to specific work with women and girls, working with men and boys can also help to challenge deep rooted gender inequalities and inequitable social norms. For example, supporting men to provide direct care for their children helps build more positive home environments and provides alternative, caring and equitable models of masculinity. It can also improve the lives of women and girls for whom a reduction in the burden of care work can bring more time for engagement in productive work, public life and a fairer share of leisure.

### ✓ *Gender inequality has negative effects for men and boys, and also affects societies at large*

In many countries, social norms and harmful behaviour shaped around ideas of masculinity result in high male mortality and morbidity rates. Alcohol and substance abuse, violent crime, unprotected sex with multiple partners and poor health-seeking all have negative impacts on men’s own wellbeing, on their kin and communities, as well as on public spending on health, law and order.

### Risks to bear in mind

There are risks of *not* engaging men and boys in work on gender equality, just as there are risks of involving them in uncritical ways. Efforts to promote gender are likely to be undermined without serious engagement with men and boys. Unless underlying norms related to unequal power and rigid notions of manhood are addressed, there is a risk that programming remains focused on treating the symptoms of gender inequality. Furthermore, not engaging them can also undermine their buy-in to women’s rights and risks male backlash.

Risks also arise from engaging men and boys, if done in the wrong ways. A focus on a narrow set of men’s problems, or seeing these as unrelated to women and girls, may take the focus off the underlying problem of unequal power relations. Similarly, treating men as a homogenous group – for example seeing them all as violent, or all opposed to gender equality – leads to simplistic policies and approaches. While men’s and boys’ problems also need to be addressed, this should be in relation – and in proportion – to those of women and girls. This work needs to be done critically and should hold men to account as part of the process.

## 3 Current challenges for policy in changing gender relations

Some progress has been made to engage men and boys in work on gender, but challenges remain.

### Men and boys are often invisible in gender policy frameworks and theories of change

While many theories of change recognise that gender inequalities are structurally rooted and that change is needed at multiple levels, the roles that men and boys can play in challenging unequal gender power relations are not often recognised. The focus is almost exclusively on women and girls and where men and boys do appear, they tend to be framed only as barriers to gender equality.

### Change towards gender equality is often seen in linear cause and effect ways

Many frameworks for change focus on tackling barriers to gender equality head on, but do not factor in alternative routes that build on positive opportunities where there is less resistance. By portraying men as implicit problematic barriers to gender equality, opportunities to engage different men or boys as different change

agents are lost. Viewing change as a linear pathway from interventions addressing specific barriers leading to positive outcomes can result in the creation of silos, and limit the potential for strategically engaging men and boys across different areas of work around gender.

### **Change is often conceptualised without recognition of broader shifts in societies and institutions**

Theories of change often do not recognise the ways that broader changes in societies impact on gender equality strategies and outcomes – this is often more significant than the impact of deliberate policies or programmes. While young, urban and educated men in some parts of the world may live by increasingly progressive beliefs about gender equality (Barker et al. 2011), it is essential to account for – and factor in – concurrent trends of patriarchal backlash. By leaving the multiple, complex (sometimes conflicted) and shifting roles of men invisible in theories of change and policy frameworks, strategies remain vulnerable to the winds of fortune.

## **4 Lessons on how to reframe gender through work with men and boys**

So how do we address these challenges, and develop more effective ways to work with men and boys in alliance with women and girls for gender equality? The EMERGE project has identified the following principles to guide strategies for change in this area.

### **Gender is relational and socially constructed**

Gender equality goals and strategies need to be reframed in relational terms. This means that initiatives should address power relations between women and men, rather than working with women and girls – or indeed men and boys – in isolation. This does not mean meeting everyone's needs with equal urgency; taking a relational approach may involve divesting some men of vested privileges while also building their interest in achieving more equitable relationships. For example, EMERGE research in Latin America has highlighted the importance of working with men and boys to increase their recognition of women's unpaid care roles, and to engage men in redistributing this work, as well as exploring the benefit to themselves from caring (Santos 2015).

### **Gender is intersectional**

If meaningful changes in gender relations are to be achieved, gender needs to be understood as operating along with other inequalities of power based on class, race, sexuality and ability. Making these links increases opportunities for men to work more effectively with women and other men for gender equality. EMERGE research in Bangladesh demonstrated how the social

movement Nijera Kori works with male and female landless rights group members to understand the ways that gender and class hierarchies work together. This has increased solidarity between women and men and built shared commitment to addressing gender inequalities (Greig et al. 2015).

### **Social norms are shaped by trends and embedded in institutions**

While social norms influence individuals' behaviour, it is important to recognise that norms are dynamic and are reproduced through social, political and economic institutions. This means that initiatives aiming to engage men and boys for gender equality need to work across individual, community and institutional levels and work with men in different positions of power, and need to understand that power works in complex or conflicting ways in men's lives. In Ethiopia, the EMERGE project found that initiatives to end female genital mutilation-cutting that were community owned, engaged religious leaders and related to policy change at the national level were able to generate lasting change (Stern 2015).

### **Context is key**

Gender inequalities differ across societies and are deeply rooted in structures, histories and cultures. Harmful masculinities need to be understood in context; in terms of different ideals of 'being men'. If efforts to engage men and boys for gender equality are to be successful, change needs to be grounded in local knowledge, priorities and histories, and needs to be driven through local ownership. EMERGE research in India highlighted the way that the Samajhdar Jodidar initiative, shaped within a historical and political context of demands for inclusive governance, including gender quotas for local government representation, has enabled men to successfully support women privately and publicly; from their homes to politics and public life (Edström et al 2015).

### **External trends impact on gender roles and relations**

International and national social, economic and political trends and shifts play a key role in shaping power relations and masculinities. Migration, urbanisation, conflict, changing labour markets, and access to welfare or education may play a more significant role in shifting men's attitudes to gender than targeted programmes. Initiatives to engage men and boys need to take account of such trends, which may have positive or negative impacts on gender equality. In Egypt, for example, EMERGE research demonstrated the flexibility of youth movements set up to challenge the emergence of sexual harassment in public spaces. They have adapted their strategies

for a changing political backdrop and realigned their work to take advantage of new sexual harassment legislation (Tadros 2015).

### The personal is political

Changing gender norms and relations is not in all men's interests and many men resist such change. Some men may also support some aspects of change but not others. Even men who are open to change may find it difficult in practice, as it involves ongoing and deeply personal challenges. Multifaceted initiatives to engage men and boys in gender equality have an important role to play here; supporting men to be accountable for transforming harmful gender norms in their own lives and societies, and to be part of larger political processes to achieve gender justice. Processes to engage men as agents of change in addressing gender inequalities have been successfully used in work to address gender-based violence. For example, in the Men's Action to Stop Violence Against Women campaign, consciousness raising with men led to shifts in personal commitments to equality, as well as public action with women to challenge systemic gender inequality (Shahrokh with Edstrom 2015).

The EMERGE project has produced a practice brief: [Lessons in good practice from work with men and boys for gender equality](#) (BRIDGE 2015). It contains information on how to focus or target an initiative with men and boys, designing a successful initiative, and challenges and future priorities.

## 5 Directions for reframing men and boys in policy

Policymaking is a political process that can shift or reinforce different gender identities, norms and practices, and it can play a key role in challenging normative assumptions and positions on gender.

What should a gender policy framework that incorporates masculinities effectively look like? There are six key directions for reframing policy to enable more positive engagement of men and boys for gender equality. Policies need to become: relational and inclusive, intersectional, able to link the personal and political, long term and adaptive, ensuring sufficient consistent financing, as well as focused on men's accountability rather than leadership.

### Relational and inclusive

- Avoid replicating gender stereotypes, such as framing females as vulnerable or males as perpetrators.
- Systematically make visible, and interrelate, a greater range of male and female roles and contributions.

### Intersectional

- Link gender inequality and other social inequalities.
- Improve gender mainstreaming to focus on the most marginalised women and men.

### Linking the personal and political

- Use a range of approaches on gender in communities and institutions. Don't just try to change individuals.
- Support alliance building and institutional work.

### Long term and adaptive

- As changing gender norms is slow, support longer term strategies that are adaptive to changing realities.
- Use longer term means of evaluation and look for 'contribution' to change, over 'attribution' of impacts.

### Sufficient, consistent financing

- Protect good work by women's groups, but ensure enough funds for gender equality, irrespective of sex.
- Invest in collaborative planning, building relationships, networks and learning between actors.

### Accountability

- Guard against male protectionism or the reinforcement of male supremacy.
- Support collaboration between women's movements and men and boys working for gender equality.

## Policy processes should consider the following recommendations

### ✓ **Reframe policy on gender in relational and inclusive terms**

Keeping a focus on the inequalities faced by women and girls and the continued need for programmes targeted at particular vulnerable gender groups, policy discourses should avoid replicating gender stereotypes such as female vulnerability or men as only perpetrators or potential perpetrators of violence. Policy frameworks should also acknowledge that gender norms which restrict women's lives often also affect and restrict men's lives, if in different ways. Policy framings should: (i) systematically make visible a greater range of male and female roles and potential contributions, and (ii) view – and frame – people of all genders as potential 'agents of change'.

### ✓ **Recognise gender in intersectional terms**

Policies that recognise the links between gender equality and justice work and other work to address social inequalities can help create alliances for change at a greater scale, reaching those who are most marginalised from traditional approaches. Policy makers can avoid silo-approaches by (i) increasing resources to support cross-issue work beyond gender and (ii) improving 'gender mainstreaming' in other programme support, to focus on the most marginalised women and men – to 'leave no-one behind' – and on the structures that create this marginalisation.

### ✓ **Enable work with men and boys that links the personal and political, facilitating movement building and alliances across constituencies**

Social and political changes in gender orders are not best achieved through narrowly focused public health methods aimed at changing individuals alone; they require a range of multidisciplinary approaches and collective strategies for gender justice. Work at community and/or institutional level is personal as well as political; for women and for men. This calls for (i) supporting critical consciousness-raising with men and accountability of duty bearers, and (ii) supporting alliance building and institutional level work across organisations, activist networks and services.

### ✓ **Move beyond project modalities toward longer term adaptive approaches**

Support is needed for the development and implementation of strategies that have longer term perspectives and are more adaptive to changing realities (for example migration, shifting use of technologies or new forms of male dominance). Policy makers should; (i) prioritise 'adaptation' over 'replication', recognising that adaptation requires time and investment to build activist champions and networks in new contexts, and (ii) revise approaches to evaluation towards a longer term view (and timelines), framing evaluation strategies as looking for 'contribution' to change across social systems, rather than demanding 'attribution' of impacts.

### ✓ **Ensure sufficient and consistent financing for gender equality work, over time**

Since effective processes of challenging gender orders involve collaborative planning and learning, building networks and trust, and since movements from below with multilevel strategies need to develop over time, sufficient funding should be provided to enable this over longer term periods. In order to sustainably make a difference at scale, policy makers should: (i) protect good work by women's groups, but ensure sufficient funds for gender equality, irrespective of the gender or sex of recipients, and (ii) invest consistently in collaborative planning, building relationships, networks and learning between stakeholders.

### ✓ **Hold men accountable to women's calls for gender justice**

Work with men and boys on gender equality should adopt strategies that guard against male protectionism or the reinforcement of male supremacy, while also avoiding the assumption that all men are opposed to equality. This calls for: (i) support to initiatives with men that engage positively with the essential work of women's movements, and (ii) support to collaborations between women's movements and men and boys working for gender equality.

## Further reading

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BRIDGE (2015) *Lessons in good practice from work with men and boys for gender equality: EMERGE Practice Brief*, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton: IDS

Edström, J., Hassink, A., Shahrokh, T. and Stern, E. (eds) (2015), *Engendering Men: A Collaborative Review of Evidence on Men and Boys in Social Change and Gender Equality*, EMERGE Evidence Review, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton: IDS

Edström, E., Shahrokh, T., Singh, S. with Jamdade, S. (2015) 'Swapping the stick for a broom: Men supporting women in local politics in India', *EMERGE Case Study 4*, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton: IDS

EMERGE Stories of Change and Case Study series on work with men and boys in building gender equality (2015), available at <http://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/men-boys-and-gender-equality/case-studies>

Greig, A. Shahrokh, T., Preetha, S. (2015) 'We do it ourselves: Nijera Kori and the struggle for economic and gender justice in Bangladesh', *EMERGE Case Study 2*, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton: IDS

Santos, S. (2015) 'MenCare in Latin America: Challenging harmful masculine norms and promoting positive changes in men's caregiving',

*EMERGE Case Study 5*, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton: IDS

Shahrokh, T. with Edström, J. (2015) 'Sexual and gender-based violence' in Edström, J. et al, *Engendering Men: A Collaborative Review of Evidence on Men and Boys in Social Change and Gender Equality*, EMERGE Evidence Review, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton: IDS

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United Nations (2014a) *Framework of Actions: For the Follow-up to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development Beyond 2014*, New York: United Nations

UN Women (2015) Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

World Bank (2012) *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*, Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank

This policy brief is part of a series of outputs developed collaboratively by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Promundo-US and Sonke Gender Justice as part of the Engendering Men: Evidence on Routes to Gender Equality (EMERGE) project. The project is made possible through support from DFID under the Leadership for Change programme. Learn more about EMERGE – our work, our findings and free resources, here: <http://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/>

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ISBN 978-1-78118-291-8



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