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## THE ROLE OF MEN AND BOYS IN ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY

# MEN, GENDER AND EQUALITY<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the work of Governments, the United Nations and other international and regional organizations, as well as the many years of struggle by women's movements for equal rights, inequalities between women and men persist around the world. Gender-based violence remains prevalent in all societies, and is exacerbated in conflict and post-conflict situations. For millions of women and girls, education and employment opportunities are restricted, leading to inequalities in income and access to decision-making. Maternal mortality persists at unacceptable levels in parts of the world. Women's economic and social dependence leads to persistent vulnerabilities, including in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

By the mid-1990s, some 20 years after the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975,<sup>2</sup> it was clear that gender equality and the promotion and protection of women's rights required a political strategy that mobilized men in changing gender relations. Garnering sufficient support for the profound social changes required by the gender equality agenda could not be achieved by women alone but also required the active involvement of men.

Two United Nations global conferences—the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in 1994<sup>3</sup> and the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995<sup>4</sup>—signalled a political shift

with relation to male engagement and responsibility. Other global conferences of the United Nations also brought attention to the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality, including the World Summit for Social Development (1995);<sup>5</sup> the twenty-sixth special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS (2001);<sup>6</sup> and the twenty-seventh special session of the General Assembly on children (2002).<sup>7</sup> The five-year review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2000 at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”,<sup>8</sup> and the annual sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women (1996-2007), have also drawn attention to men and boys. The outcomes of these processes highlighted, among other things, the important roles of men and boys in the sharing of family and household responsibilities, sexual and reproductive health and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

In 1997, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in collaboration with the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, convened an expert group meeting to discuss male roles and masculinities in the perspective of a culture of peace. The meeting examined gender-related factors that hinder or sustain the development of a culture of peace; addressed the harmful consequences of rigid gender stereotypes; discussed practical strategies for reducing men's violence; and explored the possibility of raising boys in ways that emphasize the qualities needed in building a culture of peace.<sup>10</sup>

In 2000-2001, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) mounted a world campaign on the theme “Men make a difference”, emphasizing the positive role men can play in HIV/AIDS prevention and care.<sup>11</sup> In 2001, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) initiated a research project on men's roles and responsibilities in ending gender-based violence.<sup>12</sup>

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)<sup>13</sup> was the first United Nations intergovernmental body to address the engagement and responsibility of men and boys in a comprehensive manner. In 2001, the Commission considered the issue of the role of men and

## EQUAL RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

“Equal rights, opportunities and access to resources, equal sharing of responsibilities for the family by men and women, and a harmonious partnership between them are critical to their well-being and that of their families as well as to the consolidation of democracy.”

Source: United Nations (1995a), *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995 (A/CONF.177/20) (New York: United Nations) (Sales No. E.96.IV.13), paragraph 15.

boys in achieving gender equality as one of the priority themes at its forty-eighth session in March 2004.

To support the Commission's deliberations on this topic, the Division for the Advancement of Women convened an online discussion in June-July 2003, focusing on three topics: the role of men and boys in the world of work; the role of men and boys in the HIV/AIDS pandemic; and the value of gender equality for men and boys. More than 300 participants registered from 70 different countries, and over 80 postings described local experiences and good practices.<sup>14</sup>

### VOICES FROM THE ONLINE DISCUSSION

"There is a huge gap between egalitarian attitudes and social praxis. For example, more and more men express the wish to be involved actively in parenthood, not limiting fatherhood to being the economic provider. But only 2 per cent of fathers make use of the possibilities of parental leave."

—Michael Meuser (Germany)

"The group of men who are working in the alliances for gender equality, equal health care, and education, equity at work or in decision-making is too small in numbers."

—Rumana Hashem (Bangladesh)

"Men's partnerships with anti-violence women's groups are critical. They are powerful and practical demonstrations of men's and women's shared interest in stopping violence."

—Michael Flood (Australia)

*Source:* R. Connell (2003a), report of the online discussion on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality, organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women, 30 June–25 July 2003, prepared for the expert group meeting entitled "The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality", held in Brasilia, Brazil, 21–24 October 2003 (EGM/Men-Boys-GE/2003/WP.2) (New York: United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women).

To contribute further to an understanding of the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality, the Division for the Advancement of Women convened an expert group meeting in Brazil in October 2003. The expert group meeting was organized in collaboration with the International Labour Office, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and was hosted by the Government of Brazil. Independent experts from all regions of the world, as well as observers from governments, United Nations entities and non-governmental organizations, participated in the meeting and discussed experiences of men's promotion of gender equality at different levels.<sup>15</sup>

The adoption of the agreed conclusions on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality by the Commission on the Status of Women at its forty-eighth session in 2004 was a major step in the development of a global policy framework to facilitate an enhanced role for men and boys in the achievement of gender equality. The agreed conclusions identified men's crucial role in sharing family responsibilities, including caring for dependants; preventing violence against women, including through trafficking and HIV/AIDS transmission; and providing role models for younger men. The important role of men in efforts to mainstream gender perspectives into national and international policies and programmes was also recognized.<sup>16</sup>

A large number of the recommendations in the agreed conclusions were directed at enabling men's involvement in gender equality efforts, including by building capacity and raising awareness about gender equality and the empowerment of women. Other recommendations focused on generating the necessary sociocultural change for gender equality, including through upbringing and educational processes. Different contexts in which a large number of men could be reached, particularly in male-dominated institutions, industries and associations, were identified as potential sites for sensitizing men regarding their roles and responsibilities in the promotion of gender equality and the full enjoyment of all human rights by women.

In 2006, at its fiftieth session, the Commission on the Status of Women reviewed implementation of the recommendations on men and boys contained in the agreed conclusions adopted in 2004. Through an interactive panel discussion, initiated by two keynote speakers, Member States shared experiences, lessons learned and good practices in facilitating the involvement of men and boys in efforts to promote gender equality. The discussion highlighted efforts to incorporate attention to men and boys in legislation, policies and programmes

on gender equality and to develop ways to ensure the active participation of men and boys. Research initiatives have been undertaken and training and awareness-raising programmes have been provided to a wide range of stakeholders, including the judiciary, the police and the army, on ways to increase attention to men and boys in gender equality work.

The importance of education and the sensitization of boys in their formative years was highlighted, both through the formal educational system and in informal settings through peer programmes. The need to address gender norms through revision of curricula and materials was noted. Public information campaigns were highlighted as important mechanisms for disseminating positive messages and participants reported on effective use of public figures and opinion makers. Close collaboration with civil society was raised as an effective measure.<sup>17</sup>

Areas of particular concern where men's engagement was a priority were highlighted in the discussions. These

included trafficking and sexual exploitation, harmful traditional practices, HIV/AIDS and violence. The discussion also focused on measures, including parental leave schemes, that encouraged men's increased participation in caring responsibilities. The need to scale up initiatives was emphasized by participants. At the same time, however, the need for effective evaluation of efforts undertaken was highlighted. Multi-stakeholder partnerships were encouraged. Participants agreed that to reduce persistent resistance from men, greater attention should be given to highlighting the costs of inequality for men as well as women, and the significant benefits of gender equality for both women and men.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The term "gender" refers to the set of social norms, practices and institutions that regulate the relations between women and men (also known as "gender relations"). Gender relations involve a system of power relations between women and men in the context of sociocultural definitions of masculinity and femininity and economic relations. In many societies, the system of gender relations gives power and privilege to men and discriminates against women.

The overall system of gender relations in a society is sometimes called the "gender order". Women's and men's lives are shaped by gender relations or the gender order in many ways, including through the gender division of labour and different sociocultural norms and expectations.<sup>18</sup> The gender order determines what is accepted, encouraged and allowed for women and men. When the gender order privileges men, the social acceptance of male domination and female subordination may be sustained by many formal and informal institutions and practices.

Gender equality refers to the goal of achieving equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and boys and girls. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality is not a women's issue, but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is both a human right and a precondition for and indicator of sustainable, people-centred development. Achieving gender equality requires that the interests, needs, priorities and contributions of both women and men are taken into consideration, while fully recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men.

### MASCULINITY/MASCULINITIES AND MALE IDENTITY/IDENTITIES

"Masculinity" is defined as the pattern of social behaviour or practice that is associated, in a given society, with the position of men in gender relations. Some authors speak of masculinity as a gender identity or "male identity". Research by historians and sociologists shows that definitions of masculinity change over time—masculinity is socially defined and is not fixed by biology. Research findings indicate that patterns of masculinity differ from one culture to another, and that multiple patterns of masculinity often exist within one culture. Many researchers therefore use the plural form "masculinities" to indicate the diversity of male identities that may exist in any one context. Changing male identities or masculinities may be an important strategy for achieving gender equality.

Source: R. Connell (2005), "Change among the gatekeepers: men, masculinities, and gender equality in the global arena", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), vol. 30, No. 3.

It is important to keep in mind that the distribution of power between women and men through the system of gender relations interacts with other systems of power relations and privilege. There are significant differences in power among men (and among women) based on other determinants of inequality (for example, class, race, ethnicity and age).

## RATIONALES FOR INVOLVING MEN IN WORK FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Men's power over women in many contexts necessitates working with men to change the conditions of women's lives. The reproductive health field was one of the first areas in which the pragmatic rationale of "male responsibility" was utilized to encourage male involvement. The 1994 Programme of Action of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development noted: "Men play a key role in bringing about gender equality since, in most societies, men exercise preponderant power in nearly every sphere of life, ranging from personal decisions regarding the size of families to the policy and programme decisions taken at all levels of government."<sup>19</sup>

Working for justice and equality in gender relations should be understood as part of the broader effort to secure equality in social relations. A concern for justice has provided a political incentive for many men to seek change in the gender order.

The maintenance of an unequal gender order in societies is likely to have negative consequences or costs for men as well as women. Such costs for men include the suppression of emotions in order to stay "in control"; the absence of nurturing relations with children; exposure to many health risks; narrowing of educational opportunities; and damage in interpersonal relations with women. Such costs are unevenly distributed among men. Recognition of these costs of inequality to men is one of the important rationales for men's involvement in gender equality work.

A further very practical reason for engaging men in work on gender equality is that men often control the resources needed for this work, in particular because of the underrepresentation of women in all areas of decision-making. The existing pattern of gender inequality—men's predominant control of economic assets, political power, cultural authority and armed forces—means that men (often specific groups of men) control most of the resources required to implement women's claims for justice.<sup>20</sup>

## MEN'S MOTIVATIONS FOR INVOLVEMENT IN GENDER EQUALITY WORK

Men's lives are complex and are shaped by more than their gender identity. Race/ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality, religion and nationality all influence how men identify their interests. The increased recognition of the need to involve men in promoting gender equality has been accompanied by the growing motivation of men to become engaged.<sup>21</sup> This motivation can emanate from a variety of sources, including men's relationships with women, their concern for their own personal well-being or that of their families, or their sense of social justice.

In their families and communities, men live in social relationships with women and girls: as wives, partners, mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, nieces, friends, classmates, colleagues and neighbours. The quality of these relationships in large part determines the quality of men's lives. Men can increasingly see that their lives are also damaged by a system of gender inequality that has a negative impact on the women and girls with whom they live, work and interact in different ways. Many men make sacrifices for their children and want their daughters to grow up in a world that offers young women security, freedom and opportunities to fulfil themselves. This provides a powerful reason for many men to support gender equality.

### SOUTH AFRICAN MEN'S FORUM

Mbuyiselo Botha of the South African Men's Forum emphasizes:

"What has kept me going is the philosophy that says our own liberation as men, as black South Africans, cannot be removed from the total liberation of women in this country. That has been a driving force. It would be very hypocritical to talk of liberation when you know that a large section of the society is still in bondage."

Source: D. Peacock and A. Levack (2004), "The Men as Partners Program in South Africa: reaching men to end gender-based violence and promote sexual and reproductive health", in *Men's Sexual and Reproductive Health: Lessons from the Field*, Barker and Das, eds., *International Journal of Men's Health* (Blindern: Men's Studies Press).

Men may see a collective interest in supporting gender equality because they see its relevance to the well-being of their families and communities. Flexibility in the gender division of labour may be crucial to households in situations of poverty and underemployment, where the incomes of both women and men are critical. In poor communities, in both rural and urban areas, maximizing the total labour resources of both women and men may be vital to prosperity or even survival. Men may recognize that they benefit in the long term from the collective well-being that follows from education, improvements in health, and access to employment or income-generating activities for women and girls.

Personal well-being may also play a role. Research continues to document problems in the current gender order for adult men and boys, including lower life expectancy; premature death from accidents, homicides and suicide; high rates of occupational injury in gender-segregated industries, such as mining, transport and heavy manufacturing; and higher levels of substance abuse, especially alcohol and tobacco. Men's unwillingness to seek health care when it is needed, because of prevailing perceptions of masculinity, has been observed in many countries. These problems are, in part, the result of men's adherence to gender norms that equate masculinity with toughness and invulnerability. Gender inequality can be damaging for men's health, and increased equality can contribute to men's personal well-being and quality of life.<sup>22</sup>

Even when men cannot see personal, family or communal benefits, they may perceive a social responsibility to promote gender equality. Those with gender privilege have a responsibility to address systematic gender inequalities. This responsibility may be more evident to those men who are working for social justice in other areas in their own lives, for example, in relation to economic or racial justice. There is increasing recognition that these other struggles are related to women's struggles for gender equality, which are, in part, shaped by women's differing experiences of other forms of injustice. Beliefs about domination and subordination that lie at the heart of gender inequality (the power of the male over the female) also play a fundamental role in other forms of injustice, for example, of rich over poor, or of one race over another. Ending other forms of oppression, for example, racism and economic exploitation, depends, in part, on ending gender inequality.<sup>23</sup>

## INCREASING THE MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE

With the rationale for men's engagement in work for gender equality becoming clear, and the increasing organization of men into groups and networks, a momentum for change is already apparent. Contributing to this momentum are efforts to make male privilege more visible, increased research on the effects of the prevailing gender order and gender identities, the capacity for change among men, the influence of male leaders and role models, and the impact of other social change processes under way.

It is common that those with privilege rarely notice that they have such privilege, while those without are constantly reminded of its absence. Women are very aware of discriminatory gender norms and roles because they are confronted with the resulting disadvantages on a daily basis. While many men are also disadvantaged by gender norms and roles, men tend to benefit overall and less often reflect on gender inequalities.<sup>24</sup>

Recent years have witnessed a remarkable growth in research on men's gender identities and masculinity and on the links between gender relations and a range of social problems involving men. Academic journals have been founded for specialized research, and many conferences and a rapidly growing international literature in social science have illuminated many issues pertaining to men and gender equality, including those that are reviewed in this publication: violence, health, fatherhood, the workplace and youth.<sup>25</sup> A growing debate on men's experiences of the gender order and their gender identities and relations, and the increased visibility of the impact on the situation of women and girls, have clearly increased the momentum for change.

One of the clear findings from historical and cross-cultural research is that gender identities and roles are not fixed. Men in many different contexts have changed their attitudes and behaviours over time, often leading to a shift to more equitable gender relations. The evidence that men have a capacity for change is helping to build the momentum for working with men to promote gender equality. However, the belief that masculinity is intrinsically related to war, sexism, violence and aggression remains strong in some contexts.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore important to identify and highlight examples of men who are working to bring about a change towards the goal of gender equality.

While the surge in research and debate on the engagement of men in achieving gender equality is relatively

recent, public advocacy for gender equality by, or with the support of, male leaders has a longer history. Historic gains by women's movements have been won not only in the face of male resistance but also sometimes through alliances with men who held organizational or political authority at the time. As early as 1869, the British philosopher John Stuart Mill argued for gender equality in his work "The subjection of women".<sup>27</sup> Other examples of male leaders who have taken action in support of gender equality include Gough Whitlam, the former Prime Minister of Australia, who pioneered the creation of gender equality mechanisms in government in the 1970s, and the late Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, who actively supported gender equality in the same decade. In the 1990s, Nelson Mandela, the President of South Africa, joined male networks in marching to show male support for eliminating violence against women. More recent examples include President Lula da Silva of Brazil, who has supported the allocation of significant budgetary resources to eliminate violence against women; Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain, who supported progressive legislation on violence against women; and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, who launched a multi-year campaign, Unite to End Violence against Women, in 2008.

As a result of the increased research and more visible and strategic leadership, a growing number of organizations and campaigns engage men in support for gender equality around the world. Some have a long history of work in this area, such as the National Organization for Men against Sexism (NOMAS) in the United States of

America, which has more than 20 years of continuous work on gender equality.<sup>28</sup> Others have been formed more recently, for example, the MenEngage network, a global alliance of non-governmental organizations involved in research, policy initiatives and interventions seeking to engage adult men and boys in effective ways to reduce gender inequalities and promote the well-being of women, men and children.<sup>29</sup>

Impetus for change is provided by ongoing socio-economic processes. Changes in ideas about masculinity and relations between women and men continue to both shape and be influenced by changes in the organization of the family, the division of labour, and the transformation in global communications. Some of the changes that have most significantly influenced ideas about gender equality and relations between women and men concern the organization of the family. Male power in society has traditionally been grounded in men's control over women and children within the family—the original meaning of the word "patriarchy". The family is, however, undergoing profound change. A recent authoritative cross-cultural study of the family identified the twentieth century as the century that marked the significant decline of patriarchal family arrangements, that is, the unchallenged rule of men over women and children.<sup>30</sup> New forms of the family are emerging as a result of changing social structures, including growing numbers of blended families and female-headed households. The increasing diversity of family formations, and of roles within households, is opening up new opportunities to challenge traditional notions of gender relations.

The entry of women in growing numbers into the paid labour force and the increase in male unemployment in some sectors and societies are changing perceptions of the gender division of labour. There is increased pressure to share child-rearing and household responsibilities more equally between women and men. Given the strong association between education and social mobility, efforts to increase female educational enrolment and attainment enhance the conditions for gender equality.

The information and communications technologies (ICT) revolution, and in particular an increasingly globalized youth culture, which disseminates images of young people's lives that challenge traditional ideas about social relations between women and men, have enhanced impetus for change. The response to the global HIV/AIDS epidemic is creating unprecedented opportunities for frank discussions of gender equality and sexuality.<sup>31</sup> These and other social and economic changes are sustaining and increasing the momentum for men's greater involvement in gender equality work.

"We can all think of a million examples where if we provide men with a little more information, a few more skills, and a bit of encouragement, they themselves can be far more supportive, communicative and caring for their sexual partners and family members. It's not rocket science, and yet it isn't happening on a significant scale ...".

—Margaret Greene  
International Center for Research on Women  
(ICRW)

Source: International Center for Research on Women and Instituto Promundo (2007), *Engaging Men and Boys to Achieve Gender Equality: How Can We Build on What We Have Learned?* (Washington, D.C.: International Center for Research on Women).

## MEN'S RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Despite the increased research and leadership and the social momentum for change, resistance to gender equality persists among significant groups of men. There are multiple reasons for this resistance. Some men want to defend their privileges and power because they fear the loss of authority and economic benefits that they perceive gender equality would involve. Some men may resist gender equality because of a belief in inherent male supremacy. Most difficult to address is the fact that change towards gender equality will require new patterns of masculinity and thus may be perceived as a threat to identity for men. Change is particularly difficult when men and boys also face a range of problems related to unemployment, educational difficulties, economic restructuring, communal violence, and social exclusion and alienation. It is important to recognize that achieving change in gender relations is a complex process, likely to face difficulties and provoke resistance.<sup>32</sup>

If social definitions of masculinity include being the "breadwinner" and being "strong", men may be threatened by women's economic and professional progress. Men's resistance may also be grounded in their resentment of what they see as attention and resources being given disproportionately to women. This sentiment underpins the development of fathers' rights groups in developed countries that maintain that mothers have been given too many rights. Such groups regard fathers as an oppressed group.

Experiences from microcredit programmes, for example, suggest that when such programmes empower women to the extent that a threat is perceived to male privilege, a violent backlash is possible. Research in Bangladesh found that microcredit programmes can have a varied effect on men's violence against women. "They can reduce women's vulnerability to men's violence by strengthening their economic roles and making their

identity and self-respect can be sustained in a gender-equal society. A crisis in male privilege and authority is also a necessary part of the change process because of the need to challenge assumptions about male superiority in the current gender order.

In many parts of the world, ideologies that justify men's supremacy on grounds of religion, biology, cultural tradition or organizational mission (for example, in the military) persist. These ideas are not simply "traditional". They continue to be actively modernized and renewed, as it is clear in the resurgence of religious fundamentalisms and militant nationalisms that make use of beliefs about male supremacy in mobilizing support for their cause.<sup>34</sup>

## PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION IN ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS

It is important to identify the principles that should guide men's actions for gender equality, particularly given the resistance still faced from many men, as well as the wariness felt by women's movements about the implications of engaging men. Some women's movements fear that funding will be diverted from activities targeted to women, and that men will assume leadership and divert the focus of the gender equality struggle.

A number of important principles of action have been identified to guide the work on engaging men and boys, including the following.

**Commitment to women's human rights and empowerment:** The goal of gender equality must be kept central. Any effort to engage men should actively promote women's empowerment and in no way undermine women's human rights. Issues that need to be taken into account include ensuring:

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